

Exemplary Capstone Projects

2025

(Independent research projects by final year English Majors)



Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Preface

I am again delighted to showcase here exemplary capstone projects from the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for 2025-2026.

Each year, students develop and generate their own research and creative projects under the supervision of professors from the Department. These projects help (sometimes in a roundabout way, sometimes more directly) graduates transition from being students to their lives after leaving the University: lives in employment, in training, or possibly in further studies here or elsewhere. The projects you read here were chosen by professors as great examples of the originality, expression, and creativity that the Department aims to develop in all our students.

The projects cover a wide range of work in applied linguistics, literary studies, and creative expression. General frameworks are applied to specific topics including academic writing in English, online identities, the poet Byron, and utopian thought. Each example shows evidence of the rigorous research, theoretical perspectives, imaginative engagement, and the all-round sensitivity to language valued by our Department. As is obvious, however, what the Department helps to develop is already present in the students in some sense, and so each example is very personal if not unique. As ever, then, we congratulate all our graduates on their work throughout their time with us!

David Huddart

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**Fit Through or Get Knocked Down: Language Policing and Identity Authentication on
Hong Kong's LIHKG Forum**

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ENGE4700: Independent Research Project

Prof. Wilkinson Daniel Wong GONZALES

1 Background

In Hong Kong, English pronunciation is not evaluated only as linguistic performance. It is also read as evidence of class position, competence, authenticity, and political belonging. This makes English language policing sociolinguistically consequential. Acts that appear to correct pronunciation or grammar often reproduce wider hierarchies of education, status, and identity. The 2017 William Chan incident illustrates this problem. After a Chanel promotional video featuring Chan went viral, users across social media mocked his English and circulated phonemic memes (Chau, 2025). On LIHKG, Hong Kong's largest anonymous forum, users ridiculed Chan's pronunciation while also debating whether such ridicule was justified. The features targeted in Chan's speech, including local vowel qualities, Cantonese-influenced prosody, and consonant-final deletion, are characteristic of Hong Kong English (HKE), a variety increasingly associated with authentic local identity (Hansen Edwards, 2016, 2020). Yet in Chan's case, these same features were reinterpreted as incompetence. Phonetic correction therefore functioned as social judgement (Chau, 2025).

Existing research shows that digital mockery of English in Hong Kong performs social and political work beyond correction. Jones and Chau (2022) show that protest-era mockery of police officers' English both delegitimised political authority and reproduced standard language ideology. Chau (2021) shows how Facebook users constructed "fake ABC" English as a recognisable object of ridicule, linking English performance to authenticity and class privilege. Together with Chau's (2025) analysis of the Chan incident, these studies establish that metalinguistic commentary about English in Hong Kong is a site where social hierarchy, political allegiance, and cultural belonging are negotiated.

The limitation of this literature is its fragmentation. Chau (2025) analyses the William Chan controversy, Jones and Chau (2022) examine protest-era mockery of police officers' English, and Chau (2021) traces the construction of "fake ABC" English on Facebook. These studies establish that English mockery in Hong Kong can perform political delegitimisation, authenticity evaluation, and indexical revaluation, but they examine these processes through separate incidents rather than as a comparable repertoire of policing strategies. The result is a gap at two levels: the discursive strategies through which English is policed across contexts remain underdocumented, and the social meanings attached to different target types have not been systematically compared. A further gap concerns reflexive meta-policing, that is, how users critique, defend, or debate language policing itself. This matters because such meta-discourse reveals not only attitudes toward English, but also community-level awareness of the social consequences of judging English in Hong Kong.

LIHKG is a necessary site for addressing these gaps because it is not simply a repository of comments. Its anonymous posting lowers the face cost of direct judgment, its bidirectional voting provides visible ratification or rejection of evaluative stances, and its threaded discussion format allows policing, counter-policing, and meta-policing to unfold sequentially. Existing studies have often treated LIHKG as one source among several, rather than as a platform whose architecture shapes the metalinguistic discourse it produces. (See Section 4.4)

This study therefore analyses English language policing on LIHKG across multiple threads and target types. A systematic search using 39 metalinguistic terms returned over 240 unique threads explicitly referencing English evaluation, including discussions of celebrities, politicians, and ordinary users. The study asks what strategies LIHKG users employ to police English

(RQ1), what social meanings are indexed through these practices (RQ2), and how users reflexively engage with language policing as a practice (RQ3).

2 Research Questions

RQ1: What discursive strategies do LIHKG users employ to police a target's English?

RQ2: What social meanings are indexed when LIHKG users mock or evaluate a target's English?

RQ3: How do LIHKG users reflexively engage with language policing as a practice, in ways that reveal community-level language ideologies?

3 Research Expectations

This study is not hypothesis-testing, but three expectations from the literature orient what follows. Language policing on LIHKG is expected to operate at two frequencies. Event-driven threads, triggered by a politician's press conference or a celebrity's advertisement, will likely produce concentrated and explicitly aggressive policing given the target's public identifiability. Everyday threads about education, workplace encounters, and peer interaction are expected to sustain a routine, lower-level policing practice. Section 7 provides the database-level evidence for this distinction.

Sarcasm and indirect ridicule are expected to dominate the discursive strategies coded under RQ1. Phonetic transliteration (L1-B) and memefication (L1-C) should appear more frequently than direct metalinguistic correction, consistent with LIHKG's ironic, performative register (Švelch & Sherman, 2018).

Class and educational attainment (L2-A) are anticipated to be the most frequently activated indexical categories under RQ2, reflecting Hong Kong's entrenched equation of English proficiency with socioeconomic status (Lin, 1996; Cheung & Teng, 2026).

4 Literature Review

4.1 Language Ideology and Language Policing

The study of language policing begins from a basic premise in language ideology research, evaluations of language are never only evaluations of linguistic form. Language ideologies are “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). They are socially situated frameworks through which speakers interpret variation, assign value to particular forms, and naturalise social hierarchies (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Kroskrity, 2004). In this sense, language policing is one observable site where language ideology becomes explicit. When users correct, mock, defend, or debate someone’s English, they reveal what they believe language should sound like, who is entitled to speak it, and what kinds of personhood particular linguistic performances are taken to index.

The ideology most directly relevant to this study is standard language ideology - the belief that there is a single correct form of language and that deviation from it signals deficiency in the speaker (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012). This ideology gives language policing its social force. Online language policing consistently reproduces this ideological orientation: Pajunen (2024, p. 27) notes that despite the potential for linguistic diversity in digital spaces, policing tends to “elicit dominant language-ideological responses” and functions as “a guardian of a normative culture, emphasising and reinforcing compliance with established and codified norms.” A pronunciation error, non-standard grammatical construction, or locally accented performance only becomes publicly mockable because users treat linguistic deviation as evidence of something beyond the form itself: poor education, low competence, failed cosmopolitanism, political inferiority, or inauthentic identity. The “standard” invoked is not

necessarily singular, LIHKG evaluations may orient outward toward native-speaker or institutionally sanctioned norms, or inward toward local expectations of Hong Kong identity, bilingual competence, and recognisable community membership. Language policing in the data is therefore not treated as a set of isolated corrections. It is analysed as a metalinguistic practice through which users convert judgments about English into judgments about speakers, while negotiating the competing language norms that make such judgments socially meaningful.

Recent work on online language policing treats metalinguistic evaluation in digital spaces as informal community-based language policy, not merely as individual correction. Heuman's study of Swedish Jodel shows how anonymous users regulate language through exposed correction, humour, and repetition, producing a local hypercorrect standard-language ideology and marking boundaries of community inclusion (Heuman, 2020). Pajunen (2024, p. 27) extends this observation by demonstrating that online language policing also showcases cultural capital and defines boundaries of community membership. Grammar policing is one form of this broader practice, referring to the grassroots correction or ridicule of perceived grammatical, orthographic, or phonological errors in public online communication (Švelch & Sherman, 2018). The present study uses the broader term language policing because the LIHKG data exceed grammar in this narrow sense: users evaluate accent, pronunciation, code choice, fluency, communicative confidence, and projected persona. These evaluations are performative as well as corrective, positioning users as competent judges while converting English performance into evidence of education, authenticity, local legitimacy, or social deficiency. Pajunen (2024, p. 27) notes that online language policing "rarely aims to design an adjustment to the deviation or implement it", it nonetheless "reinforces the assumption of standard language ideology that a right and wrong way to use language exists." English policing on LIHKG is therefore analysed

as a routinised metalinguistic practice through which users convert judgments about language into judgments about speakers. The distinction between grammar policing and language policing is therefore analytical rather than categorical. LIHKG users may begin by targeting a specific feature of English, but the interaction often converts that feature into evidence of education, class, authenticity, political alignment or Hong Kong identity. The next section explains this conversion through indexicality, which is the mechanism by which linguistic forms acquire and activate social meanings.

4.2 Indexicality

Recent research in Hong Kong demonstrates this instability of indexical meaning. Chau's (2021) analysis of "fake ABC" English shows how phonological and pragmatic features can be attached to a persona of inauthentic cosmopolitanism and class privilege, while Chau's (2025) study of the William Chan incident shows that HKE features associated elsewhere with local identity can be reinterpreted as incompetence or political inauthenticity. Jones and Chau (2022) similarly show that protest-era mockery of police officers' English both challenged institutional authority and reproduced standard-language ideology. Beyond Hong Kong, Gonzales (2026) follows a similar logic: regional varieties may be revalued across contexts such as migration history and generational positioning, reinforcing that indexical meaning is context-dependent rather than inherent. Taken together, these studies show that certain linguistic features, specifically, English features, do not carry inherent social meanings, they acquire value through the interactional and ideological contexts in which they are evaluated. The framework through which this study operationalises that premise is Eckert's (2008) indexical field model, developed in the theoretical framework section.

The present study extends this insight from high-profile incidents to routine forum discourse. What remains less examined is how shifting indexical meanings operate in the everyday metalinguistic discourse of an anonymous forum, where evaluative acts are produced by pseudonymous users and ratified or rejected through collective uptake. The important point is that English features on LIHKG do not carry fixed meanings; their meanings are activated through evaluative discourse and vary according to target, context, and uptake.

4.3 English in Hong Kong

English occupies a structurally ambivalent position in Hong Kong. As an official language and a key medium of law, education, and professional mobility, it functions as a highly valued form of linguistic capital and a persistent index of cosmopolitan status (Bolton, 2003; Boyle, 1997; Hansen Edwards, 2018). Recent attitude research confirms this hierarchy, Cheung and Teng (2026) find that English continues to be rated highest among Hong Kong's three spoken languages for intelligence, competence, and prestige, while Cantonese leads in solidarity and Mandarin has overtaken both in perceived employability. English proficiency is therefore not simply a communicative skill, but one of the main linguistic resources through which class, education, and professional legitimacy are evaluated in Hong Kong (Lin, 1996).

English is also a site of persistent insecurity. Public discourse in Hong Kong has long been shaped by what Sewell (2024) calls a “complaint tradition” around declining English standards, intensified by post-handover educational reforms such as the 1998 Mother Tongue Instruction policy (Evans, 2009). Such decline narratives matter ideologically because they frame English competence as evidence of Hong Kong's educational quality, global competitiveness, and post-handover trajectory, regardless of whether they accurately measure proficiency levels. This makes English especially available for moral and social evaluation, to comment on someone's English is often also to comment on their education, class position, and public legitimacy.

Hong Kong English (HKE) intensifies this ambivalence. Since Bolton's (2002, 2003) argument for HKE as an autonomous variety, research has documented both its linguistic distinctiveness and its contested social value (Hung, 2002; Setter et al., 2010). On the one hand, attitude studies continue to show a preference for exonormative models such as British or American English, with HKE often treated as “broken” or insufficiently educated (Sewell, 2012;

Luk & Lin, 2024). On the other hand, HKE has increasingly acquired covert prestige as a marker of local identity, especially after the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when participants in Hansen Edwards's (2016) study more strongly associated HKE with authentic Hong Kong belonging. Ladegaard and Chan (2023) and Hansen Edwards (2018, 2020) similarly describe a shift toward recognising English, alongside Cantonese, as part of Hong Kong's local linguistic repertoire.

This ambivalence is the sociolinguistic condition that makes English language policing on LIHKG analytically significant. English can be used to judge competence, education, class, cosmopolitanism, political alignment, and local authenticity; HKE can be mocked as deficient in one context and defended as locally authentic in another. The next section turns to LIHKG, where this ambivalence can be observed as routine, unsolicited, and collectively ratified metalinguistic practice.

4.4 LIHKG

LIHKG (連登) is a Hong Kong-based online discussion forum launched in 2016 as a successor to HKGolden (高登討論區). It has since become the city's most prominent anonymous forum, with over 24 million monthly visits as of February 2025 (Zhang & Shen, 2025). Registration requires a Hong Kong-based mobile number or email domain, which gives the platform a relatively localised user base, although all posting is conducted through anonymous pseudonyms.

LIHKG became especially prominent during the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests, when it functioned as a major coordination and discussion platform and as an emergent digital public sphere (Kwan, 2020; Liang, 2021, 2022). Existing research has therefore treated LIHKG mainly as a site of political communication, digital activism, and identity negotiation (Cheng & Lee, 2022; Zhang & Shen, 2025). Much less attention has been paid to LIHKG as a sociolinguistic

site: a place where language attitudes, metalinguistic judgments, and everyday ideologies of English are publicly produced. This gap is important because LIHKG's architecture generates a form of evaluative discourse that differs from identity-linked platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube.

Three platform features are central to the present study. First, anonymity reduces the identity-linked constraints that shape self-presentation on platforms where users post under real names or stable social networks. On LIHKG, users can ridicule a public figure's English, defend a policed target, or criticise language policing itself without attaching those stances to a traceable personal identity. This makes the platform especially productive for observing hostile, reflexive, and norm-enforcing forms of metalinguistic discourse that may be less visible in name-attached spaces (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

Second, LIHKG's bidirectional upvote/downvote system provides a visible record of community uptake. Voting provides an indication of which framings receive community endorsement or rejection. A phonetic transliteration, authenticity accusation, or defence of a target's English may therefore be assessed not only as an isolated post, but as part of a wider pattern of uptake within the archived thread.

Third, LIHKG's threaded, multi-page discussion format enables sequential analysis. Unlike flat comment sections, LIHKG threads allow the researcher to trace how an initial policing act is taken up, challenged, reinforced, transformed, or redirected into meta-policing. This structure is especially relevant to the study's third research question, which examines how users reflexively debate the legitimacy of language policing itself.

The platform's user base is demographically skewed according to previous research; however, these demographic figures should be interpreted cautiously. Because LIHKG is

anonymous and gender expression is selected by users themselves, such data cannot be independently verified. The reported gender distribution is therefore useful as contextual background, but it should not be treated as a fully reliable demographic profile of the platform's users. Zhang and Shen (2025) report that approximately 64.56% of users are male and 35.44% female, with the largest age cohort between 25 and 34. LIHKG has also been linked to local and global “manosphere” cultures and gender-hostile discourse (Wong, 2024), while the colloquial label 連登仔 indexes a younger, male-dominated subcultural identity. These characteristics do not invalidate LIHKG as a research site, but they limit the generalisability of the findings, the language-policing patterns analysed here should be read as practices of a particular online community rather than as representative of the Hong Kong population as a whole. LIHKG is therefore not merely a convenient source of online comments. It is a platform whose architecture makes visible the production, uptake, and contestation of language ideologies at scale.

The present study uses LIHKG to examine three connected questions: how users police English (RQ1), what social meanings those acts activate (RQ2), and how the community reflexively evaluates language policing itself (RQ3).

5 Theoretical Framework

Three frameworks structure the analysis. Verbal hygiene identifies language policing as a normative metalinguistic practice. The indexical field explains how English features become sites for competing social evaluations. Enregisterment accounts for how repeated evaluations stabilise into recognisable personae and templates.

5.1 Verbal hygiene

Cameron's (1995/2012) verbal hygiene reframes language policing as a form of social practice. Verbal hygiene refers to "the motley collection of discourses and practices through which people attempt to 'clean up' language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility" (Cameron, 1995/2012, p. vii). The definition is wide enough to cover formal grammar books and forum ridicule under the same analytical category. What matters for Cameron is what the practice performs, not whether it is linguistically warranted. LIHKG policing posts are verbal hygiene in this sense. A user mocking a politician's accent is not only correcting a vowel. The act simultaneously positions the poster as a competent judge, ranks the target, and invites other users to ratify a shared standard of acceptable English. Cameron treats this range as internal to verbal hygiene. Verbal hygiene can enforce norms, mark distinction, build community, and support reflexive critique of policing itself.

5.2 Indexical field

The verbal hygiene framework explains the practice. The indexical field explains why a forum post about someone's vowel can function as a claim about their class, education, political loyalty, or right to claim Hong Kong identity.

Silverstein's (2003) account of indexical orders provides the background premise that linguistic forms acquire social meanings through repeated ideological interpretation. A Hong Kong-accented feature does not simply identify a speaker's origin; through metalinguistic evaluation, it can come to index class position, educational attainment, cosmopolitan aspiration, or political allegiance.

Eckert's (2008) indexical field model is the central theoretical tool here. Eckert argues that a linguistic variable does not carry a single social meaning but constitutes "a field of potential meanings, a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable" (Eckert, 2008, p. 454). The field is structured by ideology, this means that meanings within it are not random but cluster around shared presuppositions about what kinds of people use what kinds of language. Any particular evaluation activates one region of the field, but the other regions remain latent and may be activated by a different user, a different target, or a different interactional context. Activation is interactional. It is accomplished through the stance a user takes toward the form and toward the speaker, and it can be redirected as other participants reframe what the same feature is taken to show.

This model is necessary for analysing LIHKG data. The same HKE feature, a Cantonese-influenced vowel or a pattern of consonant-final deletion, is treated as evidence of incompetence in one thread and defended as authentic local English in another. The feature has not changed. What has changed is which region of its indexical field the evaluative context selects. As established in the literature review, Hong Kong research has already shown that HKE features may be reinterpreted across contexts as authenticity, incompetence, political inauthenticity, or institutional illegitimacy. The indexical field model is therefore used here to analyse which region of meaning a LIHKG post activates in a given interaction.

In the Hong Kong context, the indexical field of English contains several analytically distinct regions. Class and educational attainment are the most consistently activated. English proficiency is institutionally linked to school-tracking, examination performance, and professional mobility, making it a form of linguistic capital whose value is legible against DSE grade thresholds and occupational distinctions (Bourdieu, 1991; Lin, 1996; Park & Wee, 2012). A target's immigration history and biographical proximity to Hong Kong constitute another region, shaping how their English is read against expectations of local belonging. Authenticity and cosmopolitan persona form a third, built around the enregistered social type of fake or unearned Westernised identity documented by Chau (2021). Political loyalty became a prominent region after 2019, when English use was drawn into the polarisation between pro-democracy and pro-establishment positions. The Hong Kong-Mainland identity boundary fractures through the field at multiple points, indexing macro-level social distinctions through micro-level linguistic judgments. A further, reflexive region encompasses evaluations that comment not on the target's English but on the standards and assumptions underlying policing itself. Across all of these regions, the activation of any one does not exclude the others. A single evaluative act can invoke class, authenticity, and political loyalty simultaneously, making language policing analytically multivalent.

Woolard's (2016) distinction between an ideology of authenticity and an ideology of anonymity maps onto two of these regions directly. Under an ideology of authenticity, a speaker's language is evaluated as an index of true social origin, while under an ideology of anonymity, it is evaluated against a decontextualised standard to which any speaker, regardless of origin, should aspire. In Hong Kong, both ideologies are active simultaneously, which is why the same English performance can be valorised as locally genuine and stigmatised as

insufficiently educated within the same thread. This distinction is used analytically in the findings. Correctness-based policing approximates Woolard's ideology of anonymity because speakers are evaluated against a supposedly general standard of good English. Authenticity-based policing, by contrast, evaluates whether a speaker's English sounds biographically, socially, or locally believable. The distinction helps explain why LIHKG users sometimes treat technically competent English as suspicious, and locally accented English as either deficient or authentic depending on the speaker being evaluated. (See Section 8.3)

5.3 Enregisterment

Agha's (2003) concept of enregisterment explains how the indexical meanings activated through language policing can stabilise into durable, community-recognisable categories. Enregisterment is "the processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognised register of forms" (Agha, 2003, p. 231), associated with typifiable social personae. The process is cumulative. Metalinguistic activity repeated across multiple speech events and multiple users gradually fixes a loose set of features into a recognisable, nameable social type. Chau's (2021) analysis of "fake ABC" English on Hong Kong Facebook is the most direct instantiation of enregisterment in this study's research context. Users transformed a cluster of phonological and pragmatic features into a recognisable pseudo-variety whose social meanings, inauthenticity and unearned cosmopolitan privilege, had stabilised enough to be reproduced, mocked, and debated by users who had no contact with the original episodes of stylisation. The process worked through collaborative metalinguistic commentary. Language mocking practices, Chau argues, "have become an important means through which ideologies are circulated and maintained" (Chau, 2021, p. 596).

The present study uses Agha's framework more modestly to examine whether repeated evaluative practices on LIHKG may stabilise into recognisable community templates, that is, recurrent ways of testing whether a target's English matches a claimed or assigned identity. LIHKG's voting system makes endorsement and rejection visible, while the threaded structure allows such evaluative framings to be repeated, challenged, and reformulated across the interaction. In this sense, the platform does not merely host language policing, it also provides conditions under which particular policing templates can become more visible and iterable.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) account of authentication grounds the analysis of this process. Authentication treats identity as something interactionally produced and verified rather than inherent. On LIHKG, authenticity accusations work by comparing a target's English performance against an identity they are claimed to hold, for example, somebody with international-school background, an overseas-educated returnee, a pro-government official, a working-class commenter who speaks better than expected. The accusation tests whether the performance matches the identity. When this testing pattern recurs across threads, receives high uptake, and generates recognisable formulaic framings, it may be interpreted as evidence that authentication practices are becoming recognisable as community templates.

6 Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopts a theme-led, purposive multi-case design within a Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis framework. It did not begin from a random platform-wide corpus because English language policing on LIHKG is episodic, unevenly distributed, and often triggered by public incidents. Data collection therefore began with analytically visible trigger events that generated substantial metalinguistic discussion, then expanded through iterative keyword searching to capture both high-profile controversies and routine discussions of English. In this design, trigger events and keywords function as routes of discovery, threads as the primary case units, and individual posts as the coding units. This distinction is important because the study is not concerned only with discourse surrounding individual controversies, but with recurrent policing strategies, indexical meanings, and reflexive meta-policing across LIHKG. The design is multi-case because it compares threads involving different target types, especially celebrities, government officials, and ordinary users, making it possible to examine how similar evaluations of English acquire different social meanings depending on target type and interactional context.

Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis provides the analytic framework. Following Herring's approach, the study treats online interaction as discourse and reads posts sequentially, asking how each post responds to what came before and shapes what follows. Individual posts are therefore not treated as isolated opinions. The relevant object of analysis is the accumulation of policing, defence, uptake, and meta-policing across the thread.

LIHKG was selected because its platform affordances bear directly on the research questions. Its thread structure preserves conversational sequencing, the voting system makes uptake partly visible, and the anonymous posting environment enables relatively direct

metalinguistic judgement compared with other platforms (Threads, Instagram and Facebook). These features make LIHKG a useful site for examining naturally occurring discourse on English policing in Hong Kong.

6.2 Scope and Limitations

Because CMDA treats textual interaction as evidence of discourse behaviour rather than direct evidence of participants' internal beliefs, this study does not claim to measure LIHKG users' private attitudes toward English (Herring, 2004). It analyses only the publicly available evaluative stances and identity meanings that users make interactionally available in forum discourse. The study focuses on language policing of English on LIHKG. Policing of written Chinese, written Cantonese, and Putonghua falls outside the analysis, although such policing is attested on the platform and is acknowledged as a direction for future research. Not all English-related talk was included, for example, discussions on tutorials, translation requests, and document requests, were excluded because they do not necessarily involve evaluative judgment. Only threads in which English was explicitly judged entered the sample.

No fixed time boundary was imposed. The corpus spans LIHKG's operational history from 2016 to late 2025, and threads were selected for relevance and analytical potential.

Four limitations follow from this design. First, the keyword search selected for explicit metalinguistic discussion, so implicit forms of policing were not captured, for example, a user silently switching to English to assert status leaves no searchable trace. Second, the corpus is Cantonese-dominant because LIHKG users write overwhelmingly in Cantonese, while threads written entirely in English on the platform are rare (or untraceable). Third, anonymity prevents demographic verification as users cannot be matched to stable social profiles, hence, claims about education, occupation, or overseas experience are treated as discursive acts rather than

factual reports. Fourth, LIHKG threads do not display precise timestamps, so the temporal analysis is very limited. The above limits the generalisability of this study and findings should be interpreted with caution but does not preclude LIHKG from being considered a valid community for in-depth sociolinguistic analysis.

It should be noted that no intercoder reliability is measured as this is a single-coder project.

6.3 Data Collection

6.3.1 *Keyword list construction*

A metalinguistic keyword list was developed iteratively to capture the lexical field of English language evaluation on LIHKG. The initial seed list drew on existing literature (Chau, 2025) and on the researcher's familiarity with LIHKG as a local Hong Konger and regular platform user. Each keyword was entered into both LIHKG's built-in title search and Google site-restricted search. The former captured threads where language policing was signalled in the title, while the latter identified cases where policing occurred within comments. Search results were manually screened for relevance, excluding threads that contained target keywords but did not involve language evaluation, such as translation queries and document requests. In parallel, known trigger events were compiled from media reports and prior literature, including celebrity advertisements, politicians' English-language performances, and viral discussions of accent or fluency. (See Appendix B for the full keyword list.)

Keyword expansion and trigger-event browsing proceeded cyclically: search results were browsed for additional metalinguistic terms and event-specific expressions, which were then fed back into subsequent searches until new searches yielded threads already indexed in previous rounds. Confirmed threads were recorded in a master index spreadsheet. The final index

comprises 240 unique threads spanning LIHKG’s operational history from late 2016 to late 2025. (See Appendix A for documented threads and Appendix D for the full database.)

6.4 Data Coding

The coding framework was designed to capture both the interactional form and the social meaning of English language policing on LIHKG. Following prior work on online language policing, metalinguistic comments are treated not simply as isolated evaluations of correctness, but as discursive acts through which users regulate norms, mark social boundaries, and negotiate language ideology in interaction (Heuman, 2022; Heuman, 2020; Pajunen, 2024; Phyak, 2015). Heuman’s analysis of Jodel shows that online language policing is often realised through routinised strategies such as exposed correction, humour, and repetition, while her later work demonstrates that counter-policing and dismissal of linguistic correctness are also analytically important forms of metalinguistic stance-taking (Heuman, 2022; Heuman, 2020). Phyak’s (2015) study of Facebook language policing further supports treating online metalinguistic debate as an ideologically charged space in which language becomes linked to identity, hierarchy, and belonging. On this basis, the present codebook separates Level 1 strategies, which capture how policing is performed, from Level 2 meanings, which capture what social indexicalities are activated, while a separate policing-direction field records whether a post polices, defends, reflects on, or exits the evaluative act. (See Appendix C for the codebook template.)

6.4.1 Codebook Design

6.4.1.1 Post metadata (columns A-L)

Twelve metadata fields were recorded for each post:

1. discussion board,
2. thread title,

3. thread ID,
4. sequential post number,
5. pseudonymised username,
6. full original content, preserving emojis, non-standard orthography, and code-mixed passages,
7. English translation,
8. quoted posts,
9. upvote,
10. downvote counts,
11. reply count, and
12. an indicator of whether the comment was written by the original poster.

The English translations preserve the pragmatic force, register, and tone of the original, including profanity, sarcasm, and internet-specific discourse markers, rather than producing sanitised equivalents. This follows the principle that translation in discourse-analytical research should preserve pragmatic intent rather than lexical equivalence (Pavlenko, 2007).

6.4.1.2 Level 1 codes: Policing Strategy (columns M-R)

Level 1 captures the discursive how of each policing act through six binary categories. Each post is assigned Y (present) or N (absent) for each code. Multiple codes may co-occur within a single post. (Table 1)

Table 1

Codebook - Level 1 Policing Strategy Codes

Code	Label	Meaning	Description	Exemplar
L1-A	Explicit criticism	Direct evaluation	Metalinguistic commentary evaluating pronunciation, grammar, fluency, or delivery	“his grammar is terrible”; “sounds like a recording”

L1-B	Phonetic transliteration	Mockery through script	Transcribing English into Cantonese characters to mock pronunciation	“try” rendered as “猜”; “各位” rendered as “各 WEI”
L1-C	Memefication	Memetic repetition	Repeating a linguistic error as a standalone meme without further commentary	“one plus one bigger than two”
L1-D	Authenticity accusation	Performative exposure	Accusing the target of pretending to possess English competence they lack	“扮 ABC”; “fake accent”
L1-E	Meta-policing	Reflexive critique	Criticising the act of language policing itself, questioning the right to judge or commenting on HK’s culture of linguistic ridicule	“只有香港人會笑人英文差”
L1-F	Neutral / defensive	Defence or deflection	Defending the target’s English or arguing that proficiency is irrelevant to the matter at hand	“溝通到就得”; “口音唔重要”

Note. Each post is assigned Y (present) or N (absent) for each code. Multiple L1 codes may co-occur within a single post. Codes are binary and non-hierarchical. L1-E and L1-F are structurally distinct from L1-A through L1-D in that they respond to policing rather than performing it; they are retained at Level 1 because they constitute discursive strategies in their own right.

6.4.1.3 Level 2 Codes: Indexical Meaning (Columns S-X)

Level 2 captures the social why, the indexical meanings constructed through each policing act, through six binary categories. Each post is assigned Y (present) or N (absent) for each code. Multiple code applications may co-occur within a single post. A post that mocks a politician’s English (L1-A) while linking that incompetence to his lack of university education (L2-A) and contrasting him with a colonial-era predecessor (L2-D) would be coded Y for all three categories.

Table 2
Codebook - Level 2 Indexical Meaning Codes

Code	Label	Meaning	Description	Exemplar
L2-A	Class / education	Socioeconomic indexicality	English competence is linked to educational background, university attendance, examination results, or socioeconomic status	“佢連大學都有讀過” (he didn’t even attend university)
L2-B	Immigration / origin	Migration indexicality	English is linked to immigration status or place of origin	“新移民”; “大陸仔”

Code	Label	Meaning	Description	Exemplar
L2-C	Authenticity / fake ABC	Performative authenticity	English is used to evaluate whether a speaker is genuinely cosmopolitan or merely performing cosmopolitanism	“扮 ABC”; “假鬼妹”
L2-D	Political loyalty	Political indexicality	English competence or incompetence is linked to political alignment (e.g., pro-Beijing vs. pro-democracy, colonial-era vs. post-handover governance)	“藍絲英文”
L2-E	HK vs. Mainland identity	Boundary indexicality	English functions as a marker distinguishing Hong Kong identity from mainland Chinese identity	“香港人英文點都好過大陸人”
L2-F	Meta-ideology	Reflexive indexicality	The post explicitly discusses whether the practice of language policing itself is socially productive or toxic	“笑人英文差本身就係問題” (mocking someone’s English is itself the problem)

Note. Each post is assigned Y (present) or N (absent) for each code. Multiple L2 codes may co-occur within a single post. L2 codes capture the social meaning constructed through the policing act, not the topic of the post. A post discussing education is coded L2-A only if English competence is linked to educational status as an evaluative frame, not merely mentioned alongside it.

6.4.1.4 Analysis (columns Y-AA)

Three final columns capture interaction-level metadata.

Target entity: The person or group whose English is being evaluated.

Policing direction: Policing direction enables quantification of the discursive balance within each thread, the ratio of policing to counter-policing to reflexive meta-commentary, and cross-thread comparison. (See Table 3 for details.)

Analyst notes: A free-text field documenting observations that the categorical codes cannot capture.

Table 3
Codebook - Policing Direction Categories

Category	Meaning	Description	Exemplar
Policing	Active evaluation	Actively mocking, correcting, or ridiculing the target’s English	Phonetic transcription of a politician’s vowels with laughing emojis

Category	Meaning	Description	Exemplar
Defending	Counter-evaluation	Defending the target’s English or arguing against the policing act	“佢英文唔差啦，你地太 harsh” (his English isn’t bad, you lot are too harsh)
Meta	Reflexive commentary	Commenting on the phenomenon of language policing as a practice, without directly policing or defending	“香港人成日笑人英文，但自己又唔見得好” (HKers always mock others’ English but theirs isn’t great either)
Neutral	Relevant but non-evaluative	Relevant to the thread topic but neither policing nor defending	Factual background on the target’s career or education
Off-topic	Irrelevant	Not pertaining to language (e.g., interpersonal flame wars, unrelated political commentary)	Personal insults unrelated to English

Note. Each post receives exactly one policing direction category. This classification is mutually exclusive. The ratio of policing to defending to meta posts within each thread is reported in Section 7 and used for cross-thread comparison in Section 8.

6.4.2 Coding procedure

The coding scheme was developed iteratively through close reading of four high-yield pilot threads (William Chan, 2017; Keung To, 2024; John Lee, 2022; Do Do Cheng, 2024), with provisional codes applied to all relevant posts and ambiguous cases recorded in analyst notes. This procedure follows prior interactional approaches to online language policing, where recurrent metalinguistic strategies are identified through close reading of naturally occurring comment threads rather than imposed as fixed categories in advance (Heuman, 2020, 2022). The Level 1 codes were calibrated to capture the discursive realisation of policing, including direct criticism, phonetic transliteration, memefication, authenticity accusation, meta-policing, and defence. The Level 2 codes were calibrated to capture the indexical meanings activated by those strategies, following work that treats social-media language policing as an ideologically saturated space where language becomes linked to identity, hierarchy, legitimacy, and belonging (Phyak, 2015). After pilot coding, the codebook was revised by merging overlapping categories, separating discursive strategy from indexical meaning, and adding locally salient LIHKG-specific categories such as Cantonese-script phonetic transliteration and authenticity accusation. The revised scheme was then applied to the full dataset, with each post coded for metadata, L1

strategy, L2 meaning, policing direction, and qualitative notes. All coding was performed manually through close reading.

7 Database Overview

7.1 Distribution by discussion board

Table 4

Distribution of Language-Policing Threads by Discussion Board (n = 240)

Discussion board	English name	n	%
時事台	Current Affairs	60	25.0
學術台	Academic	47	19.6
吹水台	Casual Chat	46	19.2
校園台	Campus	25	10.4
創意台	Creative	18	7.5
娛樂台	Entertainment	12	5.0
上班台	Workplace	12	5.0
政事台	Politics	5	2.1
World	World	3	1.3
影視台	Film & TV	2	0.8
旅遊台	Travel	2	0.8
潮流台	Trends	1	0.4
財經台	Finance	1	0.4
飲食台	Food & Drink	1	0.4
感情台	Relationships	1	0.4
音樂台	Music	1	0.4
體育台	Sports	1	0.4
汽車台	Automobiles	1	0.4
軟件台	Software	1	0.4
Total		240	100.0

Note. All percentages in this paper are rounded off to 3 significant figures.

The distribution is concentrated. Three boards, Current Affairs (n = 60, 25.0%), Academic (n = 47, 19.6%), and Casual Chat (n = 46, 19.2%), together account for 63.8% of the sampled threads. The next largest categories are Campus (n = 25, 10.4%), Creative (n = 18, 7.5%), Entertainment (n = 12, 5.0%), and Workplace (n = 12, 5.0%), while the remaining boards

contribute only small numbers of threads. This distribution suggests that English policing on LIHKG is concentrated in public-affairs, education-related, and everyday discussion spaces rather than confined to one specialised board.

7.2 Keyword yield

Table 5

Keyword Yield by Search Term (n = 240)

Keyword	English gloss	n threads	% of corpus
港式英文	Hong Kong-style English	25	10.4
英文水平	English standard/level	24	10.0
偽 ABC	fake ABC	22	9.2
李家超 英文	John Lee English	20	8.3
英文差	bad English	19	7.9
英文廢	useless English	19	7.9
林鄭 英文	Carrie Lam English	18	7.5
英文口音	English accent	16	6.7
姜濤 英文	Keung To English	13	5.4
英文屎	shitty English	11	4.6
笑人英文	mock someone's English	11	4.6
DSE 英文	DSE English	10	4.2
陳偉霆 英文	William Chan English	7	2.9
笑英文差	laugh at bad English	7	2.9
母語教育	mother tongue education	5	2.1
捉 grammar	catch grammar errors	4	1.7
扮 ABC	pretending to be ABC	3	1.2
grammar nazi	grammar nazi	2	0.8
講英文 俾人笑	speak English, get laughed at	2	0.8
官員 英文	officials' English	1	0.4
do 姐 英文	Do Do Cheng English	1	0.4
Total		240	100.0

Note. Keywords were used to identify language-policing-relevant threads on LIHKG. Keywords are drawn from the 39-keyword list in Appendix B. Five threads related to the William Chan/Siu Shuk-shuk controversy were identified through snowball sampling and attributed to “陳偉霆 英文.”

The 240 threads were identified using 21 of the 39 keywords in the search list (Appendix B). The top three keywords by yield, “港式英文” (n = 25, 10.4%), “英文水平” (n = 24, 10.0%), and “偽 ABC” (n = 22, 9.2%), together represent 29.6% of the corpus, indicating that general evaluative terms and the iconic “偽 ABC” label are the most common entry points into language-policing discussions. Named-target keywords (李家超 英文, 林鄭 英文, 姜濤 英文) also produce a significant portion of threads, suggesting that policing on LIHKG is often triggered by public figures’ English performances. The 陳偉霆 英文 keyword (n = 7, 2.9%) captures a cluster of threads about the William Chan Chanel advertisement and the subsequent Siu Shuk-shuk accent debate, identified through snowball sampling from initial search results. Terms related to language variety (港式英文, 英文口音) encompass threads with the broadest range of L1/L2 code diversity, attracting both policing and counter-policing responses across indexical dimensions. Event-specific meme keywords (e.g., “We and Us,” “rest in piece”) returned fewer threads, consistent with narrower temporal relevance.

8 Findings

8.1 Overview of Coding Distributions

Of the 8,572 posts, 3,086 posts received at least one L1 code, yielding 4,057 total L1 code applications because some posts carried multiple L1 codes, which are non-mutually exclusive.

Table 6

Distribution of Level 1 Code Applications

L1 Code	Label	n	% of L1 applications
L1-A	Explicit criticism	1,398	34.5
L1-B	Phonetic transliteration	348	8.6
L1-C	Memefication	477	11.8
L1-D	Authenticity accusation	483	11.9
L1-E	Meta-policing	647	15.9
L1-F	Neutral/defensive	704	17.4
Total		4,057	100.0

Note. Percentages are calculated out of 4,057 L1 code applications, not out of unique posts. Because L1 codes were binary and non-mutually exclusive, a single post could receive more than one L1 code. Posts without any L1 code are excluded from this table.

Explicit criticism (L1-A) dominated, accounting for more than a third of all coded L1 applications (34.5%, $n = 1,398$). Neutral/defensive responses (L1-F) came second (17.4%, $n = 704$). Meta-policing (L1-E) was also common (15.9%, $n = 647$), suggesting that LIHKG users are unusually self-aware about the policing they perform. This shows that the prototypical language-policing act on LIHKG is blunt evaluative judgment, not elaborate parody. Authenticity accusation (L1-D, 11.9%) and memefication (L1-C, 11.8%) occupied similar shares. Phonetic transliteration (L1-B, 8.6%) was the least frequent L1 category, although its qualitative salience is disproportionate, transliteration posts are highly visible because they reproduce spoken errors in written Cantonese characters.

Table 7 shows the L2 distribution. Across the L1-coded material, the analysis identified 2,651 L2 code applications, representing identifiable ideological dimensions attached to language-policing acts. Class/education (L2-A) was the most frequent ideological frame ($n =$

754, 28.4%), followed by HK-versus-Mainland identity (L2-E, n = 535, 20.2%) and meta-ideology (L2-F, n = 469, 17.7%).

Table 7

Distribution of Level 2 Code Applications

L2 Code	Label	n	% of L2 Applications
L2-A	Class/education	754	28.4
L2-B	Immigration/origin	296	11.2
L2-C	Authenticity/fake ABC	280	10.6
L2-D	Political loyalty	317	12.0
L2-E	HK vs Mainland	535	20.2
L2-F	Meta-ideology	469	17.7
Total		2,651	100.0

Note. Percentages based on total coded L2 acts (n = 2,651). Only posts carrying an L1 code with an identifiable ideological dimension received an L2 code.

Across the L1-coded material, the analysis identified 2,651 L2 code applications, representing identifiable ideological dimensions attached to language-policing acts.

Class/education (L2-A) was the most frequent ideological frame (28.4%, n = 754), followed by Hong Kong–Mainland identity (L2-E; 20.2%, n = 535) and meta-ideology (L2-F; 17.7%, n = 469).

Table 8

Directional distribution of the Posts

Direction	n	%
Policing	2,104	24.5%
Neutral	2,507	29.2%
Off-Topic	2,691	31.4%
Meta	601	7.0%
Defending	669	7.8%
Total	8,572	100.0%

The directional distribution is asymmetric. Policing-direction posts outnumber defending-direction posts by approximately 3.1 to 1 (24.5% vs. 7.8%), with the remainder coded as neutral (29.2%), off-topic (31.4%), or meta (7%).

Table 9 cross-tabulates L1 and L2 code applications. The cell counts represent co-occurrence, that is, how often a particular policing act co-occurred with a particular ideological dimension in the same post.

Table 9

Cross-Tabulation of L1 Language Policing Acts by L2 Ideological Dimensions

	L2-A	L2-B	L2-C	L2-D	L2-E	L2-F	Total
L1-A	217	94	138	71	117	71	708
L1-B	36	10	13	8	36	25	128
L1-C	51	22	8	23	34	34	172
L1-D	124	55	109	77	90	118	573
L1-E	56	41	19	36	89	219	460
L1-F	94	44	25	43	83	114	403
Total	578	266	312	258	449	581	2,444

Note. Cell values represent co-occurrence counts. Row and column totals may differ from Tables 6-7 because a single post can carry multiple L1 or L2 code applications. Grand total: 2,444 co-occurring pairs from 1,159 posts coded at both levels.

Table 10 isolates the six most frequent L1 x L2 pairings. The marginally largest L1 × L2 co-occurrence is L1-E × L2-F, meta-policing crossed with meta-ideology (n = 219). This slightly exceeds L1-A × L2-A, explicit criticism crossed with class/education (n = 217). The two-cell difference should be interpreted cautiously, as the cross-tabulation suggests that reflexive meta-policing and class-indexed evaluation carry comparable structural weight in the sampled LIHKG data.

Table 10

Six Highest-Frequency L1 x L2 Co-Occurrence Pairings

L1 Code	L2 Code	n	Interpretation
L1-E	L2-F	219	Meta-policing + meta-ideology: reflexive commentary on LP as social practice
L1-A	L2-A	217	Explicit criticism + class: direct evaluation indexing educational capital
L1-A	L2-C	138	Explicit criticism + authenticity: language as shibboleth for “real” vs “fake” ABC
L1-D	L2-A	124	Authenticity accusation + class: identity challenges grounded in perceived SES
L1-D	L2-F	118	Authenticity accusation + meta-ideology: questioning LP norms via identity claims

L1 Code	L2 Code	n	Interpretation
L1-A	L2-E	117	Explicit criticism + HK vs Mainland: language evaluation marking regional identity

Note. Only pairings with n > 100 shown. These six pairings account for 933 of 2,444 total co-occurrences (38.2%).

These three cells correspond to the reflexive (L1-E x L2-F), the stratificatory (L1-A x L2-A), and the identity (L1-A x L2-C) dimensions of language policing on the platform. Each is examined below. The co-occurrence of identical L1 strategies with different L2 meanings exemplifies what Eckert (2008) terms the indexical field that the same evaluative act can index class, authenticity, or meta-ideology depending on discursive context.

8.2 Evaluation and Class

In the class-indexed data, English proficiency is repeatedly treated as evidence of social worth. Users do not evaluate English as a linguistic object alone. They read it through educational capital, institutional rank, and social position within Hong Kong's post-colonial hierarchy. This section traces the equation between English proficiency, educational level, and social worth across three sites: public-figure evaluation (Thread #2960197), academic gatekeeping (Thread #91218), and workplace self-appraisal (Thread #876034). The pattern established here provides the class-based evaluative template against which authenticity judgments in Section 8.3 can be read.

Table 11

Policing Strategies Co-occurring with Class/ Education (L2-A)

L1 strategy	n	% of L2-A
L1-A Explicit criticism	217	37.5
L1-D Authenticity accusation	124	21.5
L1-F Neutral/defensive	94	16.3
L1-E Meta-policing	56	9.69
L1-C Memefication	51	8.82
L1-B Phonetic transliteration	36	6.23
Total	578	100.0

Note. Counts represent posts coded with both the listed L1 strategy and L2-A, where English is treated as evidence of class or educational standing. Percentages are calculated out of all L2-A co-occurrences (n = 578) and rounded off to 3 significant figures.

L1-A x L2-A (n = 217, 37.5% of all class-indexed acts) is the second-largest cell in the cross-tabulation. Together with L1-D x L2-A (n = 124), explicit criticism and authenticity accusation account for 59% of all class-indexed policing. The pairing fuses the platform's most common policing strategy (L1-A, 34.5% of all coded L1 acts) with its most common indexical meaning (L2-A, 28.4% of all coded L2 acts). When LIHKG users evaluate someone's English, they reach for the vocabulary of educational attainment and social standing. The question is what shape this takes.

Thread #2960197 [李家超講英文講到就走音咁], evaluating then-Chief Executive John Lee's English-language press conference, shows the pattern clearly. Within the thread's opening sequence, users produce a cascade of L1-A judgments indexed to institutional hierarchy.

"You're comparing a senior AO's English with a retired police dog? 🐕 Haha" [你用個資深AO嘅英文同隻退休白衫狗比? 🐕 哈哈] (Thread #2960197, Post #7)

The target is not Lee's pronunciation. It is his bureaucratic pedigree. "Retired police dog" indexes Lee's early career in the Hong Kong Police Force. "Senior AO" (Administrative Officer, the English-educated apex of the colonial and post-colonial civil service) renders the language evaluation a judgment on institutional class.

A parallel logic surfaces in Thread #91218 [[英文] 英文差讀 u 係咪原罪...], where a poster flatly informs a student anxious about studying sociology with DSE English Level 4 that "if your English is weak and you're reading Soci, you'll have a rough time" [英文廢去讀 soci 會好慘] (Post #10). The brevity is the point. English proficiency as academic class marker requires no elaboration on LIHKG. Both threads show the axis in its prototypical mode. External evaluators appraise a target's English against an institutionally calibrated scale (AO rank, DSE grade, degree attainment) and deliver a verdict.

Thread #876034 [有無英文廢 j 返 MNC 大公司?], a 156-post discussion titled “Struggling with terrible English at an MNC,” extends the axis into territory the public-figure threads cannot reach. Here, class/education indexicality is not projected onto a distant target by evaluators but reported as lived experience by the class subjects themselves. The original poster opens with a confession. Thread #876034 also contains authenticity-policing moves, which are addressed separately in Section 8.3. Here, the focus is on the self-appraisal dimension, which is users who position themselves as the class-subordinate subject of English evaluation, not as its agent.

“Recently started a new job at a well-known MNC. My English is really terrible, but I’ve entered an all-English environment... Can barely understand what’s being said in meetings, extremely scared when foreigners talk to me.” [近日返新工，係出名既 MNC 公司。本身英文好廢，但入咗間全英文，包括讀，寫，聽都係英文為主要語言。Meeting 內容幾乎聽唔明，勁驚外國人同自己講野。] (Thread #876034, Post #1)

Respondents spontaneously disclose their DSE grades as explanatory variables.

“My DSE English overall was a 3.” [我 dse 英文 overall 係 3] (Post #35).

“I’m from a Chinese secondary school throughout, DSE English was only a 3. Now every time I ask my department head something, I think carefully first about what to ask and anticipate how they might answer and how I’ll respond, like preparing for an interview.” [我自己係中中，再加 DSE Eng 都係拎 3，而家每一次問啊 head 野要諗清楚問乜，諗埋佢可能點答，你可以點應，好似 interview 咁。] (Post #93).

A third positions their sub-degree credential against the office. *“The whole office is full of foreign/prestigious university graduates. But I myself am an idiot”* [入到去全外國/名牌大學畢業生，但我自己一碌柒咁] (Post #48), later disclosing an HD (Higher Diploma) qualification as the specific marker (Post #101). A fourth extends the barrier beyond language. *“Language is one thing; the real gap is in worldview”* [language 一件事，眼界差得眼先係問題] (Post #64),

recounting how colleagues discussed African politics with cosmopolitan ease while the poster “stood there like an idiot.”

Across the three threads, the class axis is cumulative rather than domain-specific. Thread #2960197 evaluates English through institutional rank, Thread #91218 treats DSE English as academic viability, and Thread #876034 turns DSE grades, school-medium history, and degree credentials into resources for narrating workplace belonging. The stance shifts from external verdict to self-appraisal, but the indexical relation remains stable: English proficiency, educational credentials, and social position mutually reinforce one another and are mutually indexical. The class axis therefore becomes one of the system’s reusable evaluative templates. English becomes a way to rank speakers by education, institutional legitimacy, and imagined social position, and that ranking can later be defended, challenged, or reinterpreted through meta-policing. The class axis therefore corresponds most closely to Woolard’s ideology of anonymity. Users judge English against an apparently general standard of educated competence, but that standard is not socially neutral. It is made legible through Hong Kong-specific institutions such as DSE grades, school-medium background, university credentials, civil-service hierarchy, and MNC workplace norms.

8.3 English as Identity Test

Section 8.2 showed English being evaluated through a logic of anonymity as speakers were measured against a generalised standard of educated competence. This section shows a different evaluative logic. In authenticity-testing posts, the question is not simply whether the English is correct, fluent, or prestigious, but whether it sounds like it belongs to the speaker who produces it. Woolard’s ideology of authenticity is therefore central here, as English becomes evidence of true or false social origin, not merely evidence of proficiency. Table 12 shows that authenticity-

related posts are concentrated in two strategies. L1-A explicit criticism accounts for 138 co-occurrences with L2-C, while L1-D authenticity accusation accounts for 109. Together, these two strategies account for 79.2% of all L2-C co-occurrences, suggesting that authenticity testing is usually performed through direct criticism or explicit accusations of performance.

Table 12

Policing Strategies Co-occurring with Authenticity Indexicality (L2-C)

L1 strategy	n	% of L2-C
L1-A Explicit criticism	138	44.2
L1-D Authenticity accusation	109	34.9
L1-F Neutral/defensive	25	8.0
L1-E Meta-policing	19	6.1
L1-B Phonetic transliteration	13	4.2
L1-C Memefication	8	2.6
Total	312	100.0

Note. Counts represent posts coded with both the listed L1 code and L2-C (English as an authenticity test). L1-A and L1-D together account for 79.2% of all authenticity-testing posts. Total n = 312 co-occurring pairs.

The William Chan threads supply the clearest illustration of this mechanism in operation. Thread 1169210, a 178-post discussion triggered by Chan's Chanel promotional video, generated concentrated policing of his pronunciation, delivery, and persona. The opening post sets the evaluative frame with a derogatory nickname and a link to the advertisement.

WTF, he looks like such an idiot.[屌你老味成個鷓鴣仔咁] (Thread 1169210, Post 1, L1-A)

Within three replies, the evaluation sharpens into an authenticity test. Post 13 activates the credential gap directly.

Claims international school background, yet his English sounds worse than mine.[又話國際學校出身 啲英文講得仲難聽過我] (Thread 1169210, Post 13, L1-A, L1-D, L2-A, L2-C)

The claim invokes an educational credential, international schooling, and finds the voice insufficient to sustain it. The evaluative target is not a specific error. It is the mismatch between projected identity and audible performance. By Post 3, this logic has been made fully explicit.

The biggest problem isn't poor English. It's too much performing. [最大問題係唔係英文差而係太扮野] (Thread 1169210, Post 3, L1-D, L2-C)

The advertisement's luxury branding raises the expectation that Chan's English should match the cosmopolitan persona being projected. Post 47 links the identity mismatch to the advertisement's visual language.

Chanel loves doing everything black-and-white. But you need to check if the subject suits it. [發現CHANEL又係好鍾意乜鳩都黑白咁，都要睇下訪問對象啱唔啱㗎，睇到的士陳成個懷念弱智仔咁。] (Thread 1169210, Post 47, L1-A, L2-C)

Post 110, one of the thread's most analytically dense contributions, connects the authenticity test to a wider critique of Hong Kong's evaluative culture.

HK people love mocking others' English, then act like their own accent is fine. William Chan's clip is embarrassing not because of poor English, but because he pretends to be fluent. [又係太作狀，香港人最興笑尻人英文差，然後係咁j自己啲口音，又笑尻人口音有問題，講真我成日都要同唔同國籍嘅鬼佬傾計，邊尻個得閒理你咩口音。依段片柒在唔係英文差，而係扮嘢流暢咁講英文，如果佢放返慢黎講會好好多。] (Thread 1169210, Post 110, L1-D, L1-E, L2-A, L2-C, L2-F)

The post performs a double move. It polices Chan for pretending while simultaneously policing Hong Kong users for policing. The authenticity axis and the reflexive axis converge in a single utterance. Posts referencing Mainland celebrity Huang Xiaoming's English errors (Post 5) and the slang term “skr” (Post 8) draw the HK-Mainland boundary explicitly. To mock Mainland-associated linguistic forms is to assert a Hong Kong identity for which English competence serves as the distinguishing credential.

Thread 1175854, a shorter follow-up discussion responding to the same Chanel advertisement, produces the most granular phonetic policing in the corpus. Where Thread 1169210 operates at the level of persona and brand, Thread 1175854 isolates specific pronunciation events. Post 14 identifies the key feature.

The most ridiculous thing, ‘seventeen’ split into ‘seven-teen,’ that idiotic laugh, and whoever wrote that garbage script. [最柒 seventeen 變左 seven · teen , d 鳩笑聲同埋果篇唔知咩人寫比佢既垃圾稿] (Thread 1175854, Post 14, L1-A, L1-B, L1-D)

Post 11 shows how users also dispute the phonetic facts of the performance:

He read it as ‘chwai,’ not ‘try.’ [讀咗猜] (Thread 1175854, Post 11, L1-B)

Post 18 then concedes competence while denying authenticity.

“His English is probably 10x better than mine, but when he laughs he looks like the Joker from Batman.” [英文我覺得勁我十倍 但佢笑起上黎好似蝙蝠俠裡面既 Joker] (Thread 1175854, Post 18, L1-A, L1-C, L1-E)

The concession is structurally significant. The poster does not dispute that Chan can speak English. The poster disputes that Chan can inhabit the voice his advertisement projects. In this reading, the problem is not simply proficiency but the perceived gap between English performance, celebrity branding, and projected cosmopolitan persona.

Thread 1119781, a 36-post thread titled “偽 ABC” (Fake ABCs), extends the axis from individual speaker evaluation to collaborative register construction. This thread targets no single person. It is a crowdsourced catalogue of the linguistic features that define the fake ABC persona. Users enumerate discourse markers (“Oh my God!,” “I’m like... He’s like...,” “you know,” “well actually,” “no offence”), phonological features (vocal fry, uptalk, exaggerated R-coloured vowels), and pragmatic patterns (trailing ellipses, code-mixed Cantonese particles appended to English frames). The opening post establishes the evaluative frame through a spatial and sensory image.

Every day on the MTR, screaming super loudly ‘Oh my God!’ When they speak English, it usually starts with ‘It’s like... He’s like... I’m like...’ extremely high frequency. Actual Westerners don’t even talk like this. [日日係地鐵度，太大聲尖叫：Oh my God! 講d 英文，通常開頭係：It’s like... He’s like... I’m like..出現頻率極高，明明鬼佬鬼婆都唔係咁。] (Thread 1119781, Post 1, L1-D)

Post 5 of a related thread introduces a more extreme authenticity test grounded in embodied performance.

Only count as ABC if you moan like that in bed too. [叫床都咁叫，先好認ABC] (Thread 964404, Post 5, L1-D, L2-C)

The joke performs significant ideological work. Authentic fluency, in this formulation, means using English even in involuntary, unmonitored speech. The test is not based on a single word or sound, but on whether English appears under unmonitored conditions. It is the absence of code-switching under conditions where self-presentation cannot be maintained. Post 21, written by a self-identified “true ABC,” complicates this binary.

I’m a true ABC. Even I got influenced by the environment and started using HK-style English and expressions. Also, vocal fry and uptalk are super annoying. [我係真abc，都係講港式英文 accent 同用語個d 好易比環境影響。另外 vocal fry 同 upspeak/uptalk 都好煩膠。] (Thread 1119781, Post 21, L1-B, L1-D, L2-C)

The poster’s self-positioning as a genuine ABC who nonetheless adopts local features exposes a paradox in the authenticity framework. If even real ABCs drift toward HK English, the category “fake ABC” may describe a performance style rather than a failed identity claim. Post 44 links these features to class institutions.

Band 3 MK girl... High Tea... IG... fake ABC. [香港啲 Band3 MK 妹後尾做空姐，得閒 High Tea up IG 個啲，就真係偽 abc 啦] (Thread 1119781, Post 44, L1-D, L2-A, L2-C)

The thread shows users collaboratively assembling the fake ABC persona by listing, mocking, and debating its recognisable linguistic features. The category is treated as familiar, but its boundaries are also negotiated through the thread. Users add features, challenge examples, and refine what counts as fake ABC speech.

The cross-tabulation supports this interpretation. L1-D (authenticity accusation) paired with L2-C yields $n = 109$ (Table 12, 34.9%), and L1-A with L2-C yields $n = 138$ (44.2%). No

other L1 strategy accounts for more than 8% of L2-C co-occurrences. The two strategies work in sequence, direct criticism first opens the evaluation, while authenticity accusation converts it into a judgement of persona.

A related thread, 113749, provides a syntactic diagnostic cue used to expose inauthenticity.

The most cringe thing about fake ABCs, 'Although ... but ...' [偽ABC 最柒之處 Although ... but ...] (Thread 113749, Post 29)

Post #29 identifies the “Although...but...” construction as the key feature. Users treat this construction as evidence of Chinese-influenced English despite an otherwise Americanised performance (Setter et al., 2010; Hung, 2002). A small syntactic feature is therefore made to expose the perceived gap between performed overseas identity and local linguistic background. The thread closes with a statement that connects back to the reflexive axis in Section 8.4.

Speaking English is already a sin. [講英文已經係原罪] (Thread 113749, Post 27, L2-F)

The Uncle Siu threads (1175167, 1178392) invert the mechanism observed in the Chan and fake ABC cases. While Chan is policed for performing English beyond his perceived competence and fake ABCs for performing a cosmopolitan identity that their phonology cannot sustain, Uncle Siu (蕭叔叔), a Hong Kong-based YouTube English teacher, is policed for performing an accent too well. Siu holds a local educational background yet produces RP-adjacent pronunciation features that attract both admiration and suspicion.

Thread 1175167 establishes the evaluative frame by connecting Siu’s accent policing to his earlier public mockery of William Chan. Post 1 identifies a structural hypocrisy in Siu’s position.

That’s just how Hong Kong English culture is. Leading the charge in mocking people’s accents. After this, which Hong Kong person would dare speak English? Although Taxi Chan is an idiot, his English isn’t actually wrong, yet people still laugh. Stepping on others to get ahead, absolute scumbag. [香港英文係咁嫁啦，帶頭笑人口音。以後香港仲邊有人講英文，一講

無神神俾人笑。雖然的士陳係柒，佢講英文又無錯，咁都笑人，踩人上位正仆街，無品。
] (Thread 1175167, Post 1, L1-D, L2-D, L2-E)

The post performs a meta-policing move. Siu, who mocked Chan's pronunciation, is himself accused of performing precisely the kind of evaluative aggression that silences ordinary Hong Kong English speakers. Post 12 sharpens the accusation by framing the accent itself as the problem.

A non-native doing a fake accent is honestly just laughable. [non-native 玩 accent 真係得啖笑] (Thread 1175167, Post 12, L1-A, L1-D, L2-A, L2-F)

Post 13 adds evaluative specificity, turning from the category ("non-native") to the individual.

Don't even think that guy Uncle Siu sounds that good. Very performative, not natural enough. [唔覺得個咩蕭叔叔講得有幾好，好作狀，唔夠自然。] (Thread 1175167, Post 13, L1-C)

Thread 1178392, a companion discussion triggered by a photo reveal of Uncle Siu, begins as an appearance-policing thread. The first 26 posts focus overwhelmingly on his teeth, face, and perceived ugliness. This opening frame matters analytically as the thread's evaluative orientation shifts from somatic to phonological once the visual dimension is exhausted. Post 27 marks the transition point where voice enters the frame.

"I feel his voice/speech is very affected/put-on." [我覺得佢把聲好造作] (Thread 1178392, Post 27, L1-D, L2-C)

Post 39 sharpens this into explicit accent policing.

His so-called British accent is so affected, overdone. [屌你佢啲所謂英式口音真係好攞做作，做多左啦] (Thread 1178392, Post 39, L1-A, L1-D, L2-C)

Post 174 then fuses the somatic and phonological frames into a broader persona of insecurity and performed refinement.

He's fundamentally an insecure ugly man seeking validation by performing a British accent. [樣衰都算；但男人老狗成日笑自己肥先攞命；根本就係一個沒自信的毒撚想靠 chok 口音獲得認同。] (Thread 1178392, Post 174, L1-A, L1-D, L2-C, L2-F)

The trajectory of Thread #1178392 moves from appearance to voice to character. Once the visual frame is established, users reinterpret Siu's accent as part of a broader persona of insecurity and performed refinement.

The temporal dimension of authenticity becomes explicit in a related discussion. Post 23 in Thread 959110 introduces a before-and-after contrast.

His older videos were more natural. Nowadays it's really pretentious. [佢以前D片仲自然D而家真係好作狀] (Thread 959110, Post 23, L1-A, L1-D)

The distinction between Siu's earlier and later voice implies that authenticity is time-sensitive. A speaker's English can lose its perceived genuineness through visible refinement, because refinement signals effort, and effort signals performance rather than habitation.

Post 289 in Thread 1175167 supplies a key data point. The post notes that Siu "never claimed to be doing proper RP" and calls his own accent a "bastard accent," yet this self-deprecating label fails to neutralise the authenticity challenge. The thread's evaluative logic requires that accent reflect biography, and Siu's biography (local schooling, no extended UK residence) contradicts his voice. Post 294 captures this logic precisely.

Uncle Siu, born and raised locally, studied at HKU, and managed to pick up that pronunciation in a place so far from Britain on his own, that's actually impressive. Fair enough, he went to Nam Tuen Moon Government Secondary School. Transforming from that into someone who can fake a British accent is admirable. But as a KOL he sometimes goes too far. [反而蕭生土生土長讀 hku 而且喺一個離英國咁遠嘅地方靠自己 adopt 到人地發音就真係勁啦 都啱嘅 佢中學讀南屯門官立中學 變到識 chok 英文口音係值得佩服嘅 但做 KOL 有時真係 over 㗎 仲要日日 loop 自己肥唔知做乜鳩] (Thread 1175167, Post 294, L1-C, L1-D, L1-F, L2-A, L2-F)

The post performs simultaneous admiration and suspicion. Siu's achievement is recognised as genuine effort, yet the very effort that produced the accent renders it suspect. The authenticity criterion demands that accent emerge from immersion rather than training. A locally educated speaker who acquires RP through deliberate practice violates this demand, and the violation attracts policing even when the linguistic product is technically accurate.

Unlike Chan, Siu is not mainly mocked for insufficient English competence. He is mocked for an accent perceived as too deliberate, too polished, or too detached from his local biography. This reverses the usual proficiency logic that technical competence does not protect the speaker from policing if the accent is heard as performed rather than inhabited.

Thread 876034 extends the authenticity axis into a workplace setting. Post 3, written by a respondent describing life in a multinational company, introduces the fake ABC as a workplace figure.

I'm working at an MNC as fg (fresh graduate). When meeting with clients I sometimes have to speak English. The fake ABCs among the colleagues will laugh at people's English behind their backs. Even a slight accent will be laughed at by them. [我fg 翻緊 mnc，同客開會有時要講英文，啲偽 abc 同事會喺人後面笑鳩人英文，有少少口音都會比佢地笑。] (Thread 876034, Post 3, L1-D, L2-A, L2-C)

Post 7 sharpens the authenticity accusation further.

At lunchtime you hear the fake ABCs laying on their accents. But they don't know ordinary everyday English expressions. Since everyone speaks Cantonese, why bother? [Lunchtime 聽到啲偽 abc chock 啲 accent，但好普通既字都唔係口語用法，明明大家識講廣東話。何必...] (Thread 876034, Post 7, L1-D, L2-C, L2-F)

The workplace thread reproduces the same mismatch logic in an everyday professional setting. The target is someone whose English voice is heard as performed rather than inhabited. What differs is the evaluative consequence. In the William Chan threads, inauthenticity attracts

ridicule. In the workplace thread, it attracts resentment, because the performed accent carries real gatekeeping power over colleagues who lack it.

Across these cases, authenticity policing follows a recurring mismatch logic. William Chan, fake ABCs, Uncle Siu, and workplace fake ABCs are evaluated not only for how their English sounds, but for whether that English fits the identity users assign to them. Chan’s English is heard as failing to match Chanel’s luxury cosmopolitan persona, fake ABC English is heard as exaggerated overseas performance, Uncle Siu’s British-style accent is heard as too deliberate for his local biography, and workplace fake ABC accents are resented as signs of gatekeeping power. The shared target is therefore not English proficiency alone, but the perceived gap between linguistic performance and social identity. This makes authenticity testing recursive because each accusation generates further debates over the fairness of the judgment, the credibility of the identity claim, and Hong Kong’s attachment to English social prestige.

8.4 Reflexivity at the Core

Table 13

Policing Strategies Co-occurring With Meta-Ideological Self-Critique (L2-F)

L1 Strategy	n	%
L1-E Meta-policing	219	37.7
L1-D Authenticity accusation	118	20.3
L1-F Neutral/Defensive	114	19.6
L1-A Explicit criticism	71	12.2
L1-C Memefication	34	5.9
L1-B Phonetic transliteration	25	4.3
Total	581	100.0

L1-E x L2-F (n = 219) is marginally the largest cell in the cross-tabulation. This matters because posts performing or supporting policing outnumber posts defending the target or challenging the policing act by roughly 3 to 1. LIHKG is therefore strongly evaluative overall, but its most structured co-occurrence pattern is reflexive. Users do not only police English; they also critique the ideology that makes English policing socially meaningful.

Thread #113283 illustrates this pattern in a single conversational sequence. The thread opens with direct evaluation of MTR's "HK-style English" announcements:

MTR's HK-style English announcements are so ugly to listen to... better to just not broadcast in English than this embarrassment. [東鐵個d 港式英文難聽到... ![[sosad]] 不如執柒佢咪講英文好柒過啦!] (Thread #113283, Post #1)

This post was coded as L1-A only, since it performs direct criticism without explicitly attaching the pronunciation to a broader social meaning. The thread then shifts quickly from evaluating English to evaluating the act of evaluation itself. Post #2 counters that "it's people with poor English and no self-confidence who laugh at others' poor English". Post #10 compares the original poster to "British aristocrats with aristocratic accents looking down on commoners," activating L2-A class meanings. By Post #16, the discussion has moved into meta-ideological critique:

It's only HK people who are so ridiculous. HK people walking around imitating American accents thinking they're great. [係香港人先咁無聊，明明係香港人走去扮美國人口音仲以為自己好勁![[sosad]]] (Thread #113283, Post #16)

The problem is no longer only the MTR announcement, but a perceived Hong Kong habit of mocking accents and treating English as a status test. This sequence shows how meta-policing develops out of policing. The original post evaluates English. Replies then evaluate the evaluator and the social assumptions behind the evaluation. The thread moves from first-order judgment to reflexive commentary, but without leaving the evaluative frame. Users still judge; they simply redirect judgment from the target's English to the community's policing habit.

Thread #1175167 extends this pattern by turning the policing framework back onto a public language policer. The thread discusses Uncle Siu's criticism of William Chan's English, but many replies evaluate Siu's own performed British accent as excessive, inauthentic, or

unpleasant. Post #9, the thread's second-highest-voted contribution (1,900 upvotes), identifies a chilling effect:

After mocking people's accents, who in HK would dare speak English? Once you open your mouth you get laughed at. William Chan's English wasn't even wrong; mocking him to step on him for self-promotion. [香港英文係咁嫁啦，帶頭笑人口音，以後香港人仲邊有人講英文，一講無啦啦俾人笑，雖然的士陳係柒，佢講英文又無錯，咁都笑人，踩人上位正仆街無品。](Thread #1175167, Post #9)

The post does not merely defend Chan. It reframes accent mockery as a community-level problem.

Later replies develop this argument in more explicitly sociolinguistic terms. Post #260 compares accent variation across English and Chinese contexts:

RP speakers don't laugh at Cockney, Cockney speakers don't laugh at Scouse. Guangzhou people don't laugh at Hong Kong people, Hong Kong people don't laugh at Teochew people speaking Cantonese. But it always gets over-obsessive when it comes to second languages. The average Londoner speaks Estuary English. Speaking RP will also get you laughed at. Because RP sounds really snobbish. Just look at British YouTubers, plenty of them get roasted for sounding too posh [RP 唔會笑 Cockney, Cockney 唔會笑 Scouse，廣州人唔會笑香港人，香港人唔會笑潮州人講廣東話，但永遠去到 second languages 就會開始過分執著，一般人 Londoner 講 Estuary English，講 RP 一樣界人笑，因為 RP 係好嘢唔起人，自己睇下啲英國 YouTuber 勁多人界人屌講到勁 posh] (Thread #1175167, Post #260)

The poster frames the problem as a double standard. Accent variation is treated as normal in some L1 contexts but is over-policed in L2 English contexts. Post #375 adds evidence to this claim. The poster reports showing Uncle Siu's clips to British friends, who “*politely said there are many different local accents in Britain and they couldn't tell which region this accent was from,*” while one “asked me afterwards, ‘Are Hong Kong people that unhappy with their own accent?’” [我比過蕭叔叔 d 片比我 d 英國人 friend 睇...佢地有 d 就好客氣講英國有好多唔同嘅地道口音，聽唔出呢個係邊度口音...有個仲問返我轉頭「乜香港人好憎自己口音咩」] (Thread #1175167, Post #375). The British friends cannot locate Uncle Siu's performed RP

within their own accent landscape, and the return question reframes the entire policing debate, the problem is not the accent but Hong Kong's relationship to it. Post #380 completes the trajectory by inverting the authenticity criterion altogether, "*Actually performing a pure British accent is nauseating; you're not British, why perform a British accent? Every place has accents; HK accent is fine*" [其實扮純正英國口音好嘔心，又唔係英國人，做咩要扮英國口音。個個地方口音都唔同啲，只要唔講錯，香港口音冇問題] (Thread #1175167, Post #380). The sequential trajectory across these three posts recapitulates the trajectory of the entire L1-E x L2-F cell, from technical counter-policing (Post #260's sociolinguistic comparison), through external validation that denaturalises the community's evaluative norms (Post #375's British friends), to a broader defence of HK English as a legitimate variety and a rejection of accent worship as culturally damaging (Post #380). Across these three posts, the thread moves from criticising one policer to questioning the standard by which English accents are judged.

Thread #1182220 [蕭叔叔 vs 陳偉霆廣告：英式口音對搞工升職溝女重要嗎？港式英文口音又有何問題？], posted on the Workplace board under the title "Is a British accent important for jobs, promotions, or dating?", introduces lay linguistic reasoning as a counter-policing resource. Post #7 argues that "actually 'try' results from the tr consonant cluster having no Cantonese equivalent; it's contact phonology, not an error. But ordinary people can't distinguish accent features from grammar errors" (L1-B, L1-E, L1-F, L2-F). Here, a lay speaker mobilising technical terminology, such as consonant cluster, to contest the evaluative framework from within. The thread's meta-policing rate is high (L1-E = 70%, L2-F = 60%), suggesting that the reflexive axis extends into workplace-oriented discourse where the practical stakes of accent evaluation (hiring, promotion, dating) are explicitly foregrounded. The marginally larger L1-E x L2-F cell, read alongside the near-equal L1-A x L2-A cell, suggests that reflexive meta-policing

and class-indexed evaluation are jointly central to the sampled discourse. Its importance lies in the fact that English policing has become recognisable enough to be debated, criticised, and redeployed as an object of evaluation in its very own right.

Thread #1175167 also shows that reflexive critique can create a new evaluative target: the language policer. Uncle Siu is not discussed only as an individual commentator, but as an example of a recognisable figure, the accent snob whose performed standard is itself vulnerable to authenticity critique. The thread therefore redirects the authenticity test from Chan's English to Siu's own accent performance. In this way, meta-policing does not suspend evaluation; it relocates evaluation onto the person and ideology behind the policing act.

Thread #1182220 adds a dimension absent from the other two threads. Where Thread #113283's counter-policing operates within folk psychology ("it's people with poor English and no self-confidence who laugh at others' poor English" [講過好多次係英文差同咗自信嘅人先會笑人英文差] (Thread #113283, Post #2)), Thread #1182220 mobilises lay sociological reasoning. Post #40 names the structure directly.

The fact is British accent = privilege, that's a social norm. You can disagree, but generally speaking fluent RP does add points. Everyone knows about Singlish, HKE, Indian accent. We know there shouldn't be bias, but that's not how society works. [事實係英式口音 = privilege 呢個係個 social norm。你可以唔認同，但 generally 你講到一口流利 cockney/RP 會加分囉。鬼唔知有 singlish, hong kong accent, indian accent 咩，我都知大家唔應該有 bias，但個社會唔係咁運作] (Thread #1182220, Post #40; L1-E, L1-F, L2-A, L2-F)

The poster simultaneously acknowledges the prestige economy and contests its legitimacy. Post #8 reduces the mechanism to a single sentence, "Using these to elevate oneself and put others down" [攞呢D 黎抬高自己貶低人] (Thread #1182220, Post #8), while Post #54 offers a phonological observation, "HKE often conflates sounds like 'than' and 'then'" [港式會撞埋啲發音，例如 than then 呢啲] (Thread #1182220, Post #54), framing the feature as a predictable

pattern rather than an error. The co-presence of these registers within a single thread, from folk-psychological diagnosis (Thread #113283) to lay sociolinguistic analysis (Posts #40, #54) to blunt ideological critique (Post #8), indicates that the reflexive axis encompasses a range of epistemic positions unified by their orientation toward interrogating the evaluative premises of language policing.

These examples suggest that L1-E x L2-F is not an incidental pattern. It captures a recurring movement in the corpus: a policing act invites defence, defence expands into critique, and critique turns English policing itself into an object of discussion. The significance of this pattern is not that LIHKG escapes language policing through reflexive critique. It does not. Reflexive posts often remain evaluative. The users criticise the policer, the forum, Hong Kong culture, or the social prestige attached to English. What changes is the target of evaluation. The community moves from judging English to judging the act of judging English.

The central finding supported by this section is therefore cautious but important. In the sampled LIHKG threads, English policing is more than just a practice of correction or ridicule, it is also a recognisable topic of community debate. Users repeatedly identify the classed, affective, and cultural stakes of policing while continuing to reproduce the evaluative logic that gives policing its force. This is why the reflexive cell matters as it shows that LIHKG users are not simply enforcing English norms, but also negotiating what English policing reveals about Hong Kong's relationship to class, accent, authenticity, and linguistic insecurity.

9 Discussion

The findings suggest that English language policing on LIHKG is a patterned metalinguistic practice in which users evaluate English, convert those evaluations into judgments about speakers, and debate the legitimacy of the evaluative practice itself. Section 9.1 addresses the expected finding that English policing reproduces classed and educational hierarchies. Sections 9.2 and 9.3 address two unexpected findings. First, authenticity testing is as important as correctness in several threads. Second, reflexive meta-policing is among the most prominent patterns in the corpus. Sections 9.4 to 9.6 explain why these findings exceed what standard accounts of language policing predict and what theoretical work is required to account for them.

9.1 Expected finding

The clearest expected finding concerns class and education. This expectation is borne out in the data. English competence is repeatedly treated as evidence of schooling, social status, and public legitimacy, and the strongest class-related co-occurrence is L1-A $\times$ L2-A ($n = 217$). However, the expectation about the form of policing is not borne out. Section 3 predicted that phonetic transliteration and memefication would occur more frequently than direct metalinguistic correction, given LIHKG's ironic and performative register. The distribution runs in the opposite direction, as L1-A, explicit criticism, is the largest Level 1 category, with 1,398 applications, or 34.5%, while L1-C, memefication, and L1-B, phonetic transliteration, account for 477 applications, or 11.8%, and 348 applications, or 8.6%, respectively. This disconfirmation is analytically important. It suggests that, although parody and memetic repetition remain salient in particular threads, the baseline mode of English policing on LIHKG is direct evaluation. Users most often make explicit judgments of competence, and those judgments are then made available for classed and educational interpretation.

This finding confirms the relevance of Cameron's (1995/2012) verbal hygiene framework. Language policing is not merely correction. It is a social practice through which users articulate norms and position themselves as competent judges. On LIHKG, the act of correcting or mocking English positions the poster as a competent arbiter while demoting the target. The social effect of the policing act does not depend on linguistic validity. A post that appears to be about pronunciation may function as a claim about education; a post that appears to be about grammar may function as a claim about intelligence or public competence.

The expected finding does not, however, explain the full dataset. If LIHKG language policing were only about standard correctness, evaluative posts would cluster predominantly around grammar, pronunciation, and education. The data show a more complex pattern, including posts that evaluate not whether a target's English is correct but whether the target has the right identity to speak that way, and posts that evaluate the community's habit of policing English rather than the target's language at all. These two patterns are less expected and require separate explanation.

9.2 Unexpected finding: Authenticity over correctness

The strongest unexpected finding is not simply that authenticity matters, but that authenticity repeatedly displaces correctness as the decisive evaluative criterion. Standard language ideology would predict a dominant ideology of anonymity, in which any speaker is measured against a decontextualised standard of correct English. The LIHKG data suggest that this logic is present, especially in class- and education-based evaluations. However, the authenticity cases show a second and sometimes stronger logic: users ask whether English fits the speaker's claimed or assigned identity. William Chan is mocked not only because his English is heard as weak, but because it fails to sustain the luxury, international-school, cosmopolitan

persona attached to the Chanel advertisement. Uncle Siu is mocked from the opposite direction: his RP-adjacent pronunciation is not necessarily treated as linguistically wrong, but as too effortful, too performed, and insufficiently grounded in biography. The L1-A x L2-C pattern shows that direct evaluation co-occurs with authenticity meanings in 138 posts. These posts do not treat English as a measure of competence alone. They treat it as evidence of whether the speaker is genuine, fake, locally rooted, politically suspect, or improperly cosmopolitan. The question is not only “Is this English correct?” but “Does this English match who this person is supposed to be?” This is where Eckert’s (2008) indexical field model is analytically necessary. A Hong Kong English feature does not carry one fixed social meaning. It can index incompetence, local authenticity, lack of education, political inauthenticity, or solidarity, depending on how users frame the feature and the speaker. The same L1-A strategy can activate different indexical regions depending on context. A direct criticism of English may index class in one thread, authenticity in another, and political loyalty in a third. The strategy is constant; the indexical meaning shifts.

The unexpected element is that authenticity sometimes displaces correctness as the primary evaluative criterion. A target may be criticised not because their English is formally wrong but because it is judged inconsistent with their claimed social position. A speaker can be mocked for sounding too local, too foreign, too polished, or not polished enough. This means that language policing on LIHKG can function as identity verification rather than error correction. Users assess whether a speaker’s linguistic performance matches an expected biography. HKE features are treated as deficient when users orient toward native-speaker norms, and defended as locally authentic when users orient toward Hong Kong belonging. This ambivalence reflects competing indexical regions being activated by the same feature in different evaluative contexts.

9.3 Unexpected finding: Reflexivity as a pattern

The second unexpected finding is that reflexive meta-policing is central rather than marginal. A substantial proportion of users do not simply participate in English policing. They comment on the practice itself on why Hong Kong people police English, whether such policing is toxic, whether the standards applied are fair, and whether the community's preoccupation with English reflects broader social insecurity.

This pattern is quantitatively important. L1-E meta-policing accounts for 15.9% of L1 code applications, while L2-F meta-ideology accounts for 17.7% of L2 code applications. The L1-E $\times$ L2-F cell contains 219 co-occurring L1 $\times$ L2 pairs, making it marginally the largest structured cell in the cross-tabulation. The finding is unexpected because online language policing is generally assumed to be norm-enforcing rather than self-analytical. Pajunen (2024, p. 41) identifies “reflective language policing” as a distinct category in which users challenge “what is both normal and abnormal language use” rather than policing the language itself, but notes it remains a minority practice, present only in comments rather than posts. The LIHKG data suggest that the reflexive dimension is more prominent here, which makes the pattern analytically significant. The LIHKG data suggests that users also theorise what is happening on the forum. They identify the social logic of English policing, connect it to Hong Kong culture, criticise its effects, and challenge the standing of the person doing the policing. Some posts defend the target by arguing that local English should not be mocked; others criticise the policer's own competence or authority; others generalise the practice into a comment on Hong Kong society. In these cases, the object of judgment shifts from the speaker's English to the evaluative habit itself. This extends Cameron's verbal hygiene framework in an important direction. Cameron recognises that verbal hygiene includes debates about norms, not only the

enforcement of them. The LIHKG data show how routinely and publicly this reflexive dimension operates in an anonymous digital forum. Users contest the right to impose standards. They evaluate the social meaning of evaluating English. The dataset is therefore not a space where one ideology dominates. Standardness, local authenticity, anti-elitism, political identity, and meta-ideological critique appear in the same interactional environment, sometimes within the same thread.

The key finding is not just that users are reflexive, but that reflexivity is patterned. One of the largest cross-tabulated cells is not direct error corrections but discussions of the legitimacy of correction. English policing on LIHKG has become recognisable enough to be treated as an object of community commentary. Users can name the practice, criticise it, and still participate in it. This aligns with Pajunen's (2024, p. 38) conclusion that online language policing functions less as civic digilantism targeting individual deviators and more as community empowerment, where members collectively monitor and negotiate shared norms. The difference on LIHKG is that anonymity minimises face costs, hence making this negotiation more confrontational and more visible.

9.4 Why this is unexpected

Both unexpected findings exceed what standard accounts of language policing predict. A narrow grammar-policing account predicts correction of perceived errors. A standard language ideology account predicts hierarchy reproduction through correctness judgments. Both are partly confirmed. Neither accounts for the prominence of authenticity testing or meta-policing.

The authenticity finding is unexpected because correctness is not always the standard being applied. The relevant norm in many threads is biographical rather than linguistic. A speaker fails not by producing the wrong form but by producing a form that users treat as inconsistent with

their identity. The meta-policing finding is unexpected because awareness does not interrupt the practice. Users identify English policing as elitist, insecure, or culturally specific, yet participation continues. Reflexive critique is not an exit from the evaluative system. It is absorbed into the same interactional cycle as one more available move. Language ideology on LIHKG is therefore not false consciousness waiting to be dispelled by sufficient self-knowledge. Users articulate the ideological nature of the practice directly, yet the hierarchy persists because the interactional rewards for policing remain available: humour, agreement, upvotes, and collective alignment against a target. Awareness and participation are not mutually exclusive on this platform. (See Section 9.5)

Taken together, these findings form one argument. The expected finding establishes the baseline that English policing reproduces the classed and educational value of English in Hong Kong. The first unexpected finding complicates that baseline by showing that users do not only judge correctness; they also judge whether English fits a speaker's claimed or assigned identity. The second unexpected finding adds a further layer. Users often recognise the classed, insecure, or exclusionary logic of this policing, but that recognition does not remove the practice. The discussion therefore moves from hierarchy, to identity testing, to reflexive awareness, and finally to recurrence. Verbal hygiene explains why correction becomes a normative social act; the indexical field explains why the same English feature can activate different meanings across contexts; and enregisterment explains how repeated evaluations become recognisable templates for judging future speakers. The central claim is therefore not simply that LIHKG users police English, but that the forum turns English policing into a repeatable evaluative cycle. Users judge English, attach social meanings to speakers, contest those judgments, and make the same evaluative templates available for reuse.

9.5 Explaining the pattern

The pattern observed in the LIHKG data cannot be explained by a single model of language policing. If English policing were only a matter of correction, the analysis would stop at explicit judgments of pronunciation, grammar, or fluency. If it were only a matter of standard language ideology, the main finding would be the reproduction of classed and educational hierarchy. The data show both patterns, but they also suggest two further processes. Users test whether English fits a speaker's claimed or assigned identity, and users reflexively debate the legitimacy of making such judgments at all. Three frameworks help account for the observed pattern. Verbal hygiene explains why policing carries normative and social stakes beyond correction. The indexical field explains why the same feature carries different meanings across threads. Enregisterment explains how those meanings, and the procedures for testing them, become recognisable across the community.

The indexical field is central to both unexpected findings. Woolard's (2016) authenticity/anonymity distinction identifies the ideological contrast between correctness-based policing and authenticity testing. Correctness-based policing operates through an ideology of anonymity. Speakers are measured against a decontextualised standard of educated, fluent, and publicly legitimate English. On the other hand, authenticity testing operates through an ideology of authenticity. English is evaluated as evidence of the speaker's true social origin, biography, or persona. The unexpected finding is therefore not that standard language ideology disappears, but that it is repeatedly displaced (or supplemented) by authenticity-based judgment. For authenticity testing, the indexical field explains why users can frame the same HKE feature as incompetence or local authenticity depending on the target's biography and the evaluative context. For meta-policing, it explains why English policing can activate meta-ideological meanings, where the

evaluative practice itself becomes the object of stance-taking. The cross-tabulation suggests that a single evaluative act can invoke multiple indexical regions simultaneously: a post criticising a public figure's English may index class, inauthenticity, and political alignment within the same move.

Enregisterment helps account for how these indexical meanings stabilise across threads. Repeated acts of evaluation accumulate into community-recognisable personae: the poorly educated public figure, the inauthentic overseas returnee, the locally authentic speaker, the elitist grammar policer. These are not formal institutional categories. They are recognisable social types produced through cumulative metalinguistic commentary. Each thread where users evaluate someone's English, contest that evaluation, and reflect on what the contest reveals about Hong Kong constitutes a micro-episode in this enregisterment process.

The LIHKG data extend this account by suggesting that what gets enregistered is not only a linguistic feature but also a testing procedure. Users across unrelated threads apply similar moves, comparing a target's English with the identity the target claims or has been assigned, and treating a mismatch as evidence of inauthenticity. When similar accusation structures, defences, and meta-commentaries recur independently across the corpus, it suggests that the testing template has itself become a recognisable community practice. This study suggests how Agha's framework can be extended beyond linguistic forms to cover evaluative procedures through which speakers are tested against assigned identities and projected personas.

This enregisterment of the evaluative procedure connects the two unexpected findings. Authenticity testing and meta-policing are two phases in the same cycle. A user treats English as evidence of identity; other users ratify, contest, or reframe that interpretation; others then comment on the practice of making such judgments at all. The movement from evaluation to

contestation to meta-commentary is what makes LIHKG language policing recursive rather than episodic. That recursiveness is the enregistered community norm, the very reason the cycle persists even when individual users explicitly resist it. In this sense, LIHKG's recursive system is sustained by the repeated alternation between anonymity-based judgments of correctness and authenticity-based judgments of biographical fit.

9.6 Platform role

LIHKG's platform architecture is not a neutral container for English policing. It is part of the mechanism through which English policing becomes recursive. Anonymous posting lowers the cost of evaluation. Users can mock a politician's pronunciation, accuse a celebrity of sounding fake, defend a target, or criticise the policing itself without linking the stance to a durable offline identity. The voting system then converts individual stances into collective ratification. A post that receives high upvotes becomes more visible to later readers, while a post that receives heavy downvotes becomes collapsed behind a "show" button. This interface detail matters because visibility governs uptake. A collapsed post is not removed, but the extra click makes the rejected framing less immediately available to the thread. The platform therefore does not merely record community opinion. LIHKG's interface helps decide which framings remain visible enough to be noticed, repeated, and remembered. The result is a compressed enregisterment cycle: noticing, mockery, typification, contestation, and stabilisation can unfold within a single discussion. The platform does not invent Hong Kong's classed and identity-loaded ideologies of English. The platform gives those ideologies an efficient interface. The platform architecture is therefore not a neutral background condition but part of the mechanism through which evaluative templates become visible, ratified, and reusable.

9.7 The recursive system

This thesis argues that, within the sampled LIHKG threads, English language policing is not a series of isolated evaluative acts, but a recursive discursive system that makes its own evaluative materials available for reuse. The system begins when users target and evaluate English. These acts invite defence, counter-policing, and meta-ideological commentary, through which users diagnose the cultural conditions that make judging someone's English possible in the first place. The resulting commentaries are then interpreted, reproduced, and redeployed in later evaluations. LIHKG users, therefore, do not simply mark English as correct or incorrect. They debate what a person's English reveals about class anxiety, educational hierarchy, authenticity, local Hong Kong identity, Hong Kong-Mainland distinction, and the perceived toxicity of local linguistic culture. English functions not only as an object of judgement, but also as a medium through which users interpret the community's social anxieties. Crucially, reflexive awareness does not consistently interrupt policing. Instead, it becomes part of the system itself. By naming, criticising, and explaining English policing, users keep the indexical field around English active, making class, education, authenticity, and local identity boundaries repeatedly available for negotiation and reuse.

The preceding analysis shows that English language policing on LIHKG is sustained by a recursive evaluative system rather than by a fixed linguistic standard. Users repeatedly assess English through expectations linked to class, education, authenticity, and Hong Kong-Mainland identity. These expectations are not imposed by a single authority. They are cut and recut through repeated acts of policing, defending, and meta-policing, each of which makes the same social meanings available for further uptake. LIHKG's platform structure strengthens this process because replies, upvotes, and downvotes allow particular evaluations to become visible, ratified, and reusable. The foamboard wall, borrowed from the Japanese game-show format in

which contestants must fit their bodies through an irregularly shaped silhouette, illustrates the architecture of the LIHKG platform and the recursive system this study documents. The “wall” is the evaluative template that defines what kinds of English speakerhood can pass as competent, authentic, or locally legitimate. The “foamboard” is the artificiality of that template, as the standard has no natural solidity, but the standard still knocks speakers down when users collectively treat the template as real. LIHKG users may recognise the artificiality of the wall when they criticise language policing as toxic, classed, or insecure. However, reflexive awareness does not necessarily stop the game. Meta-policing can keep the wall visible by turning the act of judging English into another object of judgment. The wall remains standing not because it is solid, but because it is rebuilt every time users police, defend, or debate English.



Figure 14. Screenshot from a Japanese Hole in the Wall/Human Tetris game-show clip, illustrating the metaphor of fitting through a foamboard wall game for the evaluative template in LIHKG English policing.¹

¹ Screenshot from Pactionly's YouTube upload of a Japanese Hole in the Wall/Human Tetris game-show clip, used to illustrate the thesis metaphor. Full citation: Pactionly. (2021, January 3). 🎮 FUNNY HOLE IN THE WALL 🎮 | JAPANESE GAMESHOW 2021 | HUMAN TETRIS [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRGJc1692io>

10 Conclusion

10.1 Summary

This study examined 240 LIHKG threads and 8,572 posts to investigate how users police English, what social meanings policing activates, and how users reflexively evaluate policing as a practice. The coding produced 4,057 Level 1 strategy applications and 2,651 Level 2 meaning applications, reflecting the multi-coded nature of many posts. Direct evaluation was the dominant strategy. Policing-direction posts outnumbered defending-direction posts by 3.1 to 1, and the most common move was explicit criticism of a target's English. At the level of meaning, class and education was the most frequently activated frame, followed by Hong Kong-Mainland boundary marking and meta-ideological reflexivity. The cross-tabulation revealed three dominant co-occurrence cells. The largest paired meta-policing with meta-ideological critique. The second paired direct evaluation with class indexicality. The third paired direct evaluation with authenticity testing. The reflexive and class-indexical cells were separated by only two posts, suggesting that stratification and reflexivity carry comparable structural weight in the sampled LIHKG data. Together, these patterns suggest that English policing on LIHKG is a recursive evaluative cycle in which class, education, authenticity, and local Hong Kong identity are made repeatedly available as meanings to be deployed, contested, and reused.

10.2 Implications

The first implication concerns verbal hygiene. Cameron's (1995/2012) framework remains useful because it treats language regulation as social practice rather than as mere correction. The LIHKG data show that this practice can include a strong reflexive dimension. Users not only police English, but also evaluate the legitimacy, toxicity, and cultural specificity of policing

itself. Researchers studying digital language policing should therefore code meta-discursive acts alongside evaluative and counter-evaluative acts.

The second implication concerns indexicality. The data show that a single English feature activates different social meanings depending on target type, biographical framing, and interactional context. The same evaluative act may index class in one thread, authenticity in another, and political alignment in a third. This study extends the use of indexical field to analyse English in digitally mediated Hong Kong discourse, where meaning is contextually activated rather than structurally fixed. The findings also extend Woolard's (2016) authenticity/anonymity distinction into online language policing. The two ideologies are differentially activated within and across threads as LIHKG users simultaneously invoke decontextualised standards of educated correctness and contextualised expectations of biographical fit, local belonging, and speaker credibility.

The third implication concerns enregisterment. LIHKG threads suggest that repeated acts of policing, defence, and meta-policing not only attach social meanings to particular English features, but they also make evaluative procedures recognisable across discussions. Users repeatedly test whether a speaker's English fits an assigned identity, challenge that test, and then comment on the legitimacy of making such judgments at all. In this sense, the relevant object of enregisterment is not a new linguistic variety or named register, but a reusable evaluative template. English has become a recurrent means for authenticating, disqualifying, or reclassifying speakers in public forum interaction.

10.3 Significance

This study is the first systematic multi-case analysis of English language policing on LIHKG. The 240-thread index shows that English policing is not limited to isolated viral

incidents. It recurs across the platform's operational history, from 2016 to late 2025, and across threads involving politicians, celebrities, workplaces, schools, and ordinary users.

This research also moves Hong Kong English attitude studies from controlled, elicited environments into natural online conversations. Previously, most research focused on classrooms, workplaces, surveys, and verbal-guise techniques. This study adds to that by analysing real-time expressions of ideological stances when users judge, defend, mock, or debate English spontaneously, without researcher prompting.

The index has archival value. LIHKG resists automated crawling, and its data are not preserved in an accessible academic repository. In a Hong Kong digital environment where users may delete past posts and where platform access can change quickly, a curated index of language-policing threads provides a record for future research on digital discourse, language ideology, and Hong Kong English.

10.4 Limitations

The study is limited to LIHKG. The findings should not be generalised to the Hong Kong population as a whole. LIHKG's user base skews male and young, and the platform has been associated with local manosphere norms. Its anonymity also prevents demographic verification of individual users. The patterns documented here are therefore best read as practices of a particular online community, not as representative public opinion. One extended thought is that since the user base has been reported to skew male and the platform has been linked to gender-hostile discourse, patterns interpreted as class-based may also partially reflect gender-specific ideologies on competence and authority. Gender dimension is beyond the scope of this study, but prompts future research to look at the intersection of language policing and gender.

The dataset is also not exhaustive. LIHKG discontinued its public API and uses bot-management protections, so programmatic scraping was not feasible. Manual collection was necessary. The 240-thread index captures a substantial and analytically rich sample, but it cannot claim complete coverage of all English-policing discourse on the platform.

The coding scheme captures written, overt metalinguistic discourse only. It excludes image-based memes, reaction GIFs, implicit stance-taking, selective quoting, and policing performed through code-switching without explicit evaluation. It also focuses only on English-directed policing. Future work could extend the codebook to Chinese-directed policing, multimodal data, or cross-platform comparison.

10.5 Future Directions

Future research could extend the present framework cross-platform (Instagram, Threads, Facebook), incorporate multimodal data, and apply the codebook to Chinese-directed language policing on LIHKG. A comparative analysis of how policing norms differ across English, standard written Chinese, and written Cantonese within a single community would test whether the indexical patterns documented here are language-specific or reflect a more general evaluative disposition.

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12 Appendices

The below lists all the appendices submitted electronically due to the limitations of MS Word and the scope of the appendix.

Appendix A: Collected Threads (n =240)

Appendix B: Keyword List

Appendix C: Codebook template

Appendix D: Full Database and Relevant Figures

Formulaic Language in Academic Writing:

A Study of Hong Kong Students' English Essays

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1. Introduction

What happens when students learn to write primarily for examinations? Second language writing research suggests the effects extend far beyond test day, especially in contexts like Hong Kong where high-stakes testing drives classroom instruction (Cheng, 2008; Qi, 2007). Exam prep strategies lean heavily on formulaic language, and teachers emphasize these phrases as reliable tools for scoring well (Cheng, 2008). Sure, this works when you're racing against the clock in an exam. But what about the long-term effects on students' ability to write authentic academic prose?

Formulaic language, defined as recurring multi-word sequences such as *such as*, *for example*, and *according to*, serves important functions in academic discourse, including organizing textual structure, expressing stance, and providing referential clarity (Biber et al., 2004). Expert academic writers employ such expressions strategically, selecting from a diverse repertoire appropriate to their disciplinary context and rhetorical purpose.

Yet, the problem surfaces when learners lean on the same tiny set of expressions for everything they write. At that point, their language loses the variety and disciplinary precision that marks sophisticated academic writing. EFL writing research has documented this pattern repeatedly, showing learners overusing a narrow range of formulaic sequences while avoiding the alternatives that native writers prefer (Paquot, 2010; Chen & Baker, 2010).

Hong Kong university students face a particular challenge in this regard. They move from the rigid, exam-focused DSE system into university writing that demands critical thinking, disciplinary awareness, and rhetorical flexibility. You'd think the change in context would shift their habits. But early observations suggest otherwise, the formulaic patterns drilled into them during secondary school stick around in their university coursework. Why

does this happen? And more importantly, can students who depend on formulas still succeed when time pressure and exam constraints disappear?

Existing research on formulaic language in EFL contexts has established clear patterns of overuse. Paquot (2010) demonstrated that learners consistently rely on a limited set of exemplification markers while avoiding alternative expressions preferred by native speakers. Studies focused on Hong Kong students have found distinctive features linked to exam pedagogy, that intensive DSE prep actually limits students' ability to benefit from English-medium instruction (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

However, several gaps remain in the literature. First, the persistence question. Studies have documented formulaic patterns at the secondary level, but few have examined whether these habits persist into tertiary education where contextual constraints differ substantially. Students have more time. No exam pressure. Different expectations. Do the patterns stick around anyway?

Second, existing research has not adequately addressed individual variation among students experiencing similar pedagogical conditioning. Some students transcend formulaic dependence. Others remain constrained. Understanding why requires examination of factors like metacognitive awareness, individual agency, and critical reflection, not just cultural background.

Third, the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools has fundamentally altered assumptions. When AI can pump out formulaic expressions faster and better than traditional teaching methods, what does that mean for pedagogy? Research hasn't caught up to this reality yet. The implications for EFL instruction remain unexplored.

My study proposes three research questions:

1. What formulaic patterns dominate Hong Kong students' academic writing, and how do these stack up against authentic academic norms?
2. Why do formulas learned for the DSE persist at university, where exam constraints don't apply anymore?
3. How should English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction evolve to address both formulaic dependence and the challenges posed by AI writing tools?

These questions progress from description to explanation to application, aiming to provide actionable suggestions for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers concerned with English language education in Hong Kong and similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Lexical Bundles and Disciplinary Variation in Academic Discourse

Academic writing relies heavily on formulaic sequences. Biber et al. (2004) and Hyland (2008) identified three main domains where these bundles operate: stance and evaluation, discourse organization, and referential framing. Rather than representing linguistic poverty, formulaic language use characterizes proficient academic writing, enabling writers to convey complex information efficiently.

However, bundle use varies substantially across disciplines, reflecting differing approaches to knowledge construction and rhetorical priorities. Large-scale corpus analyses show that hard sciences favor bundles emphasizing procedural description and quantification. Meanwhile, humanities and social sciences lean toward bundles that convey interpretation, hedging, and critical evaluation (Hyland, 2008; Cortes, 2004). These patterns are not arbitrary but reflect underlying disciplinary values and how different fields construct and communicate knowledge in their own language.

This disciplinary variation carries real pedagogical implications. Teaching generic formulaic expressions without attention to disciplinary context risks leaving students unprepared for the specific discourse communities they'll enter. Students need more than just knowledge of formulaic sequences. They need to understand which bundles work appropriately within their particular disciplinary contexts. When discipline-specific instruction is absent, it may explain why students apply generic formulas everywhere, producing less sophisticated writing than peers trained in discipline-specific conventions.

2.2 Formulaic Competence and Its Paradoxes in EFL Writing

While formulaic expressions characterize proficient academic writing, research on EFL learners reveals problematic patterns suggesting that formula use does not automatically equate to competence. Corpus analyses indicate that learners overuse a restricted set of high-frequency bundles while avoiding alternative expressions that native writers employ (Paquot, 2010; Chen & Baker, 2010; Appel & Trofimovich, 2017). This pattern shows up most clearly with exemplification markers. Learners rely heavily on *for example* and *such as* while neglecting alternatives like *namely*, *to illustrate*, and *in particular*. The result? Writing that shows surface fluency but lacks the lexical variety that characterizes sophisticated academic prose.

The relationship between formulaic use and writing quality remains contested. Some research suggests that appropriate deployment of collocations and multi-word sequences correlates with higher writing scores, implying that formulaic competence contributes to perceived quality (Granger & Bestgen, 2014). However, other studies demonstrate that formulaic density, the proportion of text consisting of multi-word sequences, correlates only weakly with writing scores once other linguistic features are controlled (Durrant, 2017). This suggests that while formulaic expressions may enhance fluency, they cannot substitute for the

grammatical accuracy, lexical diversity, and rhetorical effectiveness that fundamentally distinguish high-quality writing.

Granger and Bestgen (2014) and Wray (2002) have drawn a critical distinction worth noting: productive use versus reproductive use. In productive use, learners deploy formulas appropriate to their rhetorical context. In reproductive use, they insert memorized chunks without contextual awareness. This distinction proves essential for understanding when formulas support development and when they constrain it. Educators need to distinguish between formulas that support learning and those that ossify into rigid habits, limiting further growth.

2.3 Examination Pedagogy and Writing Development in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's education system operates under substantial examination pressure. The DSE exerts considerable influence on secondary-level instruction. Research on washback effects, how high-stakes testing shapes teaching and learning, documents systematic adjustments as teachers align instruction with exam requirements (Cheng, 1997, 2004, 2008; Qi, 2007). Teachers report emphasizing test-taking strategies, drilling examination formats, and teaching formulaic expressions believed to secure grades. These practices help students manage exam demands, sure. But concerns persist that they may constrain authentic communicative development, prioritizing assessment performance over long-term literacy growth.

Looking at Hong Kong students' academic writing reveals distinctive linguistic features traceable to this pedagogical context. Students demonstrate high grammatical accuracy and appropriate register awareness, reflecting the emphasis on error avoidance in exam preparation. But they also exhibit limited lexical diversity and heavy reliance on restricted sets of connectives and exemplification markers (Evans & Morrison, 2011). These patterns

suggest that intensive examination training produces students skilled at avoiding errors but less adept at producing varied, sophisticated expression. What's striking is that despite Hong Kong's English-medium instruction at the tertiary level, students' writing patterns resemble those of EFL learners in foreign language contexts more than ESL learners with extensive English exposure.

The emphasis on formulaic correctness appears rooted in assessment practices and classroom culture. Research examining teacher and student perceptions reveals that writing quality is often conceptualized in terms of surface accuracy and organizational clarity rather than content depth or argumentative sophistication (Hamp-Lyons & Zhang, 2001). Students report that teachers value error-free writing with clear structure, leading them to prioritize memorizing safe formulas over experimenting with more complex expression that risks errors. This creates a pedagogical environment where formula-following becomes rational strategy.

The transition to university presents real challenges as expectations shift. Interview studies with Hong Kong undergraduates reveal that many continue employing DSE-era strategies despite changed contexts (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Cheng, 2004). Students report uncertainty about university writing standards and default to familiar formulas when expectations aren't clear. This gap between secondary and tertiary literacy expectations forms the backdrop for the present investigation.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining corpus analysis with case study interviews. The corpus component documented patterns of formulaic language use across Hong Kong university students' writing, while case study interviews explored the underlying reasons for these patterns.

3.1 Research Design

The study proceeded in two phases. Phase one (quantitative) involved compilation and analysis of a student writing corpus to identify dominant formulaic patterns and their frequencies. Phase two (qualitative) involved selecting two contrasting cases from the corpus for in-depth investigation through semi-structured interviews. These interviews explored students' awareness of their linguistic choices, attitudes toward formulaic language, use of AI writing tools, and reflections on how DSE preparation shaped their current writing practices.

3.2 Corpus Data

3.2.1 Corpus Compilation

The corpus comprised 90 academic texts totaling approximately 120,000 words. These were collected from 13 Hong Kong university students across different institutions, majors, and pedagogical backgrounds. Students contributed between four and nine texts each, depending on the availability of suitable writing samples. Texts included course essays, research reports, and other assignments written for undergraduate courses between 2022 and 2025.

After obtaining informed consent, all sensitive information was removed from the texts. This included student names, identification numbers, course codes, instructor names, and personally identifiable references. All in-text citations and reference lists were also removed prior to analysis. This ensured the focus remained on students' own language production rather than cited material.

Characteristic	Distribution
University: CUHK	7 students
University: HKU	2 students
University: PolyU	1 student
University: HKUST	1 student
University: HKBU	1 student
University: CityU	1 student
Year of Study: Year 1-2	3 students
Year of Study: Year 3-4	10 students
Major: Engineering	5 students
Major: Business	2 students
Major: Social Sciences	2 students
Major: Humanities	4 students

Table 1: Corpus Participant Demographics

3.2.2 Corpus Analysis Procedures

Voyant Tools, a web-based text analysis platform, was used to extract two-word and three-word n-grams from the corpus. These sequence lengths represent the most common lexical bundles in academic writing (Biber et al., 2004). The analysis generated frequency lists ranking n-grams by total occurrences and range (number of texts containing each n-gram).

To distinguish genuine formulaic patterns from coincidental repetitions, only n-grams meeting specific criteria were retained for further analysis. These n-grams had to appear in at least 10 texts with a minimum frequency of 20 occurrences. In an earlier trial I set lower thresholds, but that produced a long tail of accidental collocations (e.g. fragments of assignment prompts and rubric language), so I raised the cut-off until the lists became useful. Manual examination of all 90 texts complemented the automated extraction process. This

close reading revealed substantial individual variation in formulaic reliance, which informed the selection of case study participants.

3.3 Case Study Participants

From the corpus, two students were selected for in-depth case study based on their contrasting linguistic profiles. Marcus exhibited the highest degree of formulaic repetition in the corpus. He consistently employed the same limited set of expressions across his texts. Tom, in contrast, demonstrated the greatest linguistic variety. He used diverse expressions and showed minimal reliance on repetitive patterns.

This maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) enabled exploration of factors distinguishing students who remain formula-dependent from those who develop varied linguistic repertoires. Both students shared similar educational backgrounds, yet their writing patterns diverged substantially.

Characteristic	Marcus	Tom
Age	22	22
University	CUHK	CUHK
Year of Study	Year 4	Year 4
Major	Electrical Engineering	Artificial Intelligence
Secondary School Type	EMI	EMI
Actual MOI at Secondary	Chinese-medium class	English-medium class
First Language	Cantonese	Cantonese
English Proficiency	Intermediate	Advanced
DSE English Result	Level 3	Level 5

Table 2: Case Study Participant Profiles

Both participants attended schools officially designated as English-medium instruction (EMI) schools. However, a critical distinction emerged regarding actual classroom language

use. Marcus was placed in a Chinese-medium class where, despite the school's EMI designation, most subjects were taught in Chinese with English used primarily for English language classes. Tom attended an English-medium class where instruction occurred predominantly in English across subjects. This difference in actual language exposure during secondary education provided important context for understanding their divergent linguistic development trajectories.

3.4 Interview Data Collection

After obtaining verbal consent, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with Marcus and Tom in October 2025. Interviews lasted 60 to 75 minutes and took place via Zoom calls. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Cantonese, with participants free to code-switch as preferred. This flexibility allowed fuller expression of complex reflections without linguistic constraints.

The protocol explored five areas: awareness of formulaic patterns in their writing; recollections of DSE preparation and secondary English instruction; beliefs about effective academic writing; current writing processes and resources consulted; and use of AI writing tools. During interviews, participants were shown formulaic patterns extracted from their own corpus texts. This stimulated recall technique grounded discussion in concrete examples rather than abstract generalizations. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) identified recurring patterns in three areas: formulaic awareness, pedagogical influences, and AI usage. Analysis emphasized contrasts between Marcus and Tom's responses to illuminate factors explaining their divergent linguistic profiles

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Corpus Analysis: Patterns of Formulaic Language Use

Automated n-gram extraction identified recurring two-word and three-word sequences across the 90-text corpus. Analysis focused on three functional categories that represent rhetorically significant functions in academic writing. These were exemplification markers (expressions introducing examples), stance bundles (expressions conveying evaluation and positioning), and discourse organizers (expressions structuring logical relationships).

4.1.1 Exemplification Markers: Three Phrases Dominate

Expression	Frequency	Range (texts)	Percentage of texts
such as	319	69	77%
for example	141	52	58%
for instance	71	36	40%
Total	531	85	95%

Table 3: Exemplification Markers in Student Corpus

The pattern shows striking restriction. Just three phrases account for 531 exemplification instances across the corpus, with at least one appearing in 85 texts. Such as alone dominates at 60 percent of all exemplification instances. This finding aligns with Paquot's (2010) documented pattern in EFL contexts where learners rely on extremely limited exemplification markers.

Paquot (2010) identified that native academic writers employ more than twelve different markers with relatively balanced distribution. Expressions like *including*, *particularly*, *namely*, *to illustrate*, and *specifically* appeared frequently in expert corpora but remained largely absent in this Hong Kong student corpus.

Biber et al. (2004) documented that expert writers select markers based on rhetorical purpose: *including* signals non-exhaustive lists, *particularly* emphasizes salient cases, *namely*

specifies exact instances, and *to illustrate* frames explanatory examples. The corpus shows minimal evidence of such rhetorical discrimination. Students appear to treat *such as*, *for example*, and *for instance* as functional equivalents rather than contextually distinct choices.

Examining texts by discipline revealed no meaningful variation. Engineering students discussing technical processes, business students analyzing cases, social sciences students examining phenomena, and humanities students interpreting texts all relied on the same three markers at similar frequencies. This uniformity contrasts sharply with Hyland (2008)'s findings. Expert academic writing demonstrates clear disciplinary preferences in bundle use, reflecting how different fields construct knowledge. The absence of such variation in the Hong Kong corpus suggests generic application of memorized formulas rather than discipline-specific awareness.

4.1.2 Stance Expressions: Impersonal Constructions

Expression Type	Examples	Total Frequency	Pattern
It is constructions	it is, it is a, it is also	231	Impersonal evaluation
Modal and be	can be, will be, would be	480	Hedging/possibility
Existential	there is, there are	159	Impersonal existence

Table 4: Stance Markers in Student Corpus

Impersonal constructions overwhelmingly dominate stance-taking in the corpus. The bundle *it is* appeared 231 times across 67 texts, meaning nearly three-quarters of all texts contained it, averaging over three instances per text. Related forms (*it is a*, *it is also*, *it is important*) added substantially to this pattern. Modal verbs combined with *be* showed similarly high frequencies, with *can be* appearing 178 times and *will be* 133 times. Existential constructions (*there is*, *there are*) added another 159 instances of impersonal framing.

This concentration on impersonal structures becomes meaningful when compared with expert writing. Hyland (2008) found that published academic writers employed more varied stance repertoires, including first-person hedges (*I would argue, we believe*), and evidential markers anchored in research (*research suggests, data indicate*). More importantly, Hyland (2008) documented that stance strategies varied across disciplines. Hard sciences favored objective-sounding hedges like *may be due to* and humanities employed interpretive bundles like *seem to suggest*.

The student corpus lacks this sophistication entirely. Students across all majors relied on identical impersonal patterns. The systematic preference for *it is* and modal constructions suggests avoidance of personal voice and commitment. When writers repeatedly frame claims through *it is important that* or *it can be said that* rather than *evidence demonstrates* or *this analysis suggests*, they distance themselves from propositions rather than engaging in positioned argumentation. This pattern aligns with Evans and Morrison (2011)'s observation that Hong Kong students demonstrate uncertainty in navigating academic writing expectations, defaulting to safe, non-controversial expressions rather than developing authoritative scholarly voice.

4.1.3 Discourse Organizers: Generic Bundles Across Disciplines

Function	Expression	Frequency	Range (texts)	Percentage
Causal	due to	119	46	51%
Attribution	according to	98	42	47%
Causal	based on	73	38	42%
Additive	in addition	71	36	40%
Framing	in terms of	80	18	20%

Table 5: Top Discourse Organizers by Function

Causal and explanatory relationships relied heavily on *due to* (appearing in over half the texts) and *based on*. Attribution defaulted to *according to* in nearly half of all texts. The framing expression *in terms of* showed an unusual distribution: 80 instances but appearing in only 18 texts, suggesting some students used it repeatedly while most avoided it entirely.

Cortes (2004) documented substantial disciplinary variation in how expert writers organize discourse. History texts favored temporal and contextual framers like *during the period* and *in the context of*, reflecting historians' concern with historical specificity. Biology texts employed process-oriented bundles like *as a result of* and *in response to*, reflecting experimental causation and biological mechanisms. The Hong Kong student corpus shows no such disciplinary shaping. Engineering students describing technical processes used the same *due to* that humanities students employed when discussing literary influence. Business students analyzing market trends relied on the same *according to* that social sciences students used when citing research.

Hyland (2008) argued that these disciplinary differences in bundle use reflect deeper epistemological orientations. Different fields understand and communicate knowledge differently. The uniformity in the Hong Kong corpus suggests students have not developed this disciplinary awareness. They apply the same generic organizers regardless of whether they are writing lab reports, policy analyses, or literary interpretations. No engineering texts used *as a function of*, no humanities texts deployed *with respect to*, no business texts employed *in relation to*. This one-size-fits-all approach points to instruction treating academic writing as generic skill rather than as a set of discipline-specific practices.

4.1.4 Summary: Systematic Restriction Without Disciplinary Differentiation

Three patterns characterize the corpus. First, students employ restricted repertoires where expert writers demonstrate variety. Three exemplification markers versus expert use of

twelve or more. Reliance on *it* is constructions where experts deploy diverse stance strategies. Generic organizers where experts select discipline-appropriate markers.

Second, these restricted patterns show high range, appearing in 50 to 95 percent of texts rather than concentrating in particular students' writing. This indicates systematic rather than idiosyncratic patterns, pointing to shared pedagogical origins.

Third, the corpus lacks the disciplinary variation that Hyland (2008), Cortes (2004), and Biber et al. (2004) documented as fundamental to expert academic writing.

Corpus-level patterns, while revealing systematic tendencies, mask individual variation. Some texts showed extreme repetition of the same few phrases while others employed considerably more diverse repertoires. Understanding why some students transcend these patterns while others remain constrained requires examining individual cases.

4.2 Individual Variation and the AI Disruption

4.2.1 Overview: Two Contrasting Cases

While corpus analysis reveals systematic patterns, examination of individual writers demonstrates that these patterns are not uniform. Two students from the corpus represent contrasting ends of the formulaic use spectrum.

Characteristic	Marcus (4 texts)	Tom (9 texts)
Exemplification Markers		
Total instances	30	18
Number of different phrases	2	8
"Such as"	16 times	4 times
"For example"	14 times	3 times
Alternatives used	None	including, particularly, namely
Average per text	7.5 instances	2 instances (diverse)

Stance Markers		
"It is"	15 times	Low repetition
Variety	Low	15+ different constructions
Discourse Organizers		
"Due to"	10 times	Low repetition
Variety	Limited	12+ different bundles
Overall Pattern	Extreme repetition	High diversity
GPA	3.3	3.6

Table 6: Linguistic Profiles: Marcus vs. Tom

4.2.2 Marcus: Formula Dependence and AI Reliance

Marcus's four texts demonstrate extreme formulaic reliance: 30 exemplification instances using only two phrases (*such as* 16 times, *for example* 14 times), averaging 7.5 per text. This represents the highest exemplification density in the corpus. His stance and discourse organizers show similar patterns, with *it is* appearing 15 times and *due to* occurring 10 times. Marcus uses these two exemplification markers interchangeably, treating them as functional equivalents.

Pedagogical Origins of Formula Dependence

Marcus's interview reveals intensive formula-focused DSE preparation that created this deeply ingrained habit. When asked about exam preparation, he explained: "I kept writing and practicing, but I eventually recite the whole article for exam. I remember I learnt Argument essays in school by reciting sentences, phrases and words like 'first, second, for example etc.' We also recited structure, linking words and marked writings that are considered as 'good sample' from our teacher."

His tutor reinforced this approach: "They asked me to use/recite canned phrases for better grades." This pedagogy operates on explicit logic. Under severe time pressure (50 to 60

minutes for complete essays), minimizing cognitive load becomes rational. Marcus described the intensity: teachers "don't want you to think much in exams. As the time is very limited in DSE, reduce as much thinking as possible by teaching you fixed expression and flow would yield greater grades." This involves not occasional exposure but sustained drilling across three years, producing hundreds of practice essays using identical phrases.

Each successful practice reinforced the formula-habit association. Teachers provided lists of "useful expressions" which Marcus memorized and deployed successfully in examinations. When asked about model essays, Marcus confirmed studying them to extract "useful words/expression from tutor" alongside structural elements. His DSE result (Level 3) validated this approach despite his self-assessment of having "horrible English," creating positive reinforcement for continued reliance.

Cheng (2008) documented washback effects showing how high-stakes testing reshapes instruction, and Qi (2007) argued that examination influence extends beyond test-taking behaviors to fundamental beliefs about language. Marcus's characterization of his expressions as "cheap" tools that are "easy, reliable and safe" reflects this deep internalization. He conceptualizes writing not as meaning-making requiring rhetorical choices but as template-filling requiring correct phrase insertion.

Limited Awareness and Automatization

When shown his corpus data revealing 30 instances of only two exemplification markers, Marcus's response illuminates his restricted awareness: "I tried, but my English is too bad, from 'for example' to 'such as' is already a huge step. It just feels bad to reuse a word too many times."

Marcus perceives alternating between his two familiar phrases as constituting meaningful variety. He describes this shift as "already a huge step." When asked why he uses these expressions interchangeably, he explained: "My major is more informative; therefore, I need a lot of expressions to introduce examples to convince people. I use 'such as' to replace 'for example' because I think I have already used 'for example' too many times. And yet I am only familiar with these two and so I use these two interchangeably."

His patterns have become automatic. When asked whether he consciously selects expressions, he confirmed: "They come out automatically." This automatization reflects years of reinforcement. When asked about comfort level: "Although these sentences are cheap, I think these sentences are just tools to express my thinkings, therefore I am very comfortable with what I have. As they are easy, reliable and safe."

When asked about preferring safety versus experimentation, Marcus articulated his rational strategy clearly: "Safety, because these sentences got me good grades with safety, therefore no reason to be creative." Marcus has tested his formula-based approach in university and found it successful. Given this positive reinforcement, experimenting appears irrational. It requires effort, risks errors, and yields no clear benefits.

Persistence Through Automatization

Critically, Marcus's texts were university coursework written over days or weeks, not timed examinations. Yet patterns persisted. Marcus had ample opportunity to vary expressions during revision. When asked whether formulaic expressions feel natural or "inserted," Marcus acknowledged: "If the expression keeps occurring in the same writings... they feel inserted." He recognizes repetition but sees no pathway to alternatives.

The explanation lies in automatization. Marcus's years of DSE preparation created deeply ingrained automatic patterns. Even with extended time for revision, changing automatic patterns requires conscious monitoring and alternative knowledge Marcus lacks. His major provides additional context. Engineering writing in his program emphasizes example provision, creating frequent need for exemplification markers. However, while his discipline creates demand, it does not explain why he uses only two phrases repeatedly. Engineering texts in expert corpora show varied exemplification strategies (Hyland, 2008).

AI Use: Complete Delegation

When asked about using AI writing tools, he explained: "I use ChatGPT for major assignments now. I give it the topic and assignment requirements; it writes the whole thing. My English is too bad anyway; AI produces better, more formal language than I ever could."

When asked about learning from AI-generated text, Marcus responded: "I just check if it makes sense and if it answers the question. Then I submit. I don't really study the language because... why? It's already better than what I would write. I just need the grade."

This approach represents an extension of Marcus's existing formula-dependent strategy. Just as he outsourced linguistic choice to memorized formulas during DSE preparation, he now outsources completely to AI. Formulas once provided pre-packaged language solutions; AI provides them more efficiently. When asked whether he considers this as a learning opportunity, Marcus responded: "It's the same as using formulas I learned, just faster and better English." The parallel is revealing: both strategies involve delegating linguistic decision-making to external sources rather than developing competence.

Importantly, Marcus's AI approach creates a different problem than his formula dependence. With formulas, at least he engaged in word-choice among limited options. With

AI outsourcing, he abdicates even that minimal engagement. He becomes a passive consumer of language rather than an active participant, eliminating opportunity for linguistic development entirely.

4.2.3 Tom: Metacognitive Awareness and AI as Enhancement Tool

Tom's nine texts demonstrate markedly different patterns: 18 exemplification instances across eight different phrases (*such as* 4 times, *for example* 3 times, plus *including*, *particularly*, *namely*, *for instance*, *like*, and *to illustrate*). This represents only two markers per text on average, with high diversity. His stance markers span 15 or more constructions and discourse organizers include 12 or more bundles.

Individual Agency and Conscious Choice

If pedagogical conditioning fully determined outcomes, all students would resemble Marcus. Yet Tom demonstrates a different trajectory despite identical systemic pressures. Both attended EMI schools, experienced DSE preparation emphasizing formulas, and studied at the same university. The divergence reveals that individual agency operates within systemic constraints.

Tom experienced identical pedagogical conditioning. When asked about teacher-provided phrase lists, he confirmed: "Yes, according to teacher or tutor it's better for exams." Teachers emphasized connectives like *moreover*, *besides*, *nevertheless*. However, Tom consciously rejected memorization: "No. I hate reciting. Sentence templates can only be used in limited scenario, and I have to follow word by word, therefore higher chance of error."

This was not passive resistance but active choice. Tom recognized formula limitations. He identified that rigid templates carry high error risk. His tutor took a different approach: "I studied grammar mostly, as it helps me to understand the fundamental rule of English and

gives me space to work with the language." Whether Tom selected this tutor type or influenced the tutoring direction remains unclear. The outcome, however, shows individual agency in shaping learning approaches. Rather than memorizing outputs, he focused on understanding principles. This required cognitive investment that memorization avoids.

Tom's DSE result (Level 5 versus Marcus's Level 3) vindicated his approach, though success was not guaranteed. Most students, facing examination pressure and formula-pedagogy consensus, would not make Tom's choice. His exceptionality underscores the point: his path required conscious rejection of dominant pedagogy, investment in principle-based learning, risk tolerance during examination preparation, and sustained effort over years.

Internalized Metalinguistic Awareness

Teachers reinforced anti-repetition norms: "Using the same expression repeatedly were seen as unprofessional or bad English from the perspective of teachers and tutors. Therefore, I hesitate to use the same phrases as it makes me feel bad." This awareness became internalized. Tom now monitors repetition and experiences discomfort when reusing expressions.

When asked whether his variety was deliberate or natural: "It just happens naturally. I might saw these new expressions from previous writings or learnt them from previous use of AI and used them subconsciously." Unlike Marcus's conscious insertion of memorized formulas, Tom developed intuitive sense of appropriate variation through reading and exposure.

When asked about studying model essays, Tom confirmed: "Yes I do study, but content mostly. I don't care about language because it's less important compare to content." This

seemingly contradictory statement reveals that his competence developed through implicit acquisition rather than explicit memorization.

Tom articulates clear awareness of formulaic patterns among peers. When asked about Hong Kong student writing: "Back in the days my friends used a lot of connectives like first, then, second, third, moreover etc. Because that's how it's taught in secondary school." This meta-awareness (observing patterns in others and attributing them to pedagogy) demonstrates critical distance Marcus lacks.

When asked which expressions hold value, Tom distinguished: "Some expressions like (it is xxx that) is useful because it is commonly used in academic field. Others aren't as important because they don't sound academic (first, second, third) and I would use subsection to replace them." This reveals disciplinary awareness and functional understanding absent in Marcus's approach.

AI Use: Strategic Enhancement

Tom's approach to AI differs fundamentally from Marcus's. He explained: "I write first, then ask ChatGPT for alternative phrasings. Like, I want to express this idea, what are different ways to say it?" When asked about implementation: "If I'm stuck on a word, I ask AI for synonyms and check which fits best. I save expressions AI suggests that I didn't know, and study why they work."

This represents a learning-enhancement model rather than delegation. Tom treats AI as a linguistic resource to expand his repertoire, not replace his thinking. When asked about critical evaluation: "Sometimes AI sounds too formal or unnatural, I adjust. I think about whether this actually sounds like something an engineer would write, or if it's trying too hard

to sound academic." This metalinguistic judgment—evaluating appropriateness and disciplinary fit—reflects the sophisticated competence Marcus lacks.

Most tellingly, Tom described his learning process: "AI shows me possibilities I wouldn't think of, but I decide what to use. I learn from why certain ways sound better in context." This contrasts sharply with Marcus's passive consumption. Tom engages actively with AI output, evaluates it against his developing understanding of disciplinary norms, and extracts learning value.

The difference is profound. While Marcus outsources thinking entirely, Tom uses AI as a scaffold for his own development. While Marcus becomes increasingly dependent, Tom becomes more competent. Their approaches illustrate two fundamentally different relationships to linguistic tools: delegation versus enhancement.

4.2.4 Implications: Why Formula-Teaching is Now Obsolete

The Assessment Paradox

Despite contrasting linguistic profiles, Marcus (GPA 3.3) and Tom (GPA 3.6) achieve similar academic success. The 0.3 difference is modest given their markedly different sophistication levels. Both students comfortably meet university standards. This assessment paradox explains why formula dependence persists: the system tolerates it.

Marcus's continued formula dependence reflects not merely habit but rational response to university assessment. His reports of A-minus grades demonstrate that formulaic writing meets institutional standards. When asked about assessment differences, Marcus noted: "Academic writing doesn't demand formulas like we had in DSE period as professors are more subjective." Yet despite this awareness that professors might value distinctiveness, Marcus continues receiving acceptable grades with formulaic writing. This suggests actual grading practices diverge from his theorized expectations. If instructors found his repetition

problematic, grades or feedback would indicate this. The absence of negative consequences signals acceptance.

Granger and Bestgen (2014) distinguished productive use (contextually appropriate deployment) from reproductive use (memorized insertion without contextual awareness). Marcus demonstrates reproductive use; Tom demonstrates productive competence. Yet assessment systems appear unable to distinguish these fundamentally different cognitive processes.

AI Makes Memorization Pointless

Traditional formulaic instruction assumes linguistic scarcity: students lack expressions, so memorize them. AI eliminates scarcity entirely. AI generates sophisticated, contextually appropriate phrases instantly, better than human memory can store them.

Marcus's logic reveals this shift clearly. He asked: "Why should I spend time memorizing formulas or trying to improve my English if AI can do it better and faster?" This is not laziness but rational economic thinking. Teaching formulas that AI can generate in two seconds makes no pedagogical sense.

The implications are stark. If Marcus submits AI-generated essays and receives acceptable grades, what incentive exists to develop competence? The system that once incentivized formula memorization now permits complete outsourcing. Formula-teaching becomes doubly obsolete: first, as a development scaffold (Tom shows metacognitive awareness works better), and second, as practical necessity (AI does it more efficiently).

Moreover, assessment cannot distinguish Marcus's AI delegation from Tom's AI enhancement without process-based evaluation. If both students submit polished, sophisticated text, traditional assessment cannot determine whether a student outsourced

completely or used AI as a learning tool. Both result in identical surface product despite vastly different competence development.

What Students NOW Need

The urgent question becomes: What should EAP instruction teach if formula memorization is obsolete and outsourcing is possible?

1. **Critical evaluation:** Which AI-generated phrase fits this specific context? Does this match my discipline's conventions? Would experts use this in this situation?
2. **Metalinguistic judgment:** Why does this expression work here rather than that one? What functional nuance am I losing or gaining?
3. **Strategic selection:** Can I learn from this AI suggestion? What principles underlie why this phrasing works?
4. **Disciplinary awareness:** Engineering contexts differ from humanities contexts. Economics texts prioritize different linguistic strategies than literature analyses.

These competencies cannot be replaced by AI because they require human judgment grounded in disciplinary knowledge. AI can generate language; it cannot judge whether generated language serves your rhetorical purpose in your discipline.

Assessment systems must shift accordingly. Rather than rewarding surface polish, assessment should reward the judgment displayed in language choice. Rather than ignoring process, assessment might incentivize evidence of learning through AI interaction. Rather than treating formula-following as competence, assessment should recognize that in an AI era, genuine competence means using AI wisely.

Pedagogically, this demands a fundamental pivot. EAP must stop teaching what AI does better and start teaching what only humans can do: understand disciplinary conventions, evaluate appropriateness, make rhetorical choices grounded in meaningful goals. This is not a minor curricular adjustment but a reconceptualization of what academic writing competence means.

5. Conclusion

This study examined formulaic language use among Hong Kong university students through corpus analysis of 90 texts and case study interviews with two contrasting participants. The corpus findings revealed severe restriction: just three exemplification markers account for 531 instances across all texts, with similar limitation evident in stance expressions and discourse organizers. Case studies of Marcus and Tom showed that while individual agency enables some students to transcend formulaic habits, assessment systems fail to differentiate between reproductive formula use and genuine linguistic competence. This creates little incentive for students to develop beyond DSE-conditioned patterns.

These findings carry significant pedagogical implications. Most urgently, the traditional approach of teaching generic formulaic expressions has become obsolete in an era where AI can generate such phrases instantly and more efficiently than human memory. EAP instruction must pivot toward corpus-based, discipline-specific training that moves beyond one-size-fits-all connectives. Engineering students require different lexical bundles than humanities students, yet current pedagogy treats academic writing as a generic skill. As a former DSE student and now an English tutor, I recognize this pattern in my own training: we were praised for error-free, “organized” scripts, but rarely think of the discipline variation. Effective instruction should build specialized corpora showing expert writing in each

discipline, identify high-frequency bundles characteristic of each field, and create explicit awareness of disciplinary discourse conventions.

Equally important is integrating AI literacy into EAP curricula. Rather than banning or ignoring AI tools, instruction should teach students to evaluate AI-generated text critically. Students need to ask: Does this phrase fit my disciplinary context? Would experts use this construction? What rhetorical nuance am I gaining or losing? This shifts instructional focus from memorizing formulas to developing metalinguistic judgment and rhetorical decision-making skills that AI cannot replicate.

Beyond classroom pedagogy, the findings demand institutional and assessment reform. The paradox that Marcus and Tom achieve similar GPAs despite markedly different linguistic sophistication reveals systemic misalignment between assessment practices and genuine competence development. Current rubrics emphasizing surface accuracy inadvertently reward formula memorization while failing to recognize the depth demonstrated in Tom's varied, discipline-aware writing. Universities need assessment frameworks that distinguish productive use from reproductive use, incorporate process-based evaluation showing learning development, and explicitly reward linguistic variety over safe formula-following.

Additionally, institutions must address the secondary-tertiary transition gap. Students arrive at university after years of intensive DSE conditioning that treated writing as template-filling rather than meaning-making. First-year programs should include explicit awareness-raising about formula limitations and provide structured opportunities for students to develop more flexible linguistic repertoires appropriate to their disciplines.

This study had several limitations. The qualitative component involved only two interview participants, restricting generalizability of the case study insights. A larger

interview study with 20 to 30 participants across different proficiency levels, linguistic backgrounds, and academic disciplines would strengthen confidence in the individual variation patterns identified. The corpus, while substantial at 90 texts, remains relatively small and imbalanced across disciplines. More robust conclusions would emerge from separate corpus comparisons examining engineering versus humanities versus social sciences writing specifically. As a cross-sectional study, this research provides a snapshot rather than tracking development over time. How formulaic patterns evolve across university years remain unclear.

Future research should address these limitations through several directions. Longitudinal tracking following students from first year through graduation would reveal whether formula dependence gradually diminishes, remains stable, or fluctuates based on assessment pressures in different courses. Intervention experiments could test whether corpus-based instruction or AI literacy training effectively supports students in transcending formula dependence. Expanding the interview component would clarify mechanisms through which some students develop metacognitive awareness while others remain constrained by examination habits.

This research ultimately raises fundamental questions about the purpose of English language education in examination-oriented contexts. When assessment systems reward formula memorization and AI can generate sophisticated expressions effortlessly, educators must reconceptualize what constitutes genuine academic writing competence. The answer lies not in teaching what machines do better, but in developing human judgment about whether generated language serves meaningful rhetorical purpose in specific disciplinary contexts. EAP instruction must therefore shift from teaching forms to developing critical evaluation skills that enable students to navigate an AI-saturated academic landscape while maintaining genuine linguistic agency.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Study Title: Formulaic Language Use in Hong Kong University Students' Academic

Writing: From DSE Conditioning to AI Disruption

Interview Duration: 60–75 minutes

Interview Method: Individual Zoom interviews conducted in October 2025

Language: Mixed English and Cantonese (participants free to code-switch)

Consent: Verbal consent obtained before recording

Section 1: Background and Educational Experiences

1. **Educational background:** How many years have you studied English? What type of school did you attend (EMI, CMI, or mixed)?
2. **Writing instruction:** Can you describe how you were taught English academic writing in secondary school? How about at university?
3. **Exam experience:** Have you taken public exams like DSE, IELTS, or TOEFL? How did you prepare for the writing sections?
4. **Tutorial/private tuition:** Have you received private tutoring for English writing? What did your tutor emphasize?

Section 2: Stimulated Recall

[Note: This section was adapted based on participant's linguistic profile. Participants were shown their corpus data during this section.]

For high-repetition participants (e.g., Marcus):

5. **Show repeated expression:** "I noticed you used 'for example' and 'such as' multiple times in your essays. Can you walk me through why you chose these expressions each time?"

6. **Awareness probe:** “When you were writing, were you aware you had used this expression multiple times?”
7. **Alternatives consideration:** “Did you consider using different expressions to introduce examples? Why or why not?”

For high-variety participants (e.g., Tom):

8. **Show diverse expressions:** “You used ‘on the other hand,’ ‘conversely,’ ‘by contrast,’ and ‘however’ to show different perspectives. How did you decide which one to use in each context?”
9. **Conscious choice:** “Were you deliberately trying to vary your language, or did it happen naturally?”
10. **Learning sources:** “Where did you learn these different expressions? From reading? Classes? Vocabulary lists?”
11. **Risk-taking:** “Do you ever worry about using an expression incorrectly? How do you decide to try a new phrase?”

Questions for both groups:

12. **Source exploration:** “Where did you first learn expressions like ‘for example,’ ‘such as,’ or ‘moreover’? Can you remember a specific teacher or textbook?”
13. **Comfort level:** “How confident do you feel using these expressions? Do you feel they’re ‘safe’ or reliable?”

Section 3: Learning Experiences

Teacher influence: “Did your teachers provide you with lists of ‘useful expressions’ or ‘good phrases’ for essays? Can you give examples?”

14. **Exam preparation:** “When preparing for DSE, did tutors or teachers emphasize certain connectives or transitions? Which ones?”
15. **Memorization practices:** “Have you ever memorized phrases or sentence templates

for writing? Can you describe that experience?”

16. **Feedback patterns:** “When teachers give feedback on your essays, do they comment on your use of expressions like ‘for example’ or ‘in addition’? What do they say?”

17. **Model essays:** “Have you studied model essays or sample answers? Did you notice any patterns in the language they used?”

Section 4: Awareness and Strategic Choices

19. **Conscious versus automatic:** “When you write, do you actively think about which connectives to use, or do they come automatically?”

20. **Safety versus creativity:** “Do you prefer using expressions you’re confident about, or do you like experimenting with new phrases? Why?”

21. **Perception of sophistication:** “Do you think using varied expressions makes your writing better? Why or why not?”

22. **Assessment concerns:** “Do you think teachers or examiners prefer certain expressions? Which ones and why?”

23. **Hong Kong context:** “Do you think Hong Kong students have particular patterns in their writing? What do you notice?”

Section 5: AI Usage and Reflections

24. **AI writing tools:** “Do you use AI tools like ChatGPT or other writing assistants when writing academic essays? If yes, how do you use them?”

25. **Value of formulaic expressions:** “How important do you think these fixed expressions are for academic writing?”

26. **Naturalness:** “Do these expressions feel natural to you when writing, or do they feel ‘inserted’?”

27. **Future learning:** “If you could improve one aspect of your academic writing, what would it be?”

28. **Advice to peers:** “What advice would you give to other Hong Kong students about using connectives and transitions in academic writing?”

Note: Questions were adapted flexibly during interviews to follow participants’ responses and explore emergent themes.

Appendix B

STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Textual analysis of academic writings produced by Hong Kong university students

I'd like to invite you to participate in a study that explores repeated patterns found in academic writings produced by Hong Kong university students. I am WONG Ka Shun, a senior student in the Department of English.

This study aims to find, if any, formulaic patterns commonly found in academic English writings produced by speakers of English as a second language and Cantonese as their first language. To do so, I am planning to collect academic writing samples from university students in Hong Kong.

If you decide to participate, I will ask you to share your academic writing samples and answer a short survey.

Your names and the writings will be anonymized so that it becomes impossible to identify who wrote which essay. Your names and writings will be codified numerically (001, 002, 003, etc.) to conceal your identity entirely. Also, the collected writing samples will be deleted immediately after the completion of the Capstone project. You can also withdraw from this study anytime you wish. Then I will delete all data from you.

In return of your participation, I will share the overall results of this project. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 1155XXXXXX@link.cuhk.edu.hk.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part!

WONG Ka Shun
Senior student, Department of English
Chinese University of Hong Kong

CONSENT FORM

Textual analysis of academic writings produced by Hong Kong university students

		YES	NO
1.	The researcher, WONG Ka Shun, read the information sheet and explained about this project to me.	☐	☐
2.	The researcher explained to me the purpose of this project and what would be required of me, and any questions I had were answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements for my participation as described in the information sheet	☐	☐
3.	I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time.	☐	☐
4.	I agree for my data to be stored. I understand that the data will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the project.	☐	☐

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Chan King Sum Julia

Professor Eddie Tay

ENGE4700 Independent Research Project

26th September 2025

Transformative Utopianism and Mikhail Bakhtin's Theories in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*

Reflection 1

Before taking the course “Children’s Literature” (ENGE2360), which is my favorite course out of all the major courses that I have taken by far, I was inspired by a few other preceding courses from both my major studies and core requirement subjects that served as stepping stones for this capstone project. I first took “Literature and Art” (ENGE3200), having an opportunity to read J. G. Ballard’s surrealist and science fiction novel published in 1979 that is named *The Unlimited Dream Company*, which is brimful of fantastical, imaginative or even wayward notions and images, such as in the following: “I had tasted the flesh of these children and knew that they were my food” (140) and “my real self was diffusing through the air and lay within the bodies of all these creatures who had given part of themselves to me” (174). This marked my first encounter with Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian linguist, philosopher and literary critic who worked on the theory of the “carnavalesque”, which would be used to analyze Lewis Carroll’s novel with its sequel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* in this capstone project. Being first introduced to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnavalesque”, I was surprised by how the subversion and destabilization of power structures could be expressed by a carnival. Despite the fact that the “carnavalesque” and its destabilization of existing power structures are temporary, its function in subverting current authority in an imaginative or oftentimes absurd way casts irony on those in power. The amusing quality embedded in the “carnavalesque” manifests notes of sarcasm or derision towards the existing power structures that the author wants to subvert. For instance, in Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the most prominent example would be the cook who throws kitchenware into the Duchess’ face. It portrays the subversion of the upper-class by the working class in Victorian society, the retaliation on the upper-class is only made available in the literary space and made viable in the realm of fantasy. This is why the fantasy realm bestows a suppressed society, namely the Victorian, power to rebel against authority, taking actions that they are forbidden to do in reality. This is also the reason why the fantasy realm is intriguing as it is not providing a way of escapism from reality but manifesting alternative world orders and stimulating the Victorian readers’ thoughts towards existent conventions.

Similarly, I encountered the same theory in “Literature and Film” (ENGE3220), which highlighted the same concept of the “carnavalesque” and was deployed to analyze two course required films, namely Terry Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys* which was released in 1995 and Isao Takahata’s *Pom Poko* which was released in 1994. I was also taught that imagination could serve as a medium for change, which manifested in the form of a carnivalesque in the films, transgressing power and social hierarchies. Taking another course named “Ekphrasis: Encounters between Verbal and Visual Arts” (ENGE3410), it includes ekphrastic texts written by Romantic and Victorian poets and authors, focusing on how the literal or imaginary artworks are invoked through words. It also introduces the term “Ut pictura poesis”, concerning how the mediums of art between poetry and painting share similarities of appealing to readers’ and viewers’ emotions, and how the term “paragone” portrays poetry

and paintings as rivals in competing for being more superior in art. This course also taught me how poetry or prose, which is the literary space or medium, is able to encapsulate static visual elements of art and is capable of adding motion to the static artwork itself. The literary space allows the piece of artwork, be it painting or sculpture, to survive through time's passage and wear. It thereby inspires me concerning how poetry, prose, novels or any other literary form could make a piece of artwork timeless and even immortal. Carroll's novels, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, are structured by episodic events occurring to the child protagonist, Alice, and the novels that are brimful of visual imagery in language along with visual illustrations which accompany the literary text reveal how language endows the protagonist to "live" and "move" across its printed illustrations. The life bestowed to Alice by Carroll's words suggests the art of language is somehow more superior than two-dimensional visual art, which has less depth than the words itself. As an enthusiast of art, the illustrations which accompany Carroll's text interested me, and the absurdity in both settings of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House portrayed through Carroll's language makes the novels more fascinating. In my opinion, Carroll's novels encompass ekphrasis, crafting Alice's encounters as pieces of visual art through Carroll's language and his literary landscape. Furthermore, I took a course called "An Introduction to Chinese Culture" (UGEA2110), which was a core requirement subject. I was taught that the concept of utopia was first raised by Thomas More, a renowned 16th century English social philosopher and Renaissance humanist, who wrote a book called *Utopia* which was published in 1516, discussing utopian socialism.

Alongside the above, the reasons for choosing children's literature as the field of research for this capstone project are threefold. Building on the previous courses and what I have thereby gained immensely from, I have found the course of "Children's Literature" (ENGE2360) to be the most interesting, which is the fundamental reason for my choice of research. While studying the course of "Children's Literature", the perspective of viewing the child protagonists as products and disciplined beings of the suppressive Victorian era, which rendered carbon copies of conventional adults who were cultivated under the unimaginative Victorian education system, class consciousness and notions of pedigree, is a new and interesting point of view to me as a person new to this genre. The Victorian regime of childhood is manifested through the eyes of adult authors and embodied in child protagonists, this sparked my interest in discovering more interpretations viable, being the second reason for my choice. Professor Tay also mentioned in class about the open-endedness of Lewis Carroll's novel, allowing readers to interpret whether Carroll is manifesting the notions of utopia, which correlates with some of my previous knowledge from other courses on utopia. Thus, I hope I would be able to utilize my past knowledge and investigate in the fascinating field of children's literature, namely Lewis Carroll's novel in this project.

Introduction: the Scholarship of Children's Literature

Written by Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* published in 1865 and *Through the Looking-Glass* published in 1871 are well-known works of children's literature throughout history. The novels focus on the child protagonist, Alice, who embarks on a journey by falling into a rabbit hole and accesses the absurd and fantastical realm of Wonderland, ultimately finding the hilarious encounters to be a dream. Similarly, in its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice climbs through a large looking-glass or mirror and enters a world of chess, finding the subsequent encounters to be a dream, which serves as a constant reminder of self-definition and exploration. Through deploying the perspective of transformative utopianism, this paper argues that the construction of a fantasy realm showcases both utopian and dystopian notions, subverting the existence of perfect traditional utopian ideals and revealing the fairytale world as a critical utopia, which challenges hegemonic structures and institutions in the Victorian era. Through Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other theories on language, Lewis Carroll portrays how the world order of "transformative utopianism" is applicable to Victorian society by applying it to the fantasy realm as an attempt or epitome, persuading the Victorian readers with Carroll's manifested authorial intentions depicted in his novels, which are in dialogue with the Victorian people, implying a possibility for social change.

The perfect traditional utopian ideal or the traditional utopian model is defined in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, "it ties its notion of happy-ever-after to a fixed, geographically defined, immovable city; its project of social reform will inevitably result in stasis; and its future orientation does not match today's emphasis on happiness now, rather than tomorrow (pp. 239–40)" (35). An example of a traditional utopian model would be in Plato's *The Republic*. Kallipolis is a model of a perfect and just society ruled by philosopher-kings who are wise and knowledgeable. The society is structured under the Principle of Specialization which is applied at a class level, including artisans, auxiliaries, and guardians. Another example is found in Thomas More's *Utopia* published in 1516, fabricating utopia as an island ruled by kings and its highest administrative posts are elected, yet no citizen has access to its management.

The concept of "transformative utopianism" stems from a co-authored book, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* published in 2008, written by Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum. This book examines how children and young people imagine future world orders, and the various utopian dreamings that are offered to the audiences (1). Defining "transformative utopianism" as a fictional imagining of transformed world orders with utopian and dystopian motifs, the fairytale world thereby proposes new social and political arrangements (2-3) since it resists dominant ideologies and social practices (4). It is said that "transformative utopianism" is a vision that challenges hegemonic structures of political power and totalizing ideologies through conveying human needs and agency that are suppressed by existing institutions (16). Contending that the traditional utopian model for a better future is not possible, it refers to how Bauman indicates the ineffectuality of the traditional utopian model¹ in terms of its geographical rigidity, inevitable result in stasis and nonreflective future orientation of happiness (35). Referring to Darko Suvin, the book says that utopia is defined as a community constructed with radically different principles in terms of sociopolitical institutions, norms and relations from those of the author's or even reader's community (106).

¹ Refer to the second paragraph under "Introduction: the Scholarship of Children's Literature".

This paper's concept of "transformative utopianism" would thereby be supported by the above mentioned, which would later be explained in detail.

For Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories, they are recognized by literary scholars that they are useful in interpreting children's literature. In an article "Interpreting and Teaching contemporary children's literature in the light of M.M. Bakhtin's theories: from Dialogism and Polyphony to the study of Medieval Carnival", it says, "The ideas of the Russian writer M.M. Bakhtin on the dialogic nature of the novel and on the carnivalesque have opened up new possibilities in reading and interpreting literary texts" (339) and "The work of Bakhtin has also approved important to the criticism of children's literature. Major works of children's literature scholarship such as those by John Stephens (1992), Robyn McCallum (1999) and Maria Nikolajeva (2010)², have recognized Bakhtin's theories as powerful constructs for understanding literature written for children and young adults" (339). In this article, it indicates how Mikhail Bakhtin can be used to analyze a carnivalesque children's book *The Brothers Gruesome* published in 1999, celebrating "the Bakhtinian category of the open, unfinished nature of the body and its interactions with the world" (341).

Bakhtin's theories as applied to children's literature are relevant in terms of manifesting subversion of societal conventions. Bakhtin's polyphony³ encourages a profuse of various voices, this is somehow discouraged in Victorian society where it suppresses the exploration of the mind, and society is thereby ironized. Through heteroglossia⁴, the subversion of Victorian society is heard through refracting authorial intentions onto fictional characters (Bakhtin 324). As "there can be no actual monologue" (Bakhtin 426) and everything is in dialogue with one another, it further ironizes Victorian society to be unidirectional and didactic in its education and conventions, imposing overarching control over the next generation.

This paper hopes to contribute uniquely to the scholarship of children's literature by analyzing Carrolls' *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in correlation with Bakhtinian theories. Firstly, there is a lack of research on how Bakhtin's theories could be used to analyze this chosen novel of Carroll's, and the research conducted previously mainly focused on Russian translations of Carroll's text and its correlation with the Russian literary critic of Bakhtin. Moreover, there is an absence of research on how "transformative utopianism" could be

² John Stephens is an Emeritus Professor at Macquarie University's Department of English and published *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* in 1992, which explores children's literature with research concepts like the carnivalesque, intertextuality, subjectivity, focalization and reader subject position. His wide array of books and articles focuses on textuality, ideology, discourse analysis and the cultural situatedness of children's literature. Robyn McCallum is an independent scholar who taught at Macquarie University for 25 years, researching on children's literature and film along with the Narrative Theory. Her book *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* published in 1999 examines selfhood in adolescent and children's fiction by using Bakhtin's theories to analyse their subjectivity, narrative and language. Maria Nikolajeva was a Professor of Education in the University of Cambridge. Her book *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* published in 2009 explores contemporary power theories like feminism and the carnival theory to portray how a child is educated and empowered in children's literature.

³ Bakhtin's definition of polyphony is "(a decentered authorial stance that grants validity to all voices) exemplified by the prose of Dostoevsky ('The Problem of Content')" (Emerson, par. 15). It is further illustrated in the fourth paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas".

⁴ In Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* published in 1975, it says, "Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions" (324). It is further illustrated in the third paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas".

combined with Bakhtin's theories to bring out potential hope for change in societies that may well be suggested in the novel. The novel does not suggest a physical utopia, yet "transformative utopianism" implies a possibility of improving the world order. Furthermore, Bakhtin the rhetorical theorist helps frame Carroll's text beyond subversion of Victorian society and propels social change through demonstrating a new world order in fiction under the lens of Bakhtin's theories, deeming change as possible in reality.

Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas

Since this capstone project suggests that Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other language theories reinforce the idea of "transformative utopianism", it thereby implies a propensity for social change. Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and literary critic who focused on literary theories and philosophy of language, and he postulated the theory called the "carnavalesque", which was first introduced in his book named *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* which was published in 1929 and was further demonstrated in his other work called *Rabelais and His World* which was published in 1965. Carnavalesque is said to be "derived from the term carnival that Mikhail Bakhtin used to denote popular festive life in European Medieval society" (Bernier-Cast 21). In Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, it says, "The philosophers Diogenes and Epictetus play here the role of carnivalesque fools elected kings. The royal purple robes and golden scepter of Diogenes are stressed as well as the beating inflicted on the old uncrowned king, Alexander the Great. The image of Epictetus is presented in a different, more gallant style; he is the feasting, dancing king" (385). This demonstrates one of the characteristics of the "carnavalesque" is role play or role reversal, taking up various social roles and dressing up to pretend certain people in society are ways to subvert the normal social order. It could also be seen in Carroll's novel that Alice dresses up and pretends Queen, "'Oh, how glad I am to get here! And what *is* this on my head?' she exclaimed in a tone of dismay, as she put her hands up to something very heavy, that fitted tight all round her head...It was a golden crown" (206) and it says, "She was standing before an arched doorway, over which were the words 'QUEEN ALICE' in large letters" (213). Alice's cat, Kitty, also partakes in role playing as she plays the Red Queen in Alice's dream, "'Let's pretend that you're the Red Queen, Kitty! Do you know, I think if you sat up and folded your arms, you'd look exactly like her...' And Alice got the Red Queen off the table, and set it up before the kitten as a model for it to imitate" (118) and the ending of the Red Queen cycles back to the beginning of the *Through the Looking-Glass* with a cyclical ending or reference, "SHE TOOK HER off the table as she spoke, and shook her backwards and forwards with all her might. The Red Queen made no resistance whatever: only her face grew very small, and her eyes got large and green: and still...she kept on growing shorter---and fatter---and softer---and rounder---and---and it really *was* a kitten, after all" (221-2). Alice also says, "Let's pretend" (118) and "Let's pretend we're kings and queens" (118), highlighting the characteristic role playing in the "carnavalesque" through subversion of roles and status in the Looking-Glass House.

Subversion is also significant in other scenes in Carroll's novel. In the sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Unicorn orders the King about, "'Come, fetch out the plum-cake, old man!' the Unicorn went on, turning from her to the King. 'None of your brown bread for me!' 'Certainly---certainly!' the King muttered, and beckoned to Haigha" (189-190). Although anthropomorphism is used throughout the novel, the animals allegedly should have a lower status than the hierarchical king, the Unicorn here subverts the hierarchical order of society in the Looking-Glass House with his impudent attitude and the king is unexpectedly servile in manner, especially when the duel between the Lion and the Unicorn would not bereave the

throne of the king at all (186). The Lion also calls Alice a monster and orders everyone around impertinently, “‘Then hand round the plum-cake, Monster,’ the Lion said... ‘And sit down, both of you’ (to the King and the Unicorn)” (190). The subversion of the upper-class by the lower class is also conveyed through the cook and the Duchess in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, it says, “While she was trying to fix on one, the cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby---the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her” (49). The cook represents the lower working class and the Duchess refers to the higher and nobler social class or even people who belong to aristocracy, the scene illustrates how the lower class in Victorian society is underlyingly discontented with the upper-class and thereby retaliates them and their next generation, revealing a sense of subversion in a metaphorical way. In both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice subverts the Queen in the courtroom and banquet respectively as she says, “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (103) in the former and “‘I can’t stand this any longer!’ she cried, as she jumped up and seized the table-cloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor” (220) in the latter sequel, thereby reflecting subversion of the Victorian upper-class and aristocracy.

Moving on, another concept raised by Bakhtin is heteroglossia, which is also portrayed in Carroll’s novel in terms of the duality in voices. In Bakhtin’s book of essays, *The Dialogic Imagination*, it says, “Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions” (324). It suggests that a speech of a character not only conveys the character’s perspective and meaning intended to be expressed, but also a refraction of the “intention of the author”, thereby having “simultaneously two different intentions”. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the voices or the Looking-Glass insects think in chorus, “Better say nothing at all. Language is worth a thousand pounds a word!” (138), replying to Alice’s internal thought of “Then there’s no use in speaking” (138). Although the voice in chorus agrees with Alice on not speaking a word, the chorus ironically subverts their stance by humorously saying language is expensive which worths “a thousand pounds a word”. It ultimately brings out the importance of words and language, revealing the voice or thoughts of Carroll the author, expressing “authorial intentions”. When the fawn asks Alice who she is in another moment later in the novel, it says, “who am I?” (145) and “‘I wish I knew!’ thought poor Alice” (145). Carroll figuratively suggests the loss of individuality without the mind’s exploration in Victorian society, all unified under public education. Furthermore, when the Knight falls headlong, he says, “My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head-downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things” (200), suggesting the more he goes downward into the rabbit hole of the fantasy realm, the more imaginative he becomes. Carroll thereby underlyingly ironizes and rebels against the suppressive Victorian mindset of discouraging the exploration of the mind and spirit through revealing “authorial intentions” in characters’ speech and thoughts.

Heteroglossia seems to be unifying both authorial and character’s voices together to reveal a unitary meaning, yet Carroll’s novels deploy Bakhtin’s polyphony to endow each character individuality in their voices which differ from the author as well. Bakhtin’s polyphony is said to be “(a decentered authorial stance that grants validity to all voices)

exemplified by the prose of Dostoevsky ('The Problem of Content')" (Emerson, par. 15), suggesting that the character's voice is decentered or detached from the "authorial stance" so as to grant "validity" or individuality "to all voices". Alice and other characters are not necessarily Carroll's mouthpiece. Although Carroll subverts Victorian conventions and he utilizes heteroglossia to refract his authorial intention onto characters at times, he does not force his voice onto Alice the protagonist and other characters. For example, Alice does not have to be courageous at all times, ready to rebel against the Victorian conventions, she could have her own consciousness of subjugating to authority and commands when she is in fear. In the tea-party of the Hatter, Dormouse and March Hare, Alice does not dare to retort the March Hare and the Dormouse, it says, "Alice was silent" (62). Alice also does not dare to reject the Duchess, it says, "because she was exactly the right height to rest her chin on Alice's shoulder, and it was an uncomfortably sharp chin. However, she did not like to be rude: so she bore it as well as she could" (74-5). Alice subjugates when she feels pressurized by authority, and does not necessarily subvert it. Although it is recognized that Alice is an epitome or showcase of an obedient Victorian child through her submissive behaviour, she has her own consciousness and "free will" to act in the novel as she is not created to fulfil Carroll's authorial intentions fully. Her consciousness could be detached from Carroll's point of view.

Relating to heteroglossia, dialogism is another concept raised by Bakhtin, conveying how the world is created in dialogue and how novels are in dialogue with people. In Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, it says, "Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole— there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue" (426), suggesting that the meanings of words in novels interact with one another through the communication between characters and the novel itself with the readers, thereby having the potential to condition others and revealing the absence of a monologue. It also says, "Dialogue and its various processes are central to Bakhtin's theory, and it is precisely as verbal process... A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute" (427). In Carroll's novel, dialogue is prevalent throughout, especially portrayed in the conversations between the human child protagonist Alice and the animals when anthropomorphism is deployed. The absurdity in the invented language from the Looking-Glass House conveys how privilege is endowed to the nonsensical language, an example would be the Jabberwocky (124-6). The "undialogized language" being authoritative and absolute reveals the language characteristics of the Victorian society where semantics are valued over the sense of hearing words. However, words in the Jabberwocky (124-6) are made comprehensible or fathomable by Humpty Dumpty (177-8), who explains the words in their relative meanings, like "mimsy" is "flimsy and miserable" (177) which is using blending in linguistics. Carroll "deprivileged" Victorian English by embracing absurd nonsense, he places "discourse, language or culture" to undergo "dialogization". It also says that "Dialogue may be external (between two different people) or internal (between an earlier and a later self)" (427). External dialogue is ubiquitous throughout the novel and internal dialogue is also present, for example the novel suggests a comparison of Alice's old self who has doubts on her individuality (16) and her later self who is more courageous to subvert authority (103). She has acquired an exploration

of the mind in Wonderland and undergoes change in personality shown through the internal dialogue, inspiring change for the Victorian society.

Transformative Utopianism and A Critical Utopia

Since this capstone project displays Wonderland as encompassing both utopian and dystopian notions to be a subversion of traditional utopian ideals, manifesting the fairytale world to be a critical utopia, the concept of “transformative utopianism” is introduced. According to *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, from which this capstone project’s concepts would stem, it says, “the term ‘utopian’ is often taken to refer to unrealistic imaginings of improved world orders which when tested against the realpolitik of pragmatism collapse into ineffectuality” (2). The definition of utopia and the adjective “utopian” refer to the “unrealistic imaginings” that are unable to be “tested against the realpolitik of pragmatism”. This then correlates to the Greek definition of a “utopia”, meaning non-place called “ou-topia” and a good or ideal place called “eu-topia”. The twofold meaning presents an ideal and illusory world, which utopia is imaginary. Continuing with the same book, it says that “...‘transformative utopianism’. This concept is realised as fictional imaginings of transformed world orders and employs utopian/dystopian themes and motifs which propose new social and political arrangements (Parrinder, 2001)” (2-3). It illustrates how Carroll’s absurd fictional Wonderland is a land of “transformed world orders” as it proposes “new social” “arrangements”. The perfect traditional ideals of a geographical utopia is suggested to be absent, since this concept “is realised as fictional imaginings”. “Transformative utopianism” thereby manifests itself to be a propensity for social change, proposing “new social and political arrangements” other than the Victorian conventions, which would be discussed more in detail afterwards.

As aforementioned, “utopia” is geographically absent, yet it is portrayed to be a process of transformation. Referring to the same book, it says that “Utopia must be transformative if it is to imagine a better world than the one that readers/audiences currently know. However, as Lucy Sargisson notes, ‘utopian transformation doesn’t have to be located in the future, in a far-distant hope for a better place. Rather, it can be part of transformation in the now’ (Levitas and Sargisson, 2003, p. 17)” (4). It illustrates that a utopia is to “imagine a better world” than the present or Victorian era back then, and this notion drives the society forward to “be part of transformation in the now”, instead of being an illusion of “a far-distant hope”. Wonderland’s absurdity and Alice’s subversion of Victorian social order therein suggest Wonderland to be a critical utopia. In *Utopian Studies*, a journal article “Instantiating Critical Utopia” written by Ashlie Lancaster says, “Critical utopias are not blueprints for ideal societies, but expressions of the aspiration for human fulfilment towards which our political practice should always be directed” (111), portraying how critical utopia and transformative utopianism interweave with one another by being part of the aspirations of improved world order. According to *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, it says, “what Moylan (2003, p. 2) sees as crucial to critical utopias, ‘an emancipatory utopian imagination’ which breaks away from the restrictions of the traditional utopia while preserving these texts’ ability to challenge and resist dominant ideologies and social practices” (4), conveying critical utopias to be detached from traditional utopian ideals and its “emancipatory utopian imagination” as resisting “dominant ideologies”, shown in the subversion of Victorian conventions in Carroll’s novel.

Transformative utopianism is an important critical approach when it comes to analysing children’s literature. Referring back to the same book, it says, “we have come to

understand that utopian narratives are, more than anything else, concerned with the present, and with the values, politics and social practices conveyed in these texts as desirable possibilities for a transformed world order” (8), revealing that the notion of transformative utopianism is the driving force for “desirable possibilities for a transformed world order”. Based on *Happily Ever After*, Jack Zipes says that fairy tales are “complex symbolic social acts intended to reflect upon mores, norms, and habits organized for the purpose of reinforcing a hierarchically arranged civilizing process in a particular society” (3), which its “hierarchically arranged civilizing process” highlights the existence of class consciousness, male-dominance and patriarchy, and the suppressive “civilizing” force of the Victorian education system in Carroll’s novel. In a bid to subvert the suppressive “civilizing process” of children’s literature which serves a didactic function, the works are not simply pessimistic reflections of Victorian conventions, but could be viewed as narratives that prompt change through transformative utopianism. Transformative utopianism portrays a sense of attainability, detaching from perfect traditional utopian ideals⁵ that are unattainable. In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, it says, “a transformative utopian fiction will build in some notion of attainability” (17), hinting at the possibilities for change during the Victorian era. In Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the absurdity of the arbitrary judgement taken place in the courtroom in Wonderland is subverted through Alice’s overtly defiant speech, ““Who cares for you?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time)” (103), using the courtroom scene to ironically judge the Victorian tyrannical rule and system symbolized by its setting. The courtroom symbolizing Victorian tyrannical rule and the following subversion of Alice suggests that subversion of Victorian conventions in Victorian reality is possible, since there is a sense of attainability through Alice’s subversion in a Victorian symbolized setting. Also, Alice growing to “her full size” metaphorically portrays an outgrowth of Victorian childhood regimes, and thereby her grown-up self has attained the strength needed to subvert conventions. The notions of transformative utopianism and critical utopia could also be applied to other works of children’s literature. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Shire is symbolized as a utopia of communal activities, yet Saruman’s industrialized forces dismantle the community, thereby portraying a critical utopia with both utopian and dystopian motifs or forces, alike Carroll’s fantasy realms. In C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the White Witch Jadis is a Satanic figure that casts down a never-ending winter in Narnia, portraying the utopian setting of Narnia as detached from perfect traditional ideals of a utopia with the presence of a devilish character. It is also similar in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, which portrays Neverland to be an enticing land with the presence of villainous Captain Hook and his crew. The presence of both good and evil in fantastical realms reveals a transformative potential for a better world order since there is an absence of a geographical utopia, and could be analyzed through transformative utopianism which strives to fulfill human aspirations. Hence, transformative utopianism is significant in examining children’s literature, a genre of subverting conventional norms and society.

Thesis

Deploying the perspective of “transformative utopianism” into Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, this paper argues that the construction of a fantasy realm which showcases both utopian and dystopian notions subverts the existence of perfect traditional utopian ideals and

⁵ Refer to the second paragraph under “Introduction: the Scholarship of Children’s Literature”.

illustrates the fantasy realm as a critical utopia, challenging hegemonic structures and institutions in the Victorian era. Through Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other theories of language, Carroll portrays how the world order of "transformative utopianism" is applicable to Victorian society by applying it to the fantasy realm as an epitome, persuading the Victorian readers with Carroll's manifested authorial intentions in his novels, which are in dialogue with the Victorian people by implying a possibility for social change.

The construction of a fantasy realm showcases both utopian and dystopian notions, subverting the perfect traditional utopian ideals through the perspective of transformative utopianism. As aforementioned, according to *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, the perspective of transformative utopianism "is realised as fictional imaginings of transformed world orders and employs utopian/dystopian themes and motifs which propose new social and political arrangements (Parrinder, 2001)" (2-3), which the constructed fantasy world, "fictional imaginings of transformed world orders", "employs" both utopian and dystopian "themes and motifs" to advocate a new world order that differs from reality. It is emphasized again, "Our use of the term 'transformative utopianism' is based on the assumption that works of fiction employ utopian and dystopian themes and motifs in a way that has a transformative purpose: that is, they propose or imply new social and political arrangements by imagining transformed world orders" (6), portraying how the existence of both utopian and dystopian notions in a fantasy realm constructs an ideal new world order which is not impossible by revealing its attainability in reality. It says, "as Lucy Sargisson notes, 'utopian transformation doesn't have to be located in the future, in a far-distant hope for a better place. Rather, it can be part of transformation in the now' (Levitas and Sargisson, 2003, p. 17)" (4), which subverts the "far-distant hope" of the unattainable perfect traditional utopian ideals. Since "a transformative utopian fiction will build in some notion of attainability" (17), the construction of a fantasy realm showcases both utopian and dystopian notions to portray a glimpse of hope for the reality to improve its current existent world order. The utopian and dystopian notions are reflected as notions of liberation and constraint respectively, it is suggested here, "The better worlds envisaged in utopian thinking project both liberation and constraint. Frances Bartowski succinctly labels such narratives 'tales of disabling and enabling conditions of desire' (1989, p. 4), and this concept is especially pertinent to children's texts, since to grasp what children's texts propose about values, politics, and social practices is to see what they envisage as desirable possibilities for the world" (6), emphasizing how the improved or the "better worlds envisaged" "project" both notions of "liberation and constraint", which thereby disable and enable "conditions of desire". The "enabling conditions of desire" could be interpreted as anarchic or untrammelled freedom, which some works of children's literature are "tales" that disable these desires by proposing envisaged "values, politics, and social practices" as "desirable possibilities for the world", highlighting how utopian and dystopian notions are liberating and constraining freedom to a certain degree.

Continuing with the above, through the perspective of transformative utopianism in Lewis Carroll's novels, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House are fantastic realms that display both utopian and dystopian notions that subvert the perfect traditional utopian ideals propelled in the Victorian era, which is ironically far from the ideals. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the fluctuating bodily growth in Alice's height metaphorically symbolizes the growth and development of the children's mind. She says, "'Now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!' (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off)" (14) after she finishes off her cake (13), losing control of her bodily expansion that is undergoing puberty, with the growth of her mind included. Her height varies turbulently, "She got up and went to the table to

measure herself by it, and found that, as nearly as she could guess, she was now about two feet high, and was going on shrinking rapidly: she soon found out that the cause of this was the fan she was holding, and she dropped it hastily, just in time to save herself from shrinking away altogether” (17), shrinking and contracting. Out of curiosity, she expands again after uncorking and drinking a little bottle without the label of “DRINK ME” (29), “Alas! It was too late to wish that! She went on growing, and growing, and very soon had to kneel down on the floor: in another minute there was not even room for this...she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney” (29). After nibbling the mushroom (44), she shrinks again, “she began nibbling at the right-hand bit again, and did not venture to go near the house till she had brought herself down to nine inches high” (45), conforming to a normal height in proportion to the house she prepares to enter (46). The expansion or contraction of the minds in children symbolized by Alice’s height is provoked by certain agents, like the cake, the fan, the little bottle and pieces of mushrooms, which these objects that belong to Wonderland symbolize how the fantasy realm gives rise to the development and exploration of the mind, outgrowing the sense of self. The fantasy realm liberates the growth of children in a flexible manner, differing from the suppressive control of the children’s minds and discouragement of the mind’s quest of exploration. The social acceptability of fluctuating growth in Wonderland is manifested in the caterpillar’s direct speech, “You’ll get used to it in time” (42) and “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter” (42) when Alice feels perturbed about her height. The caterpillar’s open-mindedness towards Alice’s growth figuratively suggests that the fantasy realm accepts the mind’s growth in children. It could be categorized as a notion of liberation. Also, both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House attempt to breakdown the mindset of class consciousness. In the house of the Duchess in Wonderland, it says, “While she was trying to fix on one, the cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby---the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her” (49), suggesting how the lower working class represented by the cook subverts the upper-class or aristocrats represented by the Duchess, who is indifferent to the subversion as she “took no notice of them even when they hit her”. The subversion, especially when it somehow “succeeds” in hitting the Duchess with the dishes thrown by the cook, symbolizes the endeavors in having a step closer to breaking the stratified social class system, yet this utopian glimpse of hope is blended with dystopian notions of violence. Thus, the construction of a fantasy realm showcases both utopian and dystopian notions, subverting the perfect traditional utopian ideals through the perspective of transformative utopianism.

Through the perspective of transformative utopianism, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House as critical utopias which showcase both utopian and dystopian motifs imply a new and possible world order, challenging the hegemonic Victorian society. In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, it says, “A transformative utopian vision will challenge hegemonic structures of political power and totalising ideologies by revealing the ways in which human needs and agency are restrained by existing institutional, social, and cultural arrangements” (16), highlighting how the Victorian hegemonic structures of its political power under the reign of Queen Victoria and the totalising ideologies in its respectability for social class, like the bourgeoisie distinguishing themselves from the working class, are challenged by portraying how the Victorian people “are restrained by existing institutional, social, and cultural arrangements”. As aforementioned, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House encompass both utopian and dystopian motifs which implies a new and possible world order under transformative utopianism. In a journal article called “Instantiating Critical Utopia” from *Utopian Studies*,

Lancaster says, “Utopia is no longer the construction of an ideal society but rather a tool for criticism in the present, rendering irrelevant its attainability. However, without some notion of attainability, utopian thought loses its transfigurative element (Benhabib 1986 389)” (112), suggesting that the achievement of a utopia is rendered irrelevant since it is “a tool for criticism in the present”, and the transformative or “transfigurative element” is crucial to provide some “notion of attainability”. Since Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House are not blueprints for society with its flawed imperfections stemmed from the reflections of Victorian society to provide a transformative possibility or attainability, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House are critical utopias. Continuing with Lancaster’s journal article, it says, “Drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson, Moylan argues that critical utopias are explicit attempts to challenge and undermine hegemonic structures of political power in a common quest for emancipation while retaining and emphasizing the dangers inherent in totalizing visions” (111), undermining hegemonic structures while “retaining and emphasizing the dangers” in “totalizing visions” as aforementioned. In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations*, it says, “critical utopias, ‘an emancipatory utopian imagination’ which breaks away from the restrictions of the traditional utopia while preserving these texts’ ability to challenge and resist dominant ideologies and social practices. In our critique of the transformative utopian potential in children’s texts, we consider to what extent the narratives resist ‘stasis and uniformity’ (Beauchamp, 1998, p. 223) and authoritarian systems of control” (4), revealing how critical utopias resist “stasis and uniformity” and “authoritarian systems of control” to a certain extent, while “retaining” traces of hegemonic structure without a total subversion as mentioned by Lancaster.

Continuing with the above, Carroll’s Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House are critical utopias which challenge the hegemonic Victorian society, providing alternatives of world order. When the Queen of Hearts sentences to behead Alice (67), the King of Hearts “laid his hand upon her arm, and timidly said ‘Consider, my dear: she is only a child!’” (68) and the Queen of Hearts “turned angrily away from him” (68) even though she accepts the King’s advice. Her fury towards the King reveals her power and dominance over the King. This is suggested again as the King has to carry out his commands upon the Queen’s approval on beheading the Cheshire-Cat, the King says, “My dear! I wish you would have this cat removed!” (71) and the Queen accepts it, “Off with his head!” (71). The Queen overthrows the King’s command in the courtroom scene, the King says, “Let the jury consider their verdict” (103) while the Queen retorts, “‘No, no!’ said the Queen. ‘Sentence first---verdict afterwards’” (103). Although the tyrannical rule which reflects Victorian rule is present in Wonderland, it reveals how dystopian notions are existent. However, as a critical utopia, Wonderland challenges the hegemonic Victorian society in terms of its patriarchal control. This could also be suggested in the Looking-Glass House, manifesting how the novels underlyingly shift away from being male-dominated. In the Looking-Glass House with the realm of chess, Alice tells the Red Queen frankly about how she loses her way, the Queen answers her, “I don’t know what you mean by *your* way” (132) and “all the ways about here belong to *me*” (132). Although the fact that “all the ways” “belong to *me*” is sensible in terms of the setting of a chessboard, the Queen can take steps in nearly all directions. It metaphorically symbolizes how femininity outpowers masculinity that is represented by the King, who has fewer steps available than the Queen in a chessboard setting. The authority of a Queen is further anchored with the presence of three Queens, namely the Red, White and Alice herself (207). Alice becomes Queen herself, “she put her hands up to something very heavy, that fitted tight all round her head...It was a golden crown” (206) and the two other Queens are sitting beside her, “the Red Queen and the White Queen sitting close to her” (207). This is further reinforced in Alice’s direct speech, “I don’t think it *ever* happened

before, that any one had to take care of two Queens asleep at once! No, not in all the History of England---it couldn't, you know, because there never was more than one Queen at a time" (213), portraying how the presence of three Queens, including Alice, is impossible in "all the History of England". Although Queen Victoria reigns during the era, her power as a monarch does not represent the suppressed women who are confined in their domestic spheres in private, "women lost touch with production, and came to fashion an identity solely within the domestic sphere. It was through their duties within the home that women were offered a moral duty, towards their families, especially their husbands, and towards society as a whole" (Abrams), revealing patriarchy as prevalent in Victorian society. However, as Alice becomes Queen in the novel, Alice represents the future generation of the Victorian society (225), which is further explained in the last paragraph of this section, hence Alice's identity as Queen symbolizes Victorian female empowerment since she will be a woman under Victorian society in the future. It thereby challenges patriarchy through the elevated status of a Queen over a King in the case of the Queen of Hearts, and Alice's uplifted status as Queen symbolizes female empowerment of Victorian women. Thus, how femininity outpowers masculinity portrays an alternative world order which challenges the hegemonic Victorian society of patriarchy.

Adding on, men wield less hierarchical powers than women in the depictions of the Kings and Queens, rebelling against the regnant Victorian society with its critical utopias. In the Looking-Glass House, the fight between the Unicorn and the Lion unveils how the King's status is debased, "'Come, fetch out the plum-cake, old man!' the Unicorn went on, turning from her to the King. 'None of your brown bread for me!' 'Certainly---certainly!' the King muttered, and beckoned to Haigha" (189-190). The King's obsequious attitude portrays how patriarchy is somehow absent in the fantasy realm, overthrowing Victorian patriarchal dominion. Also, Alice encounters the White Knight who constantly falls, "the Knight fell heavily on the top of his head exactly in the path where Alice was walking" (198), "instantly rolled out of the saddle, and fell headlong into a deep ditch" (200) and Alice says, "There he goes! Right on his head as usual!" (205). The incessant falling of the White Knight may figuratively symbolize how the domineering Victorian masculinity should "fall" or collapse and be subverted "headlong", which contrasts to how Alice travels and arrives at the eighth square without stumbling and becoming Queen (206). Thus, the novels may well challenge the hegemonic Victorian society of its patriarchy and suggest an empowerment in femininity.

Alongside the above, through Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory⁶, Carroll portrays the world order of "transformative utopianism" as applicable to Victorian society by applying it to Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House as attempts or epitomes, implying the propensity for social change. As aforementioned, through Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, Carroll's novels suggest a suspension and subversion of Victorian societal conventions, yet it also manifests a subversion of power structures in terms of voice and authority. In Carroll's novels, it subverts the allegedly monologic voices of the characters who represent the aristocracy and the upper-class as these characters along with the novels become dialogic⁷, propelling a polyphonic⁸ subversion in voices. Consequently, the single monologic voice of authority is subverted and replaced by the dialogic voices, which is usually external dialogism⁹ between the characters as internal dialogism within characters, like Alice, reveals internal subjugation of authority. Dialogism and polyphony in the novels become a carnival

⁶ Refer to the first paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas" on Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory.

⁷ Refer to the fifth paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas" on Bakhtin's dialogism.

⁸ Refer to the fourth paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas" on Bakhtin's polyphony.

⁹ Refer to the fifth paragraph under "Mikhail Bakhtin's Ideas" on Bakhtin's dialogism.

itself as it subverts the tyranny of a singular and monolithic voice or meaning, manifesting the carnivalesque by destabilizing the authoritative voice with collective voices. In Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, dialogism is defined, "Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole— there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue" (426). The literary nonsense indicated in the Jabberwocky (124-6) from the Looking-Glass House is a "constant interaction between meanings", since the relative semantics of newly coined words like "slithy" stems its meaning from "lithe and slimy" (177), which such absurdity illustrates a sense of primitivity, "the pre-existence of the language world". The external dialogue between characters themselves, and in this case, Humpty Dumpty explaining his understanding of words to Alice is a subversion of the authoritative and conventional definition and understanding of words from Victorian literature and language, since a layman of language like Humpty Dumpty can subvert traditional Victorian semantics with his own understanding. The celebration of literary nonsense subverts not only the Victorian English language, but also reverses the authoritative power of who could define language, revealing how language is universal and suspending the seriousness of Victorian conventions. This thereby shapes a carnivalesque created by the dialogic voices of characters, subverting the monologic authority of language in this case.

The monologic voice of Victorian authority or monarchy is also subverted by external dialogic or even polyphonic voices, forming a carnivalesque. When the Queen of Hearts wants to behead Alice (67), Alice "loudly and decidedly" (67) says "Nonsense!" (67), it portrays external dialogic voices of Alice subverting the Queen's arbitrary judgement. The Queen commands to behead the unfortunate gardeners who are painting a mistakenly put white rose-tree into a red one, and Alice valiantly says, "You shan't be beheaded!" (68), subverting the monologic Victorian authority which is depicted as tyrannical. The absurdity of painting a white rose-tree into a red one (66) conveys a subversion of logic and rationality, especially when this provokes the laughter among readers. Also, this act of deceiving the Queen suggests a sense of mischievousness, which correlates with the spirit of the carnivalesque in suspending reality and seriousness. Another subversion in power dynamics is illustrated in Alice's reprimand for the Queen of having the sentence preceding the verdict, Alice says, "Stuff and nonsense!" (103), she overthrows authority of judgement in the courtroom. The arbitrariness of the Queen's judgement (103), which is set in stone, and the compliant response from the other characters portray the voice of authority as monologic. The external dialogism between Alice and the Queen portrays a subversion of monolithic power structures in terms of Alice's defiant speech, but also reveals a carnivalesque by conveying the absurdity of a trial or proceeding held by a pack of cards as Alice says, "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (103). Subversion may not always be polyphonic, since Carroll may utilize Alice as a mouthpiece to suggest that subversion is possible through the perspective of "transformative utopianism", and that the subversion may be categorized under heteroglossia. However, Alice may also be viewed as a character independent from Carroll's authorial intentions, her pent-up emotions eventually bursting forth after being retorted by myriads of characters in Wonderland, be it coerced to give prizes in the Caucus-race (23), the impudence from the caterpillar (37) or the Queen's stifling and threatening presence (71). Alice's subversion can hence be interpreted as polyphonic, granting validity to her own individual voice (Emerson, par. 15). Towards the end of Carroll's sequel, at the banquet, Alice slices up the pudding and faces its confrontation, the pudding bursts into fury, "What

impertinence!” (217) and “I wonder how you’d like it, if I were to cut a slice out of *you*, you creature!” (217). The pudding has its own voice which portrays polyphony in a humorous way, subverting Alice’s status as a Queen. Regardless of how subversion is portrayed, be it dialogism or polyphony, the notion of subversion conveys how power dynamics are destabilized and thereby manifests Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. This illustrates how a new world order of “transformative utopianism” and its destabilization of power are applied to the fantasy realms, manifesting how subjugation towards authority is not necessarily mandatory. This serves as epitomes for Victorian society and implies the propensity for social change.

Since Carroll’s novels imply the possibility for social change, Carroll persuades the Victorian readers with his authorial intentions through Bakhtin’s heteroglossia¹⁰, having a dialogue with the Victorian people to stimulate social change in the era. In Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, it says, “Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia” (426), acknowledging the authorial voice, stance or intentions. Continuing with Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, it says, “Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions” (324). This suggests how characters’ speech and thoughts are deployed to portray authorial intentions, constituting a “double-voiced discourse”. Although Carroll uses dialogism and polyphony to subvert the monologic voice of authority, Carroll utilizes his characters to portray his authorial stance and intentions. For instance, in the sequel, the books are upturned and reversed in the Looking-Glass House, Alice says, “the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way: I know *that*, because I’ve held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other room” (119), portraying how books belonging to Victorian reality are upturned in the fantasy realm which allows room for creativity and new world orders. This may suggest Carroll’s authorial intentions of seeking subversion of Victorian reality through the fantasy realm. Humpty Dumpty makes a comment on Alice, “you’re so exactly like other people” (181), manifesting Carroll’s thoughts of how Alice as a Victorian-bred child loses her individuality under public education, which produces carbon copies of unimaginative children. At the end of the sequel, Alice says, “You see, Kitty, it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course---but then I was part of his dream, too!” (225). It portrays not only the monarchy represented by the Red King who is part of the dream of a child, since Alice is heavily influenced by the Victorian institution, but also how children are part of the Victorian dream in terms of being the future pillars and generations. Carroll thereby suggests the Red King or the monarchy itself as a social dream or ideology in “He was part of my dream”, since Alice the child is also part of the Victorian dream as conveyed in “part of his[the Red King’s] dream”. Considering that the Victorian monarchy or institution also fabricates a dream of the next generation as suggested in the Red King dreaming of Alice, Carroll somehow passes the message of “transformative utopianism” which manifests how Victorian society should envision new possible world orders that improve current ones. In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, it says, “For utopianism incorporates what Lyman Tower Sargent refers to as ‘social dreaming’, the complex of ‘dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live’ (1994, p. 3)...it shapes visions for improved world

¹⁰ Refer to the third paragraph under “Mikhail Bakhtin’s Ideas” on Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.

orders" (2), encouraging the Victorian readers to "envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" and propelling social change in the Victorian era. Thus, through Carroll's use of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Carroll conveys his authorial intentions to stimulate social change in Victorian society through having a dialogue with the Victorian readers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that through the perspective of "transformative utopianism", Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* illustrate how the construction of a fantasy realm which indicates both utopian and dystopian notions overthrows traditional utopian ideals and unveils itself as a critical utopia, challenging regnant Victorian structures and institutions. Through Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other language theories, namely heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism, Carroll suggests how the world order of "transformative utopianism" is applicable to Victorian society by applying it to the fantasy realm as an attempt, having a dialogue with the Victorian readers and persuading them with his authorial intentions, which underscores the propensity of social change within the Victorian era.

Since "transformative utopianism" envisions a new world order for the Victorian society, Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other language theories make social change possible in the literary realm of fantasy. Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory makes subversion of tyrannical rule and authority come true in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House with the suspension of reality and destabilization of structures, and oftentimes in humorous absurdity to express the "carnavalesque" or the carnival atmosphere. It thereby lightens the sober critique against the Victorian society. Considering that Carroll is in dialogue with the Victorian readers through conveying his authorial intentions, he manifests the need for social change by displaying the dystopian notions in a fantasy realm, which its critical utopia negates the existence of a utopia that the Victorian society aims to create. This thereby reveals how Bakhtin's theories serve as a commentary on Victorian society. Also, Carroll uses heteroglossia to refract his authorial intentions of implying the possibility of social change in Victorian times onto various characters, including the child protagonist Alice, yet bestows them "free will" at times to give characters authority in their polyphonic voices, portraying a sense of liberation that Victorian society is in lack of. The monologic voice of authority is oftentimes imposed onto the Victorian people, who adhere to the conventions established. However, Carroll challenges the monologic authoritative voice through granting validity to all voices in his use of polyphony, which he as an author does not deploy his dictatorial power by making his novel monologic. He makes his novel dialogic, be it internal or external within the novel, and is also in dialogue with his readers. Carroll himself as an author serves as an epitome for the Victorian society of not unifying all characters' voices into his, but allowing "free will" in polyphony, critiquing the monologic voice of the Victorian authoritative regime.

Notwithstanding, Bakhtin's carnivalesque could only be found in literature. Since Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory suggests a destabilization of structures, it is only temporary. It only serves as a stimulus to provoke Victorian readers to think whether subjugation to authority is necessary, since a temporary suspension of order is not a permanent resolution to the long-term suppression of Victorian authority. A utopia, meaning non-place called "ou-topia" and a good or ideal place called "eu-topia", is non-existent, and that a carnivalesque brings us no closer to a more utopian vision with its anarchic spirit but only serves as a possibility for subversion. "Transformative utopianism" is henceforth deployed to bestow a

sense of hope for society's vision of the future, which all societies can be part of the transformation in the now and change is not a far-distant hope. Societies that claim themselves as utopias are only deceptions, they are dystopian, nonetheless. Thus, Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his other language theories challenge the existing ways of world order, suggesting the propensity of social change among the Victorian people in their era.

Reflection 2

This capstone project has availed me of the opportunity to hone my essay writing skills and consolidate what I have learnt from my undergraduate studies. As I am planning to embark on a career of being a secondary school teacher, a teacher of both the English language and hopefully, English Literature as well, this Literature project is highly relevant to my future career pathway in terms of honing my research skills in literary concepts and scholarly texts, my essay writing skills in connecting concepts together into an arguable thesis, and my analysis skills in close reading. As an enthusiast of Literature, this project also bestows me an opportunity to indulge in what I am passionate about, since I enjoyed the research and writing process very much. This project broadens my horizons in terms of learning new literary theories and concepts which I have not encountered in the courses that I have taken. It thereby allows me to gain experience for my future career path as a secondary school teacher, since I want to teach both the English language and English Literature, and that I would be able to use my experience to teach my students to always dig deeper than the obvious through different perspectives, theories or even schools of criticism. By having such invaluable experience of writing an extended essay as such, I would be able to share with my students the joy of analyzing and writing when one falls in love with Literature, and that one could truly be passionate about it. As an enthusiast of reading, I am fortunate that I could study Literature since I was in secondary school. I am an introvert, and being rather timid usually hinders my expression of inner thoughts and emotions. Reading poetry, prose, novels and various literary texts comforts me immensely as the literary texts often successfully channel my suppressed emotions into expression, and I often feel being heard. I am thankful that I was taught and inspired by my English Literature teachers back in secondary school, and that they further strengthened my ambition of being a teacher, being as successful as they are in making their students love the subject.

In Carroll's fascinating texts of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, the child protagonist, Alice is an interesting character who is both a student and a teacher in the novels. On one hand, Alice is a student in both realms, the Victorian reality and the fantasy realms. Her Victorian student identity is indicated, "Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the school-room" (8), "I've been to a day-school, too" (80) and "we learned French and music" (80), "Alice...worked the sum for him[Humpty Dumpty]" (175), learning traditional academic subjects under Victorian's public education system. She is also a student in the fantasy realms of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass House. In Wonderland, she shares a nursery rhyme, yet she has not said it right, she admits it to the Caterpillar, "some of the words have got altered" (41). In the Looking-Glass House, despite the absurd and arbitrary corrections raised by the Knight, Alice complies to the Knight, "Alice corrected herself" (202). Alice as a student figure in both reality and fantasy suggests that all of us are forever students to the boundless world of knowledge, even if we do have some knowledge like Alice has in Victorian reality, she appears to be helpless under the new world order in the fantasy realm. It suggests that we are forever like Alice, who would be able to capture some knowledge from certain aspects or fields yet would not be fully known to all fields of knowledge, we should always be able to "correct" and "alter" ourselves in a humble manner, remaining curious like a child to all knowledge. Alice is also a

teacher figure who teaches readers to retain our independent thinking towards general compliance, she subverts nonsensical judgement of the Queen in the courtroom in Wonderland, “Who cares for you?” (103) while others comply in obedience to the King and Queen. She subverts authority again in the Looking-Glass House, “I can’t stand this any longer!” (220). Her subversion in both novels prompts readers to think independently before we blindly succumb to authority and abide by its instructions, be it in Victorian society or nowadays. A child protagonist who has wit and valor further encourages us readers to have the courage and bravery like a child, standing up against unfairness and iniquity. As we grow older, our audacity in standing out against arbitrary authority and judgement dwindles as we are more aware of the consequences that we may face. However, we as readers are encouraged to subvert what is unfair and stand up for our rights and justice. Thus, Alice teaches me humility as both a teacher in the future and my enduring identity as a student since human knowledge is limited, and that we readers should all be fearless of suppressive control.

I also encountered some challenges when I was working through this capstone project. Since this capstone project comprises different perspectives like “transformative utopianism”, Bakhtinian concepts like the carnivalesque, heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism, I struggled to bridge them together to make an arguable thesis. Given that these concepts are distinctive on their own, it was a bit difficult to embed these concepts into the arguments in the main body of the paper and make the arguments flow smoothly from one to another. Although I learnt some basic concepts and definitions regarding Bakhtin’s carnivalesque theory before, it was only foundational towards this large-scale capstone project. I had to learn from scratch on the Bakhtinian concepts and the perspective of “transformative utopianism”. At first, I found it strenuous to make the definitions of the Bakhtinian concepts lucid to myself, since the scholarly texts were abstruse. In the scholarly texts written by Bakhtin that I have read for this project, Bakhtin constantly switches perspectives in introducing a concept, theory or a genre, namely the author’s opinion on his or her work cited by Bakhtin, how the readers and Bakhtin himself view the cited text, and the general, factual or objective point of view towards the text Bakhtin cites. When the three perspectives interweave in a paragraph, it becomes difficult to understand and decipher whether it is the readers’, Bakhtin’s, the author’s or a factual point of view. However, this style of writing correlates to Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony, which Bakhtin introduces various perspectives and opinions when explicating concepts, theories or new genres of other literary texts analyzed, making his analysis more prolific and complicated at the same time. It was also laborious when it came to close reading, digging out all the examples from the text and making them fit for the Bakhtinian concepts and perspectives used. However, it is truly these challenges that hone my research and essay writing skills, which I believe will be proven useful for my future career as a teacher.

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Ebb & Flow: an Experimental Short Story Cycle

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Introduction

In *Dubliners*, James Joyce contends that a person's stages of life should be divided into four different categories, namely: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life. Yet, in which moment can one exactly pinpoint the shifts from one stage to another stage? My creative work *Ebb & Flow* explores the mutability and fragmentality of life through deconstructing life into individual incidents in an attempt to diminish its linearity. *Ebb & Flow*, an experimental short story cycle, maps life from the protagonist's childhood innocence to the sobering mundane realities of adulthood. Each story is written with a deliberate stylistic choice, incorporating a variety of forms and literary techniques to echo with the individual story's themes. This stylistic experimentation is not just decorative but structural. Each story's form is chosen to mirror the protagonist's cognitive and emotional state at the developmental stage, while the cycle's fragmentary structure reflects the non-linear nature of grief and growth.

Garrete Stewart argues that "style is the material objectification in words of [...] subject matter", referring to the materialisation of themes through styles (Stewart 1). Thereby arguing that styles should be regarded as "a matter of literary ways and means", a functional meaning-generating aspect of narrative which works the same as any literary device, instead of mere "signature effect" that signals to the readers the author of the creative work (Stewart 4). With the premise of style as literary means, it is concluded that forms and styles are inherently inseparable from the story's subject matter. Therefore, each short story in the cycle should be read with a pre-understanding that its form and style are equally as important as the story's themes, and serve as a literary means to deliver the story's motifs. The formal choices I make

are the rudimentary vehicle through which the cycle's central themes, pain, grief, and the construction of self, are rendered.

Ebb & Flow consists of two completed short stories, focusing on the journey of one particular protagonist who lost her mother at the age of six, with each story representing an incident during a stage of life, including childhood, adolescence, and maturity. Future stories are planned to continue this formal experimentation and explore the development of the protagonist. Throughout the short story cycle, water serves as a large motif in my work. Reminiscent to how water takes different shapes and forms, my stories differ in styles and forms to deliver distinct themes.

For the first story, "Whistling Wind", I incorporated a child narrator and fantastical elements to portray how a child's imagined reality shapes their cognitive recognition of truth. It is not merely escapist, but acts as a mode of meaning-making when confronted with adult deception and loss. With inspiration from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Nighttimes*, the journey of a child who had just lost her mother is told.

For the second story, "Ripples", I opted for the form of a play script. The dramatic nature of play scripts allows staging of the divided self that a normal first-person narration cannot provide. In the script, the main character interacts with her inner persona, her reflection, and in the end reconciles with her inner hatred of her current self. Through the dramatic duologue, the constant self-doubt, teenage angst, and the inherent dramatic nature of teenage years are expressed and magnified. With regards to the theory of double in literature, and contemporary examples, a manifestation of inner conflict is presented.

Short Story Cycle

Instead of other forms of writing, I opted for a short story cycle as the overarching structure for its simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence, and fragmentary nature. There are many other forms of creative writing, but most lack the defining characteristic found only in short story cycles— self-sustainability and interrelatedness. Short story cycles are distinctively different from short story collections, while the latter one may simply be collections of short stories, the former one warrants the conscious effort of writers to weave the stories together to deliver a single overarching theme. In *The Short Story Cycle*, Mann defines the short story cycle as a collection of short stories in which the narratives are specifically composed and arranged, aiming to create different enhanced experiences when reading the group as a whole as opposed to its individual parts (Mann 12). Barth wrote in the preface of his short story cycle *Lost in the Funhouse* that the book is “neither a collection nor a selection, but a series [...] meant to be received ‘all at once and as here arranged’” (Barth ix). The stories inside a cycle are independent in terms of story completeness yet inseparable from one another in constructing a narrative. Take Joyce’s *Dubliners* for an instance, it is not feasible to convey the overarching theme of the constant growing pervasive sense of paralysis, that is the sense of entrapment due to characters’ inability to escape their constraints, through a single narrative. Only through a series of different examples can such expansiveness be captured. In “Eveline”, the main character by the same name is shackled by senses of stagnation in her life, forfeiting a possible bright future when she inevitably retreats into familiarity and suspends herself between her past and the call of new experiences. Mr. Doran in “The Boarding House” is paralysed by guilt and fear of scandal, which ultimately drives him to succumb to the weight of social expectations. Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud” embodies that banal paralysis of being trapped by domestic obligations and fear of failure, which shackles him from his pursuit of artistic ambition. In order to portray the overwhelming paralytic characteristic of the city of Dublin, James Joyce builds each narrative upon another, creating a cumulative effect that

intensifies entrapment as a theme. Each story acts as a layer of stagnation that not only is the theme conveyed, but the readers also feel trapped alongside the characters.

This characteristic of the short story cycle is reminiscent of how life manoeuvres, at the same time each story is separated yet together forms a complete and different story. Life is at the same time fragmented yet interconnected. While one may be able to distinguish and examine how each incident of their life influences their decisions, it is the culmination of all these incidents that makes up a person's sense of self, analogous to how a complete short story cycle constitutes different feelings than an individual short story inside the cycle. Through a series of interconnected, self-sustained yet interdependent stories, I aim to convey the unique sense of connected fragmentedness of life, exploring the overarching themes of pain and change in the cycle; using the multiple stories to accumulate a sense of underlying pain.

Aside from the cycle's self-sustainability and interdependence, its fragmentary nature is another characteristic that propelled me to choose the format. Each short story can be regarded as a piece of fragment that in the end piece together a complete narrative, often of a character or a society. In the case of my short story cycle, the stories become fragments of the protagonist P's life. Each story represents an incident during a stage of her life, covering childhood, adolescence, and maturity. This hence provides daring gaps and stylistic ruptures inside the cycle, creating a "sense of isolation" that is a dominant theme in many cycles, including mine where the protagonist is first isolated from her family, then herself, and finally, the society (which can be further explored in future stories due to scope limit) (Mann 12).

Along with "the sense of isolation" arising from the independence of each story, "the gap that exists between stories in cycles [... also] emphasise the fragmented nature of life", referring to the segmented life of most people (Mann 12). While life seems lateral and linear, a short story cycle segregates each stage of life and diminishes life's linearity. This tension of fragmentedness of growth which emphasises the discontinuous experience of growing up is

often explored in Bildungsroman. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce develops the prose style according to the maturation of the protagonist Stephen Daedalus, demonstrating the incoherent sense of adolescence where one may behave completely differently when compared to their yesterday's self. Opposed to Joyce's single narrative, my cycle incorporates multiple narratives of different forms and styles to realise the same sense of fragmentation and mutability in the physical form of multiple stories of different forms, exploring memory, identity, and grief after loss. The jumps and gaps between stories, the spaces the readers must infer, becomes necessary to constitute and emulate the experience of growing up.

Story 1: “Whistling Wind”

I hate the wind. My mum always smiles at the whistling wind. The wind doesn't talk, it whistles, she says. I don't understand what she meant. I know the wind blows and I can feel it. But the wind doesn't speak. It has no mouths. Every night when the wind comes, I'd curl up with thick woollen clothes on and lay on mum's chest. Her chest would rise and fall and it sounded like the waves beating the sand. She would twirl my ringlet with her slim bony finger while I slept. The doors were closed but the wind would still creep in and our doors would rattle and creak. I don't like that sound. They are the sounds that tell me when mum would leave for another adventure in the morning, leaving me home.

My mum is an adventurer. Every day she goes on an adventure to fight monsters. Once she slain a giant kraken. The gloomy weather that day told her something was wrong. A kraken suddenly flung its thick slimy tentacles onto mum's ship like slabs of meat. It was trying to bring the ship down for a big meal, but it underestimated mummy's fierce bravery. She raised her sword and as she yelled, all her crew members charged with her. And like meat on a chopping board, the kraken's tentacles were cut into pieces. Then, mummy and her crew turned from prey into predator, tearing at the kraken's meat. She said it tasted like salmon, instead of octopus. How weird? Then, I cried for two hours when I realised she didn't bring any home for me. Another time, she came face to face with a giant whale. It was night at the time, the sea was at peace. The moon hung high above the sea. Waves were like silver pieces. Then, the sea surface broke. Water started pouring into a weird big hole. It was a giant whale, so big that the ship was on its back the whole time. The silver shards? Its spots. I begged her to tell me how she had escaped, but she said she was tired and went to sleep. Maybe the whale didn't even notice the teeny tiny ship on its ginormous back? Oh, and that one time when mum saw a sea dragon! It was not just any sea dragon. It was one that could breathe cyclones. Imagine that!

Cyclones! Her crew told her to leave it but I know mum would never. She always fights her hardest and she never loses.

But still the wind beat her.

She was on her way to the treasure island when suddenly a rainstorm came, and her ship was down.

Once my mum brought me out in a rainstorm. We climbed the wooden fence and stood clinging to it. The rough wet wood chafed my palms as I held on tight. I could feel my legs shaking as I tried to balance on the narrow wood. She told me to close my eyes and listen to the wind's whistle.

"Listen. They are whistling." The wind was so strong, she had to yell.

I closed my eyes and let the rain wash my face. I could feel the harsh wind brushing my cheeks. I tried to listen to the whistle, but all I could imagine was how bad the fall would be if I was blown off by the wind.

"Can you hear their happy whistle? They are carrying us to a faraway land, the treasure island!" She smiled.

I turned to face mum and fought to open my eyes. I could feel my eyelashes tugged down by the rain. Through the slits, I saw her brown hair swaying with the wind. She must be a sylph, the spirit of wind and air. I saw sylphs on the TV and they hid among us as normal people.

"Follow me! Let go of your hands!" she yelled and gently pried open my grasp behind my back, lifting my arms by my side.

It was like I was weighed down by the wind, I could barely move. Mum was talking to me, but my heart was strumming loud. Then, her warmth came through. I felt mum's hug.

"We are flying!" I yelled.

I could feel the wind carrying us to a dream land far far away.

Maybe it can carry me to mummy, to the treasure island where her ship disappeared.

I know mum is on the treasure island. I asked dad. He told me mummy was in a dreamland far far away.

“The treasure island?” I asked.

“Yes, the treasure island,” he smiled, like how mummy smiled at the whistling wind.

“Where is the treasure island, daddy?”

“Across the sea where the sun goes down,” he said and pointed to the falling sun.

And that is why I am building a ship. I know I cannot swim that far. I still remember that time when I was chasing a mermaid and almost drowned. I was in the middle of the sea and there was nobody near me. How would mum and dad react when they know I almost drowned *and* lost the mermaid? I was paddling in the water for a really long time. My legs were tired and my arms were weak. Suddenly, the waves brought me back to the coast. Now I think about it, it must be mum. She’s a sylph and she commanded the wind to guide me back.

I am going to build a ship and find the treasure island, where she will be waiting for me to bring her home. She can’t just order the wind to send her back. How can she travel so far without any food to power her magic? Besides, she doesn’t even have a ship, because it broke. I will be the hero and then she will tell me all about the monsters she defeated on our way home, and I will tell her how I travelled all the way to find her. She will then praise me for being a good kid and never go away again.

I haven’t told anyone my secret mission. Once when I was drawing the ship’s design, dad almost saw me. But I think he doesn’t understand what I’m doing anyway. He’s always looking out at the window. He doesn’t even notice how much I have grown. My toes are always trying to break free from my shoes. My long-sleeved shirt now looks more like a mid-sleeved shirt. My wish has worked. But daddy doesn’t know. If he’s not going to find mummy, I will. I will bring her back and daddy will notice me again.

“I am telling you about my mission only, Teddy. Promise me you will never tell my secret to anyone!”

I don't have to worry because Teddy never speaks, but I guess he's just shy. His face is always boiling red, just like mum's after she went home from her adventures. Once I tried to snip her hair to stick behind my necklace, because we watched a film together and the mum in the film has a locket, and inside is her daughter's hair. I remember my mum crying to that movie. Maybe she likes the daughter with long hair better? Maybe she wants a necklace too. But even with my arms fully stretched, I still couldn't reach her head. But I still got her hair in the end because I saw a fairy at night snipping her hair off. They are quick and small. The next morning, before I could catch the fairy, they disappeared. I know Teddy saw them too but he never speaks. But they left mummy's hair on her pillow for my necklace.

I have already gathered some tree barks from the park and paper boxes from around the house. Daddy said the things inside the basement aren't needed anymore, so I searched through it. But those things are not useful at all. I can see why he would throw them away. Some books, some dresses, some powder stuff mummy always put on her face, something that smells like mummy after she went back from her adventures. There is nothing useful for my ship but they remind me of mummy. In the end I found a large cloth and I am going to make my flag with it.

I now have six large tree barks, four giant boxes, some tapes, and one large white cloth. That should be enough for a ship. I'm going to find mum alone. Dad can't know because he will be mad. I pick up the scissors to cut apart the cardboard box. The cutting noise is very loud. *Snip snip*. Dad may even be as mad as the time he argued with mum. The wind was blowing outside that night too. He came into my room and took mum with him. The wind pushed open the door he forgot to close. He's a silly man. We all know to close the door behind us. I heard them saying things out loud. Their shadows cast over the wobbling window. They were so loud, I could hardly sleep.

“Don’t stop fighting. Think of P, think of me. Think of *us*.”

Dad’s voice was coarse like a moocow. Mum didn’t reply. Only the wind beat the window, trying to break in. The wind was very loud.

I have cut the cardboards. And now, it’s time to piece them together with tapes. It’s surprisingly hard to tear apart the tapes, but when mum does it, it seems so easy. I would go to dad for help but he’s always staring at the window after mummy’s ship disappeared. What did dad mean anyway? Fight what? The monsters? How selfish is dad to ask mum to continue fighting? I wanted mum to fight too, but if she was tired, then I’d rather she just stay home. She once told me how tired she was after each adventure. She told me that she had met a sea witch and the wicked witch put a magic spell on her, that she would get cold when it was summer; and would never get warm when it was winter. She sweated so much that few days even though the wind was blowing a lot.

Mummy should have stayed at home. I don’t want her to see the witch or go on fighting monsters anymore. I could hear her weeping outside the room. Their shadows became one. I have never heard dad so angry before, not even when I knocked mum over when I ran towards her that one time. I was growing crazily fast like I had wished. I was growing so tall and so strong, I could touch mum’s head easily. She was wearing a thick wool hat even though it was hot inside because the witch’s spell was still working.

I have taped the cardboards together, and the only thing missing now is the flag. Maybe a rainbow, that seems a good sign for my ship. Daddy once said on the phone to someone that something hits something like a storm. It must be mum’s ship. I know rainbows always come after a rainstorm, that way, my ship will be like the rainbow that shows up and leads mummy home. My ship is finished.

I sneak out and run to the beach down the road, dragging my boat behind. I have brought everything that reminds me of mum with me, my necklace, her dress, and a jar of wind. Daddy

probably won't even notice until I come home and surprise him with mummy with me. I can't wait to see his surprised face. He hates when I say it but he always looks like a monkey.

The sea is quiet and the sun is going down. I can feel the wind gently blowing.

"Go! Move!" I yell as I slide the ship down the rough sand into the water. My ship is now half in the sea. I try to use my hand to bring us forward but we are not moving. I can see the sun is almost touching the sea. I have to hurry otherwise I will be lost without the sun.

"Come on, wind! Come one! Help me find her! Mum!"

I look at the grey sky above me and pray to the god of wind. The sky is dull and no wind comes. Everything is still.

Liar.

I thought you said the wind whistles. There's no sound at all. I turn and look at my ship. The cardboard is now wet and mushy. I am never going to the treasure island. I can feel my eyes getting wet, and my chest getting sore. I want my mum and dad back. I want everything to go back to normal. Suddenly, the waves become bigger and bigger, like the sound of mum's chest. The sea must have heard me. I can hear something rattles. The ship is moving! I feel something brush against my cheek and whisper in my ear. It's the wind! I can hear whistles as the wind carries my ship out to the sea. And we ride with the wind as it takes us to the dreamland far far away. Mummy, are you still smiling at the whistling wind?

Story 1 Analysis

In the first short story “Whistling Wind”, through the perspective of a child narrator, a story of childhood innocence and loss are told. The six-year-old protagonist and narrator P is unaware of her mother’s death due to cancer. P is deprived of the right to know the truth, instead, she is told of great adventures where her mother disappears during her journey to Treasure Island. The story unfolds as readers follow the limited first person perspective of P as she builds a ship in an attempt to save her mother. In order to portray the innocence of the childhood stage, I have utilised a range of stylistic features. Taking the form of a straightforward short story, it may appear ordinary at first glance, yet with simple child-like syntax, a child focaliser, and children’s fantasy, a story of how fantasy shapes a child’s recognition of truth is told.

In *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, James Joyce details the growth of Stephen Daedalus, an Irish boy, in Dublin. As a classic example of bildungsroman, the semi-autobiographical narrative captures Stephen’s journey from childhood to adulthood, venturing into his relationships with religion, family expectations, and artistic pursuit. Throughout the first chapter of the book, Joyce constantly employs simple syntax. The opening scene of the book starts with the famous line “[O]nce upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down the road met a nice little boy named baby tuckoo” (Joyce 1). In this single opening, childish expressions, monosyllabic words and unnecessary repetition are used. These linguistic features throughout the chapter are employed to strengthen the uncertainty, and fear seen in the child protagonist, while acting as the child focaliser’s means of dealing with unpleasant situations. In other words, the language is specifically manipulated to render the consciousness of the young Stephen Daedalus.

Inspired by Joyce, I have incorporated the same linguistic features in my work. When describing the adventures her mother had been on, the six-year-old protagonist narrates in short phrases: “The moon hung above the sea. Waves were like silver pieces. Then, the sea surface broke. Water poured into a weird big hole. It was a giant whale” (Story 1, para 2). These simple short sentences capture the mental status of the child protagonist, while the sensory-specific language such as the visual simile reflects the way a child renders the world through senses, instead of acquired facts. The readers are able to experience the world through my protagonist’s linguistic ability, creating an immediacy between the narrator and the readers.

Besides using childlike language to imitate the cognitive recognition of the child protagonist P, in order to emphasise the disparity between childhood innocence and adult deception, P is designed to be the narrator. Child narrators are often used to offer an unbiased pure view of the world, as they describe happenings according to how they perceive it. However, since how a person may experience an incident is subjective and unique, child narrators are also said to be unreliable narrators, who may misunderstand, misinterpret, or be shielded from the truth of the situations. This “gap between what is said and what is understood [by the adult readers] enhances [...] the poignancy or the humour [of the text]”, creating powerful irony (Racker 149). This technique is seen in the book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, another book that inspired me to write the short story. In this book, the readers follow the perspective of a child focaliser, Christopher, who is described to have “some behavioural difficulties”, hinting at his neurodevelopmental disorder (Haddon 21). The readers follow Christopher’s view on the world as he investigates the death of his neighbour Mrs. Shears’ dog. During which, readers are able to infer a romantic relationship between Christopher’s father and Mrs. Shears when Christopher cannot. For example when Mrs. Shears cooks for Christopher and his father, it is misinterpreted by Christopher that Mrs. Shears only cooks for them “because she [doesn’t] have to cook for Mr. Shears anymore” (Haddon 20).

Evidence such as Mrs. Shears staying overnight at their house is dismissed by Christopher's father with excuses such as Mrs. Shears' lack of companionship (Haddon 20). These patterns of daily care are evidence that implies a level of intimacy beyond neighbourly kindness, yet they escaped the child focaliser. The cognitive disparity between the said and the inferred highlights the theme of childhood innocence, as in the case of Christopher.

While in my story, I have utilised this cognitive gap between the narrated and the inferred, to emphasise the theme of child naivety and adult deception. The fact of P's mother's demise can be deduced by the adult readers from the way her father hesitantly responds to P's naive questioning of her mother's location. When being asked, P's father tells a white lie of her being "far far away" and allows P to mistakenly assume she is in Treasure Island. While P is unable to recognise the truth behind his response, the readers can infer the actual reality. Another example is when P and her mother watch a movie together, her mother suddenly collapses emotionally after seeing a movie character cry at her locket with her daughter's hair inside. While P mistakes this as her mother's desire for a locket, readers may be able to deduce the reason to be her love for P and her imminent death. Finally, the most apparent deception throughout the story is the premise of the last stylistic feature in the story—the fantastical adventures of P's mother.

Children's fantasy is a major theme in the story and it acts as a psychological tool. In the story, P is told of great adventures her mother went on, meeting Krakens, giant whales, witches, and going to Treasure Island. All of her understanding of fantastical elements stem from the simple white lie her mother told her: she went on adventures. Rather than apprising her daughter the truth of her adventures—chemotherapy, P's mother fabricates a fantasy for her daughter. This deception imperceptibly influences P's belief in fantasy, where she sees fairies, and believes her mother to be a wind spirit who goes on an adventure to Treasure Island. To a large extent, P's fantasy is her understanding of her mother's disappearance. Instead of

emotional escape where the narrator chooses to believe in fantasies, P's fantasy is her reality, showing her cognitive consciousness and psychology. In *The House on the Mango Street*, a short story cycle written by Sandra Cisneros, the child narrator imagines the trees outside her house as her companions, recognising the trees to be "the only ones who understand [her]" (110). The child narrator gains sense of acknowledgement from traits of the skinny trees which she identifies with, such as their "skinny necks and pointy elbows", and their unyieldingness as they "grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger" (Cisneros 110). As an immigrant in the U.S., the protagonist consciously opts for fantasy and imaginations to escape the harsh realities of immigration, poverty, and isolation. At the age of twelve, the protagonist is able to distinguish reality from fantasy, yet she utilises fantasy as a coping mechanism, regulating her feelings by identifying with trees and indulging in her fantasy. Cisneros' work acts as a predecessor of using fantasy to show children's cognitive consciousness and psychology. This technique allows me to portray the themes of children's innocence, adult deception, and loss.

Story 2: "Ripples"

INT. STEAMY BATHROOM 3AM

Clothes scattered everywhere. Mini-skirt that stops above butt cheeks, tube top that squeezes breasts, lace-up boots with a three-inch platform, old yellowing bra and underwear. The light is flickering and the water keeps running out from the bath tap. Alone, P looks at her half-submerged naked body.

P'

Whore!

P

(She stares in front of her)

No, I'm not.

P'

(smirks)

Yes, you are. You know that.

P' sits in the same bathtub as P. Naked, her arms hung on the bathtub rim. They look identical.

P'

Don't ignore me. You know I'm always here.

P

Why are you following me?

P'

(leans forward)

What do you mean follow? I am you. You want me here.

P leans back against the wall. The bath tap beside her still lets hot water out. Plumes of thick silence roam in the bathroom. P looks adamantly at P', who's sitting with her legs pressed towards herself.

P

I hate you.

P'
(smirks)
No, you don't.

P closes the bath tap. Water stops moving. Everything is completely still. Only the steam continues to condense into droplets and hang to the ceiling. Any moment longer, they seem to fall and break the unstirring surface.

P'
Did you go out again tonight?

P does not reply, only letting the steam hit her face.

P'
Where to? The bar? The club? Don't you think it's a bit inappropriate for a sixteen-year-old to go to those places?

P still doesn't reply.

P'
(playing with the bath
water, making splashes)
You know, mum would hate to see you like this.

P stands up and lunges forward to P'.

P
(pointing at P')
She wouldn't, because she's not here!

Her loud yell rings in the bathroom. The condensation drops from the ceiling, and breaks the now crenellated water surface. P' does not say anything and watches P leave the bathtub. Water glides down her glistening body as she stands on the mat to dry herself off. P' now takes over the entire tub, leans languidly on the rim of the tub. P's phone dings on the bathroom counter.

P'
Is that him? The guy who was twenty-four, then twenty-eight, then thirty-four?

P continues to dry herself off with a wrinkled, holed towel.

P
Twenty-three.

P'
What?

P
He said he was twenty-three.

P'
(chuckles)
Twenty-three, twenty-four, yada yada.
Still doesn't hide the fact that he's
a predator.

A new hole tore in the towel. Now too raggedy to be used as a body towel, P throws it on the floor to dry off the puddle of water that came with her.

P
He's a good guy. He just
(stutters)
had his reasons.

P'
Reasons such as trying to play down
his age and get it on with a sixteen-
year-old? What a *nice* guy? News' just
in, the Nobel Prize committee has just
found a new candidate for the peace
award. What's his name again?

P
You don't know him. You don't know him
like I do.

P'
Oh, I know him. Didn't he force you
into having sex with him?

P's leg now stops dragging the towel across the puddle and hovers in the air.

P

He didn't force me. We both agreed to it. We did no more than kissing and hugging.

P'

Kissed and hugged the whole night, and not coming home till six a.m.? He must be a good kisser. Aren't your lips sore at all?

Does dad know about this?

P

You know he doesn't. Stop bothering me.

P'

Right, I forgot. You guys haven't talked for like how long, three years? Ever since mum died, he's

P

(interrupting P')

She didn't. She did not.

Her voice growing louder and stronger as each she enunciates each and every syllable like a soldier stomping his foot.

P

She's

(stutters)

She's far away.

P'

And you found her. With your boat. Hurray. There you go, living your happy little life, I will be here to soak up all those revolting feelings as always.

P doesn't reply. She stands in front of the bathroom mirror. The fog blurs the reflection. As she smudges away the steam on the mirror, P' appears behind her in the reflection.

P'

Who are you?

P stares at the reflection. The two identical girls stand still in front of her, staring right back at P.

P'

Look at you, how *womanly*?

P' glides her finger tips along P's left shoulder, then arm, lifting her touch just to collide with P's waist. Waves of tingles shoot through P as P' continues to trace along her silhouette.

P'

(whispers)

Squeezing your boobs for a cleavage, wearing corsets to show a curve, oh and don't forget the Kim Kardashian hip pads. Who are you without these things? What does he like *in* you? Why did he choose *you*?

Her whisper sends chills down P's spine. She gazes into the mirror adamantly, but something flickers in her eyes.

P

(Simultaneously)

He's a friend's friend and he's a nice man. He holds my hand when I'm confused; he strokes my hair when I fall asleep. He taught me to be the woman I wanna be. So what if I'm urging things, who cares? We fell in love with each other. There is no coercion. I am the one who chose to do it.

P'

(Simultaneously)

You know deep down you hate yourself. You despise your current state. Look at you, a hot mess in making. You've never

owned up to your life. Does mum know? Does dad know? Do they know you are drowning yourself in booze and meaningless flings? And why?

P
(Simultaneously)
I love him.

P'
(Simultaneously)
You hate yourself.

P'
(looks straight at P)
You think just because you dress provocatively and way too maturely for your age you are a woman. You think you can be the woman your mum isn't for you. You think you are so mature now, you don't need anything or anyone else. Do you know who that man really is besides a booty call at 3am? Do you know who you really are? Do you know what you really want?

P'
Let me tell you then. You are just a girl in denial. You are a victim, P.

The bathroom falls silent. An ineffable lump of soreness suffocates P. The thick steam rushes into her throat and aggravates her breathing. Hot, steaming tears stream down her cheeks.

P
(Quavers)
I'm not.

P' grabs P's shoulders and forces her to look at her.

P'
Admit it. Look at you. Look at *me*.
When did you stop climbing Dad's

shoulder? When did you stop crawling
into Mum's arms? When did Teddy become
just stuffing?
When did you leave? Where's you?

Both of them do not speak. Only the sound of the water dropping
from the loose bath tap rings around the room. P' slowly turns
P to face the mirror.

P'

The ship never sailed. You never
sailed.

Her shapeless words stab P like needles, sharp and precise. P
struggles out of her grabbing, and with her phone on the bathroom
counter, she smashes the mirror into a million pieces. She swipes
off all the remaining fragments glued on, and rushes to the bath
tub and takes out the bathroom plug. Her hands are now covered
in blood. The bath water forms swirls after swirls with her
dripping blood as it gets sucked away.

P'

Sail now.

P' vanishes. The bathroom is empty again, only P remains.

EXT. BEACH 5AM

P sits alone at the beach. The same beach she once sailed away
to the dying sun. The sea is more at peace than ever.
Occasionally waves beat the sand. She gazes at the sea as the
sun slowly rises behind her. She takes out her now shattered
phone, and throws it into the sea.

The wind is blowing again, it too whistles.

THE END

Story 2 Analysis

Distinct from story 1, story 2 “Ripples” adopts the form of a play script. With a ten-year gap between the stories, “Ripples” tells the story of sixteen-year-old P who numbs herself with meaningless alcohol and nights out. Refusing to accept the fact that she has been sexually assaulted by a man, she derives a double, an inner persona, P’. Set in a bathroom, P has a private conversation with P’, showing the internal struggle of a teenage girl in grief and trauma.

One of the literary motifs employed in the script is the theory of the double, as reflected from the dialogue exchange between P and P’, her inner persona. The double, or doppelgänger, is a metaphor or symbol for the hero torn by psychological conflict. While in many literary works, the motif of the double is connoted with being evil, often in the gothic genre, the notion of the double itself does not warrant the idea of evilness. In the field of psychology, the double is termed psychological duality, referring to the personification of the unconscious desires. In the field of existentialism, the motif of the double is referred to as the uncanny, which embodies repressed and conflicting emotions of a person. These ultimately contribute to the literary motif of the double representing a person’s repressed yearnings. As defined by Oyebode, a doppelgänger is “a fictional character who is both physically and psychologically identical [to a character]”, who is “conceived of as an exact but sometimes invisible replica of a person” (3). Doppelgänger, coined by Jean Paul Richter in his novel *Siebenkas*, is used to serve as “a symbol of the different parts of [his character’s] personality” (Oyebode 2). While the motif of the double allows the author to materialise a character’s inner personality or desires, its ultimate function is not merely as a mirror of a character, but an activator for the character to be “aware of oneself and recognises what is *myself*” (Oyebode 5). Simply put, the existence of the double propels the character to realise their own actions and acknowledge their vocation, or inner desire.

In the film *Fight Club*, internal conflicts are externalised through the derivation of the character Tyler Durden played by Brad Pitt. As a visceral critique of modern consumerism, corporate culture, and toxic masculinity, the film follows the unnamed narrator as he tries to escape soulless corporal culture by co-founding a secret society called “fight club” with the mysterious character of Tyler Durden, who is later revealed to be the double of the narrator. The narrator, who is defined by consumerism, alienation, lacks an authentic identity which prompts him to repress his inner desires and frustrations, which causes him to derive a double as the embodiment of repressed emotions. Through the materialisation of the double, the film exposes identity as “a construct of internal self-worth and external regard”, which further underscores the centrality of double being the “primary medium/lens through which we are shown our own internal divisions and abject phantasies” (Bernstein 1197). With regard to the idea summarised by Oyeboade, the mirror image, in this case, Tyler Durden, does not simply return one’s self. Instead, it is what “fundamentally constitutes and forms the senses of self” (Bernstein 1196). The existence of Tyler Durden forces the narrator to recognise his notion of self, to acknowledge what might have constituted his understanding of himself.

Similarly, in Alice Gerstenberg’s 1916 play *Overtones*, one of the first examples of using the double as a way of manifesting the unconscious on the stage, explores the suppressed yearnings of women in the early 20th century. Two civilised women, Harriet and Margaret, meet for tea in the opening scene. Yet, on the stage there are four actresses, the extra two actresses play Hetty and Maggie respectively, the doubles of Harriet and Margaret. Hetty directly talks to Harriet and claims to have “passions deeper than [hers]”, and that she is “crude and real”, while Harriet is only “[Hetty’s] appearance in the world” (Gerstenberg act 1). This alone introduces the character of Hetty and her role in the play which is to reveal Harriet’s inner thoughts, same as the case of Margaret and Maggie. Throughout the play, Hetty and Maggie hurl at each other with truths and constantly haunt both Harriet and Margaret as they

attempt to stay poised to retain their social status as civilised individuals. Take the following as an example:

MARGARET: Most great men have come from the country. There is a fair chance that John will be added to the list.

HETTY: I know it and I am bitterly jealous of you.

HARRIET: Undoubtedly he owes much of his success to you, Margaret, your experience in economy and your ability to endure hardship. Those first few years in Paris must have been a struggle.

MAGGIE: She is sneering at your poverty.

MARGARET: Yes, we did find life difficult at first, not the luxurious start a girl has who marries wealth. (Gerstenberg act 1)

This interchange showcases how the doubles act as a literary device to expel the truths in a character. Despite Hetty revealing how Harriet is “bitterly jealous” of Margaret, the civility of Margaret prompts her to stay polite and directs the success of John, Harriet’s secret crush and Margaret’s husband, to Margaret (Gerstenberg act 1). Similarly, Margaret tries to curb her inner thoughts of distaste for Harriet yet Maggie succeeds in influencing Margaret, when she eventually retaliates with a sarcastic remark at Harriet who has married a rich man for his wealth. This excerpt shows how the technique of the double is used and the way doubles both reveal characters’ inner desires and influence their actions.

Inspired by the film *Fight Club* and *Overtones* by Alice Gerstenberg, my story 2 “Ripples” takes the form of a play script and employs the same technique of the double to reveal P’s inner conflicts. Different from a story form, play scripts limit the direct referencing of feelings. Lacking narrations, prose descriptions, and inner monologue, the play script style offers the most unmediated narration of a narrative, challenging the readers to read between the lines. In an attempt to portray the dramatic nature of teenage years, I abandoned the usual

story format and opted for the play script style. In order to show P's troubled state, a double named P' is created. She is the embodiment of P's inner desire, reasonings, and truths. While the literary device of the double allows me to reveal P's inner consciousness, the play script allows me to materialise internal conflict, turning abstract ideas into a visible visceral character, staging the uncontainment of emotion in a way that prose narration cannot. Throughout the play script, the protagonist constantly argues with P', take the following excerpt as example:

P': [...] What does he like in you? Why did he choose you?

P: He's a friend's friend and he's a nice man. He holds my hand when I'm confused; he strokes my hair when I fall asleep. He taught me to be the woman I wanna be. So what if I'm urging things, who cares? We fell in love with each other. There is no coercion. I am the one who chose to do it.

P': You know deep down you hate yourself. You despise your current state. Look at you, a hot mess in making. You've never owned up to your life. Does mum know? Does Dad Know? Do they know you are drowning yourself in booze and meaningless flings? And why?

P: I love him.

P': You hate yourself.

P': You think just because you dress provocatively and way too maturely for your age you are a woman. You think you can be the woman your mum isn't for you. You think you are so mature now, you don't need anything or anyone else. Do you know who that man really is besides a booty call at 3am? Do you know who you really are? Do you know what you really want?

P': Let me tell you then. You are just a girl in denial. You are a victim, P. (5)

This argument takes place after P' confronts P who refuses to accept her mother's death. In this excerpt it is shown that P' acts as the active agent in reflecting P's true thoughts and presents

her with raw unfiltered ideas, challenging her with self-hatred and merciless fact of her victimhood. This argument with her inner self is not a descent into madness, but a necessary confrontation that leads toward integration and growth, adhering to the Bildungsroman tradition. The materialisation of P' provides room for P to recognise her notion of the self, to realise her own reckless actions of irresponsible drinking and the fact that she has been sexually assaulted. This confrontation with the self also aids her in terms of healing after the death of her mother. The technique of the double and the form of the play script provide the ideal stage to explore the teenage angst, the effect of trauma, and resolution with the self.

On Writing Creatively

In his book, *Craft in the Real World*, Saleses proposed that “craft”, i.e. writing, “is a set of expectations”, standardised and set, meant to be broken (27). He mentioned that the traditions of literary writing, especially bildungsroman genre, are standardised where the “craft axiom states that [...] protagonist must either change or fail to change and [the] novels fulfill this expectation”, which in his perspective, means that not just the characters are trapped by societal norms, so are the novels (Saleses 27).

While I hold the same view as him regarding the standardisation of literary traditions, such as the unspoken rule of how a story should progress from opening, through rising actions and climax, to a recognisable ending, his claim on novels being trapped by the notion of change or societal norms is rather drastic. To state that a genre is trapped is to propose that the genre is incapable of resistance and subversion of its own conventions. I attempted to respond to this notion by creating a short story cycle that at the same time embraces the Bildungsroman tradition of change while resisting its linearity. The protagonist changes yet the cycle's fragmentary structure and stylistic features beg the question of whether change and growth is ever as logical and smooth as the genre's form typically suggests. Through the different forms

and styles, this short story cycle refutes the idea of being trapped by the expectation of change, instead, it is in dialogue with it. For me, the dialogue between writing and traditions is where the real craft takes place.

Conclusion

Ebb & Flow is a short story cycle that introspectively explores life's mutability, the aftermath of loss, and the idiosyncrasies of grief and trauma, through stylistic experimentation. The cycle trails the life event of the protagonist P to reflect a more honest account of human development that growth is not linear, neither is life. While the years of your age increase consistently year by year, it is not the years that define your growth or what life stage you are at. Through this capstone project, I aim to challenge the idea of life being linear and the notion that one can easily pinpoint distinct stages of development. Despite my quoting James Joyce's idea on categorising life into four discrete stages, it feels rather unfitting to adhere to this structure wholly. As my project title, *Ebb & Flow*, suggests, water is an important motif in my work. I believe that life, instead of being succinctly separated and categorised into stages, takes the form of water, fluid, back-and-forth, and prone to unexpected change. Water can be separated into individual drops, each distinct and seemingly alone. But put these drops together, and they fuse to form an ocean. The same water that is flushed against the shore, returns in another form to the deep sea. Each short story is an incident in the protagonist's life, a drop of water, and it is the culmination of these stories, the short story cycle, that constitutes P's sense of self, an ocean.

Critical Reflection

One question raised during my presentation of this project was the reason for my decision to write about life, women and trauma. This question prompts me to reflect on my journey for this capstone project. My initial idea was to do a literary research project on the idea of *écriture féminine* proposed by Helene Cixous, intending to explore the relationship between the female body, language, and the act of writing itself. Having first encountered Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" during the course Reading Poetry, it drew me instantly with the idea that writing is a site of liberation. The idea of writing being a means of liberation urges me to take creative writing courses and to finally write the stories that had been living inside me without a form. The first creative course I ever took was ENGE3260 Creative Writing where poetry is the main focus and I soon realised prose writing is my true vocation. In pursuit of prose writing, I took ENGE3290 Reading and Writing Short Stories, where I encountered the influential writings of Alice Munro who wrote excessively on womanhood and girlhood. Her depictions of girlhood and womanhood articulate a dimension of my own lived experience that had previously remained unnamed. From then on, I realised no matter how hard I tried, my writing always, in the end, steered towards girlhood. It was as if that unnamed part of myself had finally found a plume of light in total darkness, and firmly grasped it before it would dissolve. As that silent urge found its voice, the amount of creative writing courses I took multiplied. In the end, it prompts me to write, to forge it a form, rather than a sole research.

To write creatively comes as natural as breathing; to write consciously, however, proved an entirely different matter. Writing consciously demands intentionality, self-awareness, and critical distance, something I have yet to master. This proves to be my first challenge during my creative process. Doing a creative writing project seemed a lot easier than the actual execution. This project requires not only creativity, but also research ability. While I have written a variety of literary analytical essays, this is one of my first few attempts at

writing a critical essay on creative writing, not to mention at such a large scale. Required to provide reasons to explain my creative decisions and motives resulted in an unexpectedly long working process and the large portion of my critical component, which directly costs me scope for more short stories. My initial intention was to compose five short stories to fully flesh out P's life, which in retrospect seems a bit too ambitious. The number of stories was then cut down to three after serious considerations, and in the end, only two remain. While only having two stories to entail P's girlhood and womanhood is an unfortunate condition, I am content with my delivery of her loss, trauma, and change in such a narrow scope.

On that note, I see this project as a seed for future creative projects that I will continue to work on after my graduation, composing more stories to narrate a fuller and richer narrative of the protagonist's life. While pursuing a post-graduate degree in education after my completion of undergraduate studies, this creative project will continue to grow (just like P does) as I bring my understanding of narrative form, childhood consciousness, the externalisation of internal conflict, and all the things I have learnt during my undergraduate studies into the classroom. Just as Cixous urged women to 'write her self', I shall now carry this belief, and bring it to whichever classrooms I will be in.

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**Construction and Deconstruction of Gendered Ideals of Male Proactivity and
Female Restraint in the Growth of Characters in *David Copperfield* and *Jane***

Eyre

Ip Nga Yau Florence

Reflection 1

In the third year of my undergraduate studies, I took a course called “19th Century Novels on Screen”, which introduced me to the genre of the Victorian Bildungsroman through the novel *David Copperfield*. In reading the novel, I found myself being immersed in the protagonist’s life by witnessing his growth from childhood to adulthood and seeing friendships blossom and hardships arise. The novel’s humor and portrayal of Victorian social issues like child labor, prostitution and class prejudice all appealed to me very much, yet it was not until I started doing research for my term paper for that course that I realized its stereotypical portrayal of female characters, particularly in the female protagonist Agnes. In researching more on the academic criticisms surrounding the novel, I came across the term “Angel in the House”, and the many academics that framed Dickens’ women characters, including Agnes, as embodiments of this ideal. I thus reconsidered the novel from an entirely new perspective, focusing not on David’s journey of growth, but on the neglected,

insufficiently told tales of the surrounding female characters. In my term paper for that course, I compared the agency between the female characters in the original novel and the 2019 film adaptation, putting some of my ideas on the novel's female characterizations on paper. Yet even as I was finished with the course, I felt there was more to be said about the male and female characterizations of the novel, especially under the lens of the characters' growth and upbringings as male and female in the Victorian context, and the different gendered ideals and standards they were held to. The element of examining characters' journeys of growing up was influenced from another course I took in the same semester, "Children's Literature", where we examined Victorian childhood traditions through Victorian children's novels like *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*. In that course, by examining the differences between Victorian childhood and adulthood, and looking at how gender plays a part in children's subconscious constructions of their identities, the correlation between gender and trajectory of growth became a topic of interest to me, and I thought a lot about this topic under the context of *David Copperfield*, and thus decided I would focus on this in my capstone.

However, I also wanted to compare another novel to *David Copperfield* for increased nuance, thus I began reading more Bildungsroman novels, specifically ones from the Victorian era, as both the above mentioned courses I took effectively aroused

my interest in the Victorian era and its rigid societal customs, and the different ways it impacted males and females growing up in the social order. Amidst this search, *Jane Eyre* stood out to me as a Victorian Bildungsroman that surrounds a female protagonist from childhood to adulthood. In reading *Jane Eyre*, I found many similarities between Jane and David, particularly in their childhood, as they both experience oppression by step-parental figures, both experience harsh school systems while encountering their childhood mentors and protectors there, and both struggle to find an equal partner in their romantic relationships. With their many similarities, the key difference between the two protagonists manifests in their gender, which most clearly illustrates the disparity in how they face different struggles in life growing up as males and females in the Victorian context. The idea of comparing two protagonists of opposing gender and their different trajectories of achieving agency was thus constructed in preparation for my capstone. Thus, the basis of my essay was constructed on the internal comparisons between *David Copperfield's* male and female protagonists and the external comparisons between *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*.

Construction and Deconstruction of Gendered Ideals of Male Proactivity and Female Restraint in the Growth of Characters in *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*

Eyre

1. Introduction

In the Victorian era (1837–1901), novels became the main literary form with the help of weekly serial publishing and a growing middle-class audience. Many of the most well-known Victorian novels are “Bildungsroman” novels, a term originating from German with “bildung” meaning “formation” and “roman” meaning “novel”. Peter Golban characterizes the Bildungsroman as a narrative that “concentrates on the story of a single individual’s growth and development within the context of a defined social order” (109). Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are both examples of the Victorian Bildungsroman that reflect their protagonists’ journey and growth within their social orders as they navigate social expectations and personal development. However, a fundamental difference between these two novels lies in the opposing genders of their titular protagonists—David being male and Jane being female. Considering that male and female social orders in the Victorian era must, with their different societal expectations for men and women, contribute to gendered ideals that beget gendered societal behaviors, the difference in the protagonists’ genders in the two novels can be seen as the basis of contrast in the

depictions of the protagonists' growth. In *David Copperfield*, the portrayal of David's growth in achieving the male ideal of being a gentleman is possible through his exhibition of ideal male traits of proactivity and agency which emphasizes male autonomy and development, whereas the portrayal of Agnes Wickfield's growth in embodying the female ideal of Angel in the House is possible through her embodiment of female ideal traits of restraint and domesticity which obscures female development to function under male servitude. Yet in *Jane Eyre*, these gendered ideals are deconstructed through the equal representation of these male and female ideal traits in the portrayal of Jane's growth, as her restraint becomes a tool for her achievement of proactivity and agency, which in turn emphasizes female autonomy and development.

2. Literature Review

Much research has been done on the topic of gender in Victorian literature. In this paper, the frameworks of "male proactivity" and female restraint" are drawn from ideas of Victorian gender roles that have been covered in preexisting research.

Margaret Myers' "The Lost Self: Gender in *David Copperfield*" illustrates the role of gender in David's coming of age, stating that David's selfhood such as his artistic and moral impulses are primarily feminine, "insofar as the moral, the emotional and the artistic are culturally associated with the feminine" (54-55). She proves this by citing

how James Steerforth, from their first meeting, identifies a feminine element in David which is “central to the nature and development of their friendship” (55). David’s feminine innocence appeals to Steerforth as Steerforth expresses disappointment that David does not have a sister who he imagines would be “pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed” (Dickens 56). Moreover, the “secret sensuality” between the two is further associated with David’s imagination and artistic abilities as David uses his “romantic and dreamy” story-telling talents to form friendship with Steerforth (55). Yet as David grows up, Myers states that David shoulders a social and cultural manhood and shifts away from his androgynous boyhood to masculine adulthood, as indicated by his economic and domestic responsibilities as the head of his household. David’s boyhood is androgynous due to his unequally balanced relationship with the “dominant, experienced, condescending superior” Steerforth, who treats David “like a plaything” (55). Their relationship holds back David’s development of a masculine identity in his boyhood. In adulthood, however, Myers argues that David is initiated into cultural manhood as he loses Steerforth due to Steerforth seducing Emily which effectively ends their friendship. Myers states that David’s masculine identity creates a loss of selfhood which can be seen in David’s marriage with Dora, where in enforcing the sexual roles in the marriage through trying to mold and teach Dora to become a proper wife, he hurts the young innocence she represents and gives priority

to a social male self which “diminishes his emotional sensitivity and blunts his moral sensibility” (57). Myers states David only regains his selfhood at the novel’s ending when he marries the key feminine figure in his life, Agnes Wickfield, as David is able to make a living as an artist, weep openly and acknowledge his love for the right woman, which are all exhibitions of his previous feminine identified moral and artistic impulses. Yet at the same time, David loses none of the qualities of masculinity as he “retains his capacity for earnest hard work” which David claims he owes all to Agnes (59). Myer’s research contributes this paper’s idea of “male proactivity”, as her illustrations of David’s trajectory of self-representation demonstrate his active agency in each stage, whether it is to reinvent himself into a social and cultural gentleman like Steerforth, or to regain his selfhood through feminine reconciliation by marrying Agnes who encourages and brings out the best traits in both David’s feminine and masculine self. Thus, Myers also mentions that Agnes functions as an “agent of male destiny rather than as the creator of her own” (54). Agnes’ role in David’s reconciliation of selfhood reflects how male proactivity requires female sacrifice, one of the aspects embodied in traditional female restraint. The idea of “male proactivity” and “female restraint” in this paper also finds contributions from Annika Mizel’s “Righteous Restraint in *Hard Times* and *Jane Eyre*”, where Mizel explores the titular idea through analyzing Jane’s change from

“vengeful expression to righteous restraint” (184). Mizel’s research begins with a clear distinction between male restraint and female restraint in the Victorian era, citing Carolyn Oulton’s definitions of Victorian masculinity as “straightforward honesty, courage, and the capacity for struggle or self-mastery”, while defining Victorian femininity as “feminine self-denial” (Oulton 54; as seen in Mizel 177). For men, the act of restraint actively contributes to their character and growth, whereas for women, the defining word “denial” demonstrates a lack of self-purpose, suggesting that female restraint is not a tool for self-growth but for other’s benefits, echoing Myer’s sentiment of Agnes being an agent of David’s male destiny. Mizel goes on to analyze how Jane’s growth from “vengeful expression” to “righteous restraint” sets her apart from the above mentioned “self-denial” and reinforces her rightful emotional expression alongside rational restraint. Thus, Mizel’s research also contributes to this paper’s investigation of how *Jane Eyre* subverts the stereotypical gendered portrayals of “male proactivity” and “female restraint” by blending both restraint and agency in Jane’s growth.

What sets this paper apart from the above-mentioned preexisting literature on the topic of Victorian gender norms is that it sets out to compare two novels that have not commonly been put in conversation with each other despite their similarities. Rather than *David Copperfield*, many scholars have chosen Dicken’s arguably more well-

known novel *Great Expectations* to be an opposing force to *Jane Eyre* in academic research, as both novels share a common focus on social and class struggles the protagonists face in desiring someone who belongs to a higher class status, as seen in Jane with Rochester and Pip with Estella. However, when comparing the protagonists themselves, there are more similarities between Jane and David, including the class positions they are born into, the abuse they face in their home and school lives, and the struggles they face in finding equality in relationships (which David struggled with due to his mental superiority Dora, and social inferiority to Steerforth). Yet despite the similarities between Jane and David, their upbringings and social positions as male and female cause them to face similar struggles in different ways, which further reinforces gender as the central force that creates disparity between the growing up of male and females in the Victorian novel.

3. Historical Context of the Victorian Era

As the Bildungsroman deals with the protagonists' roles in their social order, the societal backdrop of the Victorian era plays a heavy role in the male and female protagonists' growth and their adaptation to their respective social roles. Portrayals of Victorian societal ideals in *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* can be found in the depictions of childhood, class distinctions and gender roles.

3.1 Victorian childhood

Childhood is a key starting point in the Bildungsroman. Yet according to Marah Gubar, prior to the successful reforms for children welfare and the acceptance of the romanticized ideal of the innocent child, many Victorians did not view childhood to be a “protected period of dependence and development” (1). The most notable childhood violation in the era is the rampant existence of exploited child laborers as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Yet even in other settings, children were not all treated as Romantic ideals of innocence. In *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*, the orphaned protagonists’ childhoods are largely portrayed grimly between the home and school. In their home lives, Jane and David commonly experience the cruel treatment of step-familial figures, as they are both at one point locked inside a room by their respective home oppressors, Mrs. Reed and Mr. Murdstone, as punishment for fighting back against oppressive rule, as Jane hits Mrs. Reed’s son back and David bites Mr. Murdstone in retaliation of his physical abuse. In their school lives, the common oppressive figure is demonstrated in Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* and Mr. Creakle in *David Copperfield*, who with their enforcement of stern values continue to enforce oppression onto the protagonists, such as Mr. Brocklehurst starving the Lowood girls and Mr. Creakle enforcing corporal punishment onto the Salem House boys. The rigidity of children’s education at home and at school emphasizes the

conformity to expected societal roles in Victorian society—just as how adults had their societal roles to conform to, children’s roles were to obey or otherwise be punished, often corporally. In the two novels, school is a place of growth for the child protagonists who, in the absence of nurturing, protective adults, turn to their peers for protection and idolization. After being publicly condemned by Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane confides in Helen her fear of being “solitary and hated”, and Helen reassures her that angels “see their tortures and recognize their innocence” (Brontë 104). This allusion to “an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits” suggests God’s other-worldly powers of alleviating their human suffering at the hands of the patriarch at Lowood, which offers Jane tranquility of mind, presenting Helen as a Christian symbol that holds divine power the adult tyrant Mr. Brocklehurst lacks. In *Salem House*, David Copperfield similarly finds initiation and protection in James Steerforth, whose inherent genteel social status and charm grants him immunity from the headmaster’s physical oppression and establishes him as a figure that is just as, if not more powerful, than the adult oppressor David fears. While David still has to face potential corporal punishment from the headmaster, he is at least protected by Steerforth from other threats with boys his own age, as nobody “dared to annoy [David] whom [Steerforth] honored with his countenance” (58). Thus, the child protagonists’ mentors, Helen Burns and James Steerforth, through their symbolic or practical power

over adult tyranny, become ideals for the child protagonists in their gendered journey of growing up.

3.2 *Class Distinction*

The Victorian Bildungsroman often deals with the theme of class differences through portrayals of characters from three main class distinctions: the working class, the middle class and the upper class. The upper class were those of the gentry, with income generated through inherited land rather than work. The middle class were those that performed mental or clean work, paid monthly or annually, and the working class where those who performed physical labor, paid daily or weekly (Zahia 9).

Industrial reforms in the 19th century led to the increased creation of middle-class jobs (doctors, bankers and attorneys) to meet the needs of the expanding economy. This contributed to the expansion of the middle class, which Jane and David both mostly belonged to. In *Jane Eyre*, the class differences between middle-class governess Jane, who is well-educated but cut off from familial funds, and the upper-class gentry Rochester creates a romantic conflict that goes against Victorian class-consciousness and conservative ideals. Jane's position as a governess puts her in a position between middle-class (due to the nature of her work) and upper-class (due to the setting of her work at Rochester's manor). As Bonnie Smith writes, the governess was from the social level of the family, yet the salary she received put her at the economic level of

the servants (98). In *David Copperfield*, the constant shift of David's environment demonstrates Victorian class prejudice and consciousness. At school, David meets the upper-class Steerforth, who holds power over and mocks the lower class, as seen from him calling his teacher Mr. Mell a beggar and then using his social influence to escape punishment and instead acquire the headmaster's praise by "asserting the independence and respectability" of Salem House, to which the other pupils "gave three cheers" (63). Later, David is sent to work in a factory as a child laborer, but he finds the work degrading and shameful as he laments that his "hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man" were crushed (99). Thus, he seeks out his aunt who helps reestablish his social class by adopting and providing for him, as well as sending him to school to continue his gentleman's education. Yet in Victorian England, social mobility was difficult due to societal class-consciousness which created prejudice against those of lower class. This prejudice can be seen in Steerforth's views that the lower-class "are not to be expected to be as sensitive as [they] are", and "like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded" (182).

3.3 Gender Roles

Victorian gender roles greatly affected the opportunities for growth for males and females. In the Victorian era, there were distinctly separate spheres of femininity and

masculinity. Women were thought to have belonged to the private domestic sphere at home, whereas men belonged to the public sphere at work. The domestic image of the woman led to the creation of the Victorian female ideal, the “Angel of the House”, a term first found in Coventry Patmore’s poem. The term is largely associated with Victorian women’s self-sacrificing qualities and idealized domesticity as a wife and mother. While this ideal might vary with women who belonged to different classes since lower-class women occupied the public sphere at work as well as the domestic sphere at home, the idea of domesticity and subordination to male counterparts was largely the expected ideal for all Victorian women. On the other hand, the male Victorian ideal was more exclusive to the middle and upper class, as it was often associated with achieving manhood through gentility. Jiyoung Yeo argues that the idea of the gentleman can be interpreted as a “social force in that it reflects the needs and aspirations of the various social ranks of the Victorian society for improvement of their life” (3). This can be seen in David Copperfield’s journey in finding a respectable career and equal partner to improve his life. These gender roles constructed by Victorian society greatly contribute to the differences of male and females’ upbringings. As Deborah Gorham states, in adolescence, whereas boys were encouraged to develop independence, girls were encouraged to “accept dependence on the male as a natural and inevitable part of the feminine condition” (117).

4. The Importance of Male Ideals of Proactivity and Agency in the Growing Up of David Copperfield

David Copperfield's journey of growth into a gentleman is made possible only through his exhibition of ideal male traits of proactivity and agency. In David's childhood, the first male figure he meets is his stern stepfather who strips away David's agency over his childhood and oppresses him in his own home through enforcing a strict and rigid education through corporal punishment. Previously raised in a strictly feminine household under Peggotty his kind nurse and Clara his childlike mother, Mr. Murdstone's entrance into David's home threatens this gendered balance. Just as how Murdstone wields his patriarchal power over Clara as he "mold[s] her pliant nature into any form he chose" (29), he tries the same with David. Yet while Clara bends under her husband's patriarchal influence, Mr. Murdstone's oppression marks the start of David's agency in improving his life and resisting oppression. This is seen when David rebels against Mr. Murdstone's corporal punishments as David bites his hand "in the same instant" he cut David (37). The act of punishment and rebellion happening in the same instant establishes David's retaliation as an equal force that fights against its oppressor. It is only after this retaliation that the Murdstones finalize the decision to send David to boarding school, and while David lacks direct choice and agency in this matter, it was his rebellion against oppression

that helped finalize his escape and entrance into larger society, which Golban states is a process determined by the Bildungsroman hero's own change of consciousness and external perspectives as a result of someone else's (i.e. Murdstone's) intrusion into his universe of childhood (127). Thus, this process marks David's change of consciousness for a need of agency over his life.

David's education at Salem House and friendship with the socially powerful Steerforth causes him to develop ideals of gentility that would later motivate his agency in achieving social mobility. Unlike patriarchal figures like Murdstone and the Salem House headmaster Creakle, the upper-class Steerforth acquires obedience and respect not through demands and threats, but with charms and power, which represents his gentility. This is evident in how he influences David to willingly surrender his money for Steerforth to "take care of" (54). By appealing to Steerforth with his obedience, David, like the possessions he surrenders, is promised to be taken care of by Steerforth, who is immune to Creakle's punishment due to his social standing. This demonstrates how Steerforth's social status allows him to operate above the fixed rules that David was taught to follow by Murdstone and Creakle, thus carrying agency that David had lacked. Moreover, in the conflict between Steerforth and Salem House teacher Mr. Mell, the direct correlation between gentility and social status is first demonstrated to David. When Mr. Mell refers to himself as a gentleman

in retort to Steerforth's insults of calling him a beggar, Steerforth condescends that Mr. Mell does not qualify for the name. Mr. Mell, being the person who first took care of David at Salem House and who "took the pains" with him (64), is David's first fatherly figure that treats him kindly without asking for obedience in return. Yet seeing as how he, much like David, must follow orders from the patriarchal Creakle, such as having to place a "he bites" placard on David as punishment, his social status and level of agency are evidently low. During the conflict between Mr. Mell and Steerforth, Mell lays his hand gently on David the entire time, symbolizing David being held under the internal struggle between morality and power, as Tommy Traddles, David's other friend, clearly points out that Mr. Mell is "ill-used" by Steerforth (63). Yet, as Creakle fires Mell and praises Steerforth for asserting the independence and respectability of Salem House, it is clear that not only does Mr. Mell have no power to protect David from patriarchal rule, he also has no agency to defend his own honor, so he releases his hand from David. As David holds back his self-reproach in worries that it would appear that he was undutiful to Steerforth, the winning side of David's internal struggle is determined, as his admiration of power prevails over his moral instincts. As Myers writes, David and Steerforth's relationship "has only the subtlest of moral content, and the nature of that content explicitly lies within the power of the superior Steerforth" (56). Thus, David's betrayal of his lower-

class companion Mr. Mell in exchange for upper-class Steerforth's favor demonstrates his desire to achieve the male ideal of gentility that would grant him greater agency. While the decision to sacrifice moral instinct and selfhood in exchange for gentility and social power is not an embodiment of true gentility and agency (as will be expanded on later), this desire motivates David's first real act of agency, which is seeking out the help of his aunt Betsey Trotwood as he flees the factory that Murdstone puts him in after Clara's death to "conform to the ways of the working world" (97). Having been exposed to a gentleman's public education, David finds working at the factory to be shameful as he first experiences social oppression and demotion, and he reminisces on his happier childhood at school where he was given the proper gentleman's education. However, David still recognizes himself to be different from his fellow workers, as his "conduct and manner were different enough" to place a space between him and the others (102). Thus, he has not given up his desire for social power even in the working-class setting. Moreover, unlike his eagerness to make friends at Salem House, David does not make any acquaintances with the other workers at the factory, as he leads his secretly unhappy life in a "lonely, self-reliant manner" (105). This further proves David's conscious efforts to separate himself from the lower-class. After David's surrogate family and host, the Micawbers, leave London, David is left completely alone, and he makes the resolution to seek out

his distant aunt Betsey Trotwood for help, this idea hardening into a purpose than which he had never entertained more determinedly in his life (110). Up until then, David never had a self-made purpose, as going to boarding school and working at the factory were both decisions that David had no agency over. Yet, after experiencing the education of a learned and distinguished man, and friendship with those with great social power, the ideas of class and gentility are put into his mind and recalled in this time of social oppression. He decides to seek Aunt Betsey out, not because she is his only known kin, but because she has the ability to restore David's social class by economically providing for him and his education, as public schooling is an important and necessary step towards respectability and gentility, as seen from how David feels ashamed that he could be a gentleman no more when he left Salem House to work at the factory. As Eigner maintains, David chooses to take his chances with Aunt Betsey rather than come home to Peggotty because accepting Peggotty as his mother would mean an end to his dreams of gentility (75). Thus, motivated by ideals of gentility, though misguided they may be, David embodies the male ideals of agency and proactivity in seeking out his aunt to restore his social status.

In David's young adulthood, his reunion with Steerforth causes his sense of agency to dwindle as his attempts to achieve social gentility through following social conventions hinders his proactivity in achieving moral gentility through self-

discovery. After David finishes his studies, his aunt suggests for him to take a trip of self-discovery to decide on his preferred vocation, and David becomes lured away by “the wonderful effects [a young man at his own disposal] could not fail to make upon society” (169). The word “lure” suggests a lack of agency, as David’s childish fancies towards the idealized male image is built not on self-will but on what society deems to be a gentleman. This is seen in his focus on surface level qualities of gentility and maturity, for example trying to appear “as old as possible” and speaking “extremely gruff” because he felt it was a “grown-up sort of thing” (175). As he ultimately still gets taken advantage of by both the coachman and waiter on his trip, it is shown that his childish values limit his agency and hinder his path to becoming the “fine firm fellow” his aunt encouraged him to be—with a “will of [his] own” and “strength of character that is not to be influenced, except on good reason, by anybody or by anything” (170). David further strays from his aunt’s expectations when he is reunited with Steerforth, who upon seeing David immediately re-establishes his superiority and influence over him. Not only does Steerforth nickname David “Daisy” to allude to David’s childish innocence, he also uses his social power to evoke David’s admiration as he did at school, as he arranges for David to stay somewhere more genteel, which Eigner states gives David a “suitable, human identity once again” (72). Steerforth’s social power establishes him as a gentleman in the social sense, and his

skilled command over the waiter who previously took advantage of David's inexperience by giving him the combined remainders of multiple opened bottles of wine demonstrates Steerforth's superior social standing and his embodiment of David's ideal male self as he is able to command others with experience. This idealization of Steerforth and the social gentility he represents makes David blind to Steerforth's control over him, as David welcomes Steerforth's transgressions to his autonomy, even defending Steerforth from Agnes' claim that he is a "bad angel". In doing so, Myers states that David is "covertly defending that aspect of self which is most akin to Steerforth: the social male self" (56). When David's aunt advises him to become a proctor, David takes the matter to Steerforth, who assures David that proctors "plume themselves on their gentility" (214). In effect, Eigner states that it is Steerforth's advice that makes David a gentleman (76). Yet, as Robin Gilmour explains, in Dickens' novels, true gentlemanliness comes from "true respectability of innate worth as opposed to the sham respectability of fashionable clothes" (11). The latter is a precise representation of Steerforth, who maintains gentility in a social sense but as seen from his condescension towards the lower class, lacks it in the moral sense. The profession of a proctor is also of "sham respectability", as is demonstrated later when David makes suggestions for changes in the system only to be dismissed by his boss Mr. Spenlow, as it is "the principle of a gentleman to take things as he

found them” (297). Thus, the social aspect of gentility is once again used to discourage David’s agency and proactivity.

Steerforth’s seduction of Little Emily and Betsey Trotwood’s financial crisis are two situations that upend stability and force David to let go of his idle ideals of social gentility, as he learns to take back his agency by taking responsibility in helping Mr. Peggotty find Emily after Steerforth elopes with her as he was introduced into the family by David, as well as working hard to prove his self-reliance and ability to provide for himself and his loved ones. The exhibition of these ideal male traits ultimately contributes to his becoming of a true gentleman with innate worth. After Steerforth seduces Emily, David is forced to confront his ideals of social gentility as he discovers that despite Steerforth inherent social gentility, he lacks inner substance which represents true genteel character. When first confronted with the news, David faces another internal struggle as he finds it hard to reproach Steerforth due to having admired him so deeply. Yet, David ultimately states that Steerforth “fascinated [him] no longer” and recognizes that “all was at an end between [them]” (282). This conclusion represents David’s moral instincts trumping his love for Steerforth and the social gentility he represents, which is a stark contrast to when David chose power over morals in his childhood internal struggle between Steerforth and Mr. Mell. In light of Steerforth’s true character, David recalls most strongly Steerforth’s qualities

that “might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name” (282). The word “might” suggests David’s acknowledgement of Steerforth’s wasted potential as his immoral acts demonstrate the lack of substance in his character that would make him a true gentleman of noble nature. In visiting Mrs. Steerforth to tell her about the matter, David also sees the emptiness in Steerforth and his mother’s pride as the common quality between the mother and son causes their estranged relationship where neither party is willing to forgive or ask to be forgiven. This makes David realize that “all the understanding that [he] had now of [Steerforth’s] misdirected energy, became an understanding of [Mrs. Steerforth’s] character too” (291). Thus, David’s ideals of social gentility are deconstructed as he sees the misdirection of this prideful energy as a representation of one’s misdirected character, which proves a lack of true genteel qualities and substance. As Mrs. Steerforth reveals that Steerforth would never truly make Emily a lady as she is far below him, Steerforth’s promise of social power is ultimately proved to be empty as well, as he lacks the honest character to back up his promise. After David’s idle ideals of social gentility are deconstructed, he is rid of Steerforth’s influence that threatens his autonomy and agency. Steerforth’s actions effectively wrecked the Yarmouth home of the Peggottys as his seduction of Emily breaks up her engagement with her fiancé Ham, and separates her from her uncle who essentially is her father. As Mr. Peggotty leaves Yarmouth to look for

Emily, he tells David that his boathouse in Yarmouth has “gone down”, which alludes to the irreversible damage Steerforth has done, and thus also the damage that David has done, since he was the one who introduced Steerforth to the family. It is thus that David deeply feels his “own unconscious part in [Steerforth’s] pollution of an honest home” (282). In acknowledging his faults, he proactively tries to correct his mistakes by helping Mr. Peggotty in his search for Emily, such as suggesting entreating Martha’s help, and going with Mr. Peggotty to seek Martha out. When Martha ultimately finds out about Emily’s whereabouts, she comes to David who follows her to seek Emily along with Mr. Peggotty, which shows David’s involvement in the search for Emily and his efforts in salvaging the family by means of reuniting them. Also, by acting as a mediator between Mr. Peggotty and Mrs. Steerforth, David takes responsibility not just for the loss of Emily, but also for Steerforth’s. When Steerforth dies by shipwreck in a storm, David also takes the responsibility to break the news to Mrs. Steerforth and bring his body back from Yarmouth to London, helping the family reunite even in death. Thus, his agency in helping mend the broken families caused by his actions shows his proactivity in fixing his mistakes. This proactivity is also exhibited in another crisis, when David’s aunt Betsey Trotwood tells David she is “ruined” (307). In face of his aunt’s sudden financial crisis, David is at first completely defeated as he expresses selfish misery of “carry[ing] Dora no little

presents, and to ride no gallant greys, and to show [him]self in no agreeable light” (313). As he had only just got engaged to Dora Spenlow, the daughter of his boss at Doctor Commons, he recognizes how his aunt’s financial crisis would affect this engagement as he may no longer provide for her upper-class necessities. Despite his initial misery, David still manages to rise above his predicament through means of agency and proactivity in providing for himself. He first goes to Doctors Commons to see if he could get back the one thousand pounds his aunt paid for the internship, which shows his mature realization that he may no longer rely on his aunt, and is “thrown upon [his] own resources” (314). While he does not get the money back, he takes Agnes’ advice and starts working for Dr. Strong, his former headmaster at the school his aunt enrolled him in. As can be inferred from the positive meaning of his name, Dr. Strong has always been a good influence on David, as it was at his school that David became a “promising young scholar” and the head boy of the establishment (166), which contrasts starkly from David’s limited growth in Salem House when Mr. Creakle enforced education through punishment. Thus, working for Dr. Strong allows David to repossess the potential he had at school, and this leads David on a path that indicates his change for the better, as he not only takes the first step to build his writing career, but he also has his first respectable job which makes him self-sustainable, as opposed to Doctor Commons draining him of his funds and

providing little practical knowledge. David is also motivated to prove that his aunt's "past goodness" had not been "thrown away on an insensible, ungrateful object" by "going to work with a resolute and steady heart" (322). Just as how he idealizes maturity and gentility upon first entering adulthood by acting on his childish beliefs of what constitutes an adult, he similarly idealizes the hardships of his financial crisis and the practicality involved in self-reliance, stating that he would like to "cut at the trees in the forest of difficulty" to prove his strength (322). However, just as how David's initial idealizations of gentility became the motivation that drove his first real act of agency which led to his social class being restored as he was put back on the track to gentility, David's idealizations of hard work similarly have positive effects on his agency. David idealizes hard work through the belief that working hard will allow him to prove himself and gain Dora, who is the reward that "must be won" (322). By working tirelessly towards this goal, David exhibits ideal male traits of agency and determination, becoming the "fine firm fellow" his aunt had wanted him to be. Other than working for Dr. Strong, David continues working at Doctors Commons, while also starting his pursuit of becoming a parliamentary reporter as he works at mastering the skill of shorthand, practicing "until the clock pointed to midnight, and the candles were burning down" (338). Thus, while he initially idealizes hard work through a childish lens, David's continued determination and agency in working to be

self-reliant shows significant growth in his character that contrasts from his previous idleness in his idealization of social gentility. Instead, Yeo maintains that David's achievement of true gentility is attributed to his learning of middle-class values of a practical mind and domestic management (8). Moreover, as David goes on to find success as a parliamentary writer and afterwards as a novelist, he achieves a truly respectable and genteel career that he is passionate about. These acts of agency and hard work contribute to him becoming a gentleman in both the moral and social sense, therefore helping him grow into a true gentleman of innate worth, rather than the empty social ideal he found in Steerforth. Thus, throughout David Copperfield's journey of growth, it is only when David embodies traits like proactivity and agency that he is able to become closer to the male ideal of true gentility, whereas when he grows passive and becomes controlled by social influence, he strays from true gentility and the male ideal.

5. The Portrayal of Female Ideals of Restraint and Domesticity in the Growing up of Agnes Wickfield

From Agnes Wickfield's growth from childhood to adulthood, her inherent embodiment of the female ideal of Angel in the House is marked by traits of restraint and domesticity which strip away her agency in her journey of growth, making her only a functional, self-sacrificial ideal dedicated to male servitude. Unlike David,

whose childhood makes him understand the need for agency in improving his personal conditions, Agnes' childhood makes her understand the need for self-denying restraint and domesticity in improving her familial conditions. When David first meets Agnes, she is introduced by her father Mr. Wickfield as his "little housekeeper", and David sees the manifestation of this literal image in the "little basket-trifle hanging at her side, with keys in it" (139). As Agnes' mother died when she was only two weeks old, Agnes is the sole female figure of the household. In holding the keys to the house, Agnes holds the key to domesticity, as it represents her total responsibility over the household, which brings her not to the position of a literal housekeeper, but the Angel in the House who is in charge of running the feminine, private and domestic sphere at home by taking care of household matters like cooking, keeping servants and accounting. Agnes holding the keys symbolizes her ability of feminine domesticity, which contrasts with the image of David's mother Clara losing her keys to the household due to her being "too pretty and thoughtless (...) to have any duties imposed upon [her]" (32). This contrast between the domestic ability in the mature child Agnes and the lack of it in the childish wife Clara Copperfield further constructs Agnes' angelic image, as she requires no effort and faces no difficulties in embodying the domestic qualities of the Angel in the House. Agnes' feminine qualities of domesticity and restraint in childhood are seen clearly

through her dedication to her father who relies heavily on her after her mother's passing. This reliance is observed by David even upon their first meeting, as he "doubted whether [Mr. Wickfield] could have dined without [Agnes]", and when Agnes pours her father his wine, David thinks that the wine "would have missed its usual flavor" if it had been arranged for him by any other (140). Other than these physical acts of domesticity, Agnes also takes care of her father mentally by dissuading his unhappy thoughts, as Mr. Wickfield would sometimes rest his eyes upon Agnes and fall into a "brooding state", which Agnes would quickly diffuse "with a question or caress" (140). This brooding state associated with Agnes can be interpreted as Mr. Wickfield's anxiety about losing Agnes like he lost her mother, which manifests in his overreliance on the child Agnes, who has fully taken up the Angel in the House role originally intended for a wife or mother. The brooding state of anxiety is further exacerbated by his drinking problem, as he admits to David when under the influence that he "must keep [Agnes] near [him]" (146). Her father's need for her is acknowledged by young Agnes herself, as she tells David that she cannot go to school because "[Her father's] housekeeper must be in his house" (143). Agnes' mental and physical dedication to her father as a child shows the beginnings to her female self-denying restraint as she constantly puts her father's happiness before her own practical needs as a child, such as the freedom to a carefree childhood without

total responsibility over household matters, and the opportunity to public schooling for meeting peers her own age. As Ileana Loubser writes, Agnes' domestic duties taken on at her young age reflects how she is "a victim of a society that requires a girl to maintain the household if the maternal parent is either deceased or incapacitated" (59). The early construction of Agnes' angelic image also contributes to David's first impression of her as the "tranquil brightness" of "a stained-glass window", which is an association that lasted "ever afterwards" (140). This further shows that Agnes' embodiment of the Angel in the House ideal is not ever considered from her perspective or reflective of her desires. Rather, it is a role that is naturally thrust upon her as she is bound by male expectations and perspectives to an unquestioned and naturally assumed self-sacrificial servitude, reduced to being her father's domestic "housekeeper" or mythologized as David's "stained-glass windows". In David's childhood, the cruel Murdstone and prideful Steerforth both overtly exert their power over David to control him in his childhood, thus it falls naturally that David should gain agency to resist the influence of these powerful, controlling male figures in his life. Yet, Agnes is not afforded the same realization of agency as she is not under direct patriarchal control of a specific male figure in her life, but is rather under that of a patriarchal society which bounds her, even as a child, to an inherent self-denial and sacrificial servitude as the Angel in the House.

As she enters adulthood, Agnes' self-sacrificial image is further constructed as she emotionally restrains herself by concealing her misery over Uriah Heep's takeover of her father's firm out of consideration for her father's wellbeing. These acts of restraint thus lead to male characters who are unburdened by female ideals to act on Agnes' behalf and express her discontent. Agnes first confides in David her worry over her father's wellbeing under Uriah's control, asking indirectly whether he had observed any "gradual alteration" in her father (171). However, when David replies in a similarly discreet tone to avoid slandering Mr. Wickfield, Agnes begins to urge David to tell the plain truth, such as correcting his discreet speech when he says he "fanc[ies] so" that "it is not fancy", and finishing David's observation that Mr. Wickfield is "wanted on some business" by adding on that it is "by Uriah" (172). This shows that Agnes is fully aware of Uriah's oppression of her father, but she restrains from outwardly expressing her frustration and instead urges David to use his male voice and affirm the observations she has already made, as David is the opposite to Agnes as her "brother" who is unburdened by the restraint and domesticity she is bound to. David continues to act as Agnes' male voice when Agnes later tells him that Uriah will enter into partnership with her father, as he urges her that she "must speak out" and "must prevent it" (229). Yet, David's frustration is entirely different from Agnes', as it stems largely from his dislike of Uriah and his cunning control over Mr.

Wickfield and his firm, as he points out when Uriah is exposed that he “had long known that his servility was false” and that he had always “disliked him so heartily” (465). On the other hand, Agnes’ frustration stems from her love for her father and her care for his wellbeing, as even with Uriah’s invasive takeover of her home, she expresses that the “chief evil of their presence in the house” is that she cannot be as near to Mr. Wickfield and watch over him as she wishes (317). Thus, David is able to outwardly express his feelings as he puts himself and his emotions first, whereas Agnes restrains her emotions, withholding “more than she knew, or that she suspected”, as she puts her father’s wellbeing first (229). As she frames Uriah’s partnership as absolute, Agnes turns to emphasize her domestic role as her father’s daughter, by saying that she felt “it was necessary for papa’s peace that the sacrifice should be made”, as it would give her “increased opportunities of being his companion” (230). This links back to her domestic image as Angel in the House who is dedicated to male servitude. Yet, Agnes’ emotions are outwardly shown for the first time when she cries and blames herself for weakening her father’s “strength and energy, by turning them always upon [herself]” (230). Her cries do not stem from her frustration over the oppressive situation of Uriah’s control of her home, but from her feelings of guilt of not being able to fulfill her domestic role well enough, which shows how the only instance where Agnes does not emotionally restrain herself is in

that of self-blame regarding her failure of domesticity and embodiment of the female ideal. Yet, she cannot even fully express these emotions of guilt due to her concern for David, who upon seeing her cry begins to act in a “foolish, helpless manner”, as her emotional vulnerability contrasts with the tranquil image of her that he had constructed. It is then that Agnes returns to her “beautiful, calm manner”, “as if a cloud had passed from a serene sky” (230). The image of Agnes being used to soothe male emotions is also seen when Mr. Wickfield has an emotional outburst when Uriah suggests he would like to marry Agnes, and David calms him by “bring[ing] [Agnes’] idea before him in any form” (357). However, when Agnes is asked once again by David what there is to do about the situation, she does not have any similar human figure to depend on or to gain comfort from like her father and David do so with her, thus she only says that “there is God to trust in” (359). This further reinforces Agnes’ angelic image, as she restrains from her emotions to become a source of male comfort and symbol of domesticity to such an extent that she is afforded little agency and may only place her trust for things to change in a powerful force such as God. In asking Agnes to actively try and get out of her predicament, David encourages Agnes to take on an agency that he himself depends on and utilizes in his growth. However, what David does not realize is that Agnes is not like him. While David spends his childhood understanding agency as a necessary tool to fight against outward

oppression like his stepfather's physical abuse and control over him, Agnes spends her childhood accepting the non-deliberate, inward patriarchal oppression her father enforces upon her, implicitly learning that restraint is a necessary tool in conforming to male expectations through servitude, as seen in her "housekeeper" role. In fact, David also enforces a similar patriarchal oppression upon Agnes, as through his natural assumption to rely on her as a sister "in every boyish hope and disappointment" (537), he entraps her in unrequited love and servitude towards him. Thus, Agnes' lack of agency in carrying out the suggestions of David, her male voice, stems from a necessary and learned feminine restraint that contributes to her embodiment of the female domestic ideal for the sake of her father's happiness. Mr. Wickfield's dependence on Agnes as an ideal for emotional comfort also means that Agnes cannot directly express her discontent over Uriah, as it would mean risking her father's wellbeing by straying from the angelic ideal that he finds comfort in. It is thus that other characters like Mr. Micawber through their own victimhood at Uriah's hands become the bearers of justice that ultimately expose Uriah's crimes of fraud that free Agnes and her father from his control. Agnes, on the other hand, despite being the biggest victim under Uriah's control, must simply wait for male agency to voice her frustrations and solve her problems while she endures emotional turmoil and restrains from outward expressions of misery.

Agnes' restraint and lack of agency in solving her personal problems contrast with her active role in guiding David in both his private and public spheres of life, as she takes on the role of his "better angel" and "sister" to drive his productivity and transformative growth, thus using her domestic ability in male servitude. Agnes' saintly image had been constructed since David's boyhood, with his first impression of her alluding to the tranquility of stain-glass church windows. In his young adulthood, he further defines Agnes as "the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence" (167), which shows his unchanged perception of Agnes as the Angel in the House ideal. As David's angel, Agnes serves as a driving force that helps him grow in both the public and private spheres of his career and his domestic home. When David first realizes his aunt's financial troubles, it is Agnes who advises him to work under Doctor Strong, which became David's first step in building his self-sustaining career. In her advice, she speaks "diffidently" in "her placid sisterly manner" (351), restraining from directly telling David what to do, which preserves his agency and encourages his growth. The label of Agnes as David's "sister" as well as "angel" helps reinforce her tangibility amidst the angelic portrayals of her saintly goodness, as this sisterhood represents stability and comfort that David turns back to in order to ground himself when he faces hardships in adulthood. For instance, when David visits Agnes in her Canterbury home after the news of his aunt's

financial troubles, he feels he is “a tired traveller” coming home and finding “a blessed sense of rest” (351). Moreover, Agnes’ angelic qualities also serve as a learning model for David, as he deems her to be “superior to [him] in character and purpose” (230) after seeing how she endures the adversities of Uriah Heep’s takeover of her father’s firm. Thus, when David first achieves success as a parliamentary reporter with his “steady, plain, hard-working qualities”, he states he owes this practice to Agnes (376). This shows Agnes’ embodiment of the Angel in the House ideal, as she actively though non-overtly takes part in David’s decision-making, seeking to serve his needs and help him improve. Agnes’ female ideal of restraint is thus translated under the male context into inspiration for male agency. As Loubser writes, Agnes is “mature enough to put others’ needs ahead of her own and intelligent enough to be seen as an equal in their eyes” (60), which shows the balance between restraint in personal emotions and domestic ability for male servitude in the Angel in the House ideal. Her emotional restraint and self-denying sense of male guidance is also seen in her participation in David’s private domestic sphere of home as a mediator between David and Dora in their marriage. Prior to his engagement with Dora, Agnes advises the anxious David to boldly write to Dora’s aunts for permission to marry her, stating “it would be better only to consider whether it is right to do this; and, if it is, to do it” (352). This bold advice, when applied to David’s situation, acts

as a driving force for his male agency, as it is after hearing Agnes' advice that David had "no longer any doubt on the subject" (352). This demonstrates Agnes' role in the formation of David's marriage to Dora, which paints her not just as an "angel" in her own home to her blood-related father, but also an "angel" in the not yet existent domestic home of her non-blood related "brother" whom she secretly loves. Despite her love for David, she never expresses it outwardly and does not exhibit signs of jealousy or disapproval over David's marriage to his "childwife" Dora. Agnes even becomes a mediator in this marriage, as her domesticity brings comfort and soothes both David and Dora who harbor doubts on their compatibility due to Dora's childishness and domestic incompetence. When David first introduces Dora to Agnes, he is in "anxiety" that Agnes should like Dora, and after their meeting, is "impatient" for Agnes' praise of her, which shows how much he values Agnes' opinion as his "good angel", even when Agnes had previously advised David that he should not put his reliance on her, but on his wife Dora. As Agnes gives a favorable opinion of Dora, David feels that he had never loved Dora "so deeply and truly", as he tells Agnes she "seemed to be no less [Dora's] guardian angel than [his]" (380). The sense of being a guardian angel resonates with Agnes' embodiment of the Angel in the House ideal. From her friendship with Dora, David finally sees some semblance of this ideal in Dora, who otherwise lacks any domestic ability, as Loubser states that her "high-class

upbringing leaves her incapable of successfully understanding the middle-class model of feminine responsibility” (52), as seen for example in how Dora urges David not to mention his financial troubles to her and bring her stress, which contrasts with how Agnes actively gives advice to David in his financial ruin. Agnes’ angelic influence is also welcomed by Dora, who believes that she might have been cleverer if she had befriended Agnes a long time ago, and wishes that she “could have gone down into the country for a whole year, and lived with Agnes” (399). This shows that Dora’s desire to become cleverer stems from her desire to acquire domestic abilities that are present in Agnes, as by living with Agnes she might learn the ways of taking care of a household, which are skills she lacks yet requires in face of her marriage to David. In response to David framing her as a “guardian angel”, Agnes says she is a “poor” but “faithful” angel (380). This subtly implies Agnes’ “poor” situation, as she suppresses her unrequited love for David and “faithfully” sacrifices her feelings to become an angel that contributes to the making of his household. This shows how Agnes never strays from the Angel in the House ideal to advocate for her own desires. Ultimately, it is external circumstances like Dora’s death and David’s male agency in confession that fulfil the gratification of her character to become the official Angel in the House in David’s domestic household as he marries her. In Dora’s death, Agnes continues her role as a mediator as she sees Dora to her death and breaks the news to David by

raising her “solemn hand” “towards Heaven” (478). This image of Agnes evokes her angelic influence again, as her “pointing upward” sticks with David for a long time afterward as a representation of her “ever leading [him] to something better; ever directing [him] to higher things” (525). This can also be seen as Agnes leading David towards herself, as Agnes later reveals at her and David’s wedding that prior to her death, Dora had entrusted Agnes to occupy the “vacant place” of being David’s wife. Even on her wedding day when Agnes finally lets go of restraint and allows the celebration of her previously suppressed romantic feelings, an external justification for Agnes’ emotional freedom is established to show that Agnes ultimately has no power or agency over her own happiness, as the marriage itself is framed as a prophesized promise from David’s first wife. Moreover, their marriage is made possible due to David’s agency in confessing his feelings for her, which is contrasted with Agnes’ own emotional restraint in her initial reaction of wishing to “go away” and speak “another time” (537). Her initial unwillingness to hear David out shows her insistence on keeping her feelings a secret which “has long been [hers], and must remain [hers]” (537). Yet, David, in accordance to how he has put his confidence in Agnes ever since his boyhood by openly recollecting the objects of boyish fancies, uses this same confidence to openly express his love for her, further stating that if Agnes had been “more mindful” of herself and less of David when they grew up

together, his “heedless fancy” should have never wandered from her, as Agnes later became too much of a necessary figure to David “in every boyish hope and disappointment” that he neglected to realize his romantic love for her (537). David’s realization of his over-dependence on Agnes due to her qualities of restraint and self-denial mirrors that of Mr. Wickfield’s, as only a few chapters prior, Mr. Wickfield admits he had loved Agnes with a “diseased love”, alluding to how Agnes is similar to her mother who died “laboring in secret” under the distress of her own father’s disapproval of her and her marriage (524). Upon hearing his confession, David derived from Agnes’ “filial duty” a “more pathetic meaning” than before (525). Yet, he does not realize that Agnes’ servitude to himself is also similarly pathetic, as she had also long labored in secret without expressing misery over her unrequited love for David, even going so far to play a role in the making of his domestic household with Dora. Thus, Agnes’ restraint over her emotions, whether out of filial duty to Mr. Wickfield or sisterly duty to David; whether in secret laboring as a surrogate domestic angel or in a climax love confession with feelings culminated from childhood to adulthood, ultimately carries with it a “pathetic meaning” which shows her extreme self-sacrifice and disregard of her own emotions as the Angel in the House who is destined to serve the males in her life with her restraint and domesticity.

6. Deconstruction of Gendered Ideals: Restraint as Proactivity and Agency in

the Growing Up of Jane Eyre

In contrast, *Jane Eyre* subverts the male-centric portrayal of female ideal qualities of restraint being used to serve male needs and fulfil male expectations of a female ideal by emphasizing how Jane's righteous restraint becomes the necessary tool for Jane to achieve proactivity and agency in searching for equality in a romantic relationship. At her childhood home Gateshead Hall, the two extremities of self-denying restraint and unrestrained vengeful expression are both proved to hinder Jane's female agency, as both lead to Jane's experience of oppression. A self-denying restraint is first seen in Jane's initial response to her cousin John Reed's physical abuse, in which she emotionally and physically restrains herself from fighting back against him, "never [having] an idea of replying" to his abuse and caring instead about "how to endure the blow" (11). This extreme restraint strips away Jane's agency, forcing her to be "habitually obedient" to John (11). The effects of prolonged suffering from extreme self-restraint springs back onto Jane when she instead turns to unrestrained, vengeful expressions to predominate over fear and attacks John back in a "frantic sort" (12). This attack is an amalgamation of Jane's suppressed feelings, yet her unrestrained expression has negative repercussions as she is taken to the red room by orders of punishment from Mrs. Reed. Locked in the room, she reflects on the futility of her previous self-restraint, as she was "termed naughty and tiresome"

despite “[daring to] commit no fault” and “[striving] to fulfil every duty” (19). This realization, along with the haunting ghostly images she perceives while being in the red room, as well as her aunt’s cruel apathy to her cries, further contribute to her vengefulness. This vengefulness explodes at once when Jane restrains her emotions no longer and verbally retaliates against Mrs. Reed after she had slandered her to the Lowood schoolmaster Mr. Brocklehurst. “[T]hrilled with ungovernable excitement”, Jane lashes out at Mrs. Reed and mercilessly recounts her cruelty even as Mrs. Reed begins to “look frightened” and “twisting her face as if she would cry” (53). Yet, this unrestrained emotion once again punishes Jane, this time internally, as she deems that the after-flavor of “vengeance” gives her “a sensation as if [she] had been poisoned” (54). This shows how neither extreme self-restraint nor unrestrained wild expression benefits Jane with the agency to improve her life or to gain happiness. It is only after meeting Helen Burns, Jane’s classmate and mentor at Lowood, that Jane is able to find a middle ground of restraint that benefits her and helps her create agency in life, as Helen’s biblical teachings of restraint and endurance show Jane how restraint can be a tool for self-salvation. In discussing their teacher Mrs. Scatcherd’s cruel treatment of Helen, Jane with her unbridled fury states that she should “dislike” and “resist” her, reading her own rebellion against Mrs. Reed into Helen’s experience. Yet, Helen rejects Jane’s fury and vengeance. Instead, she draws from lessons of restraint

and love in the bible, quoting, “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you” (86). Helen’s helplessness and her trust in God mirrors that of Agnes’ from *David Copperfield*, who says that “there is God to trust in” in her own helpless times of peril. However, Helen’s teachings of restraint differ from Agnes’, as Agnes’ restraint is centered around the male wellbeing from her care of her father, whereas Helen’s restraint is self-centered, and acts as a tool for the benefit of her eternal salvation. This is seen in the “creed” that she holds and delights in, which “makes Eternity a rest—a mighty home” (87). In placing her confidence in an eternal heaven, Helen’s acts of restraint against oppression reflects her carrying out the teachings of the bible and thus can be seen as acts of agency to secure salvation and peace in her afterlife. Similarly, she advises to Jane to stop “nursing animosity or registering wrongs”. stating Jane would be happier if she “tried to forget [Mrs. Reed’s] severity, together with the passionate emotions it excited” (87). This shows how Helen recognizes Jane’s suffering instead of trying to erase it, as she advises Jane to restraint from unbridled passion for the sake of her own wellbeing and happiness, noting that it is not vengeance “that most certainly heals injury” (86). However, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, despite Helen’s contemplative purity, there is evidently a “sewer of concealed resentment” contained in her, as Helen does no more than bear her fate, and like her name, burns with anger

as seen in her leaving her things in shameful disorder and dreaming of freedom in eternity (346). This shows that Helen's restraint is rooted in self-preservation without sacrificing what she believes in. Ultimately, Helen achieves the salvation she seeks through a peaceful death, in which she states that "[b]y dying young, [she] shall escape great sufferings" that would have made her "continually at fault" (123). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Jane learns a "superficial compromise" from Helen that is comprised of both restraint and self-expression as the middle ground between Helen's saintly renunciation and concealed resentment. This is seen in how Jane represses her desire for pure liberty due to learning its impossibility, and instead asks for a new servitude when she leaves Lowood as a grown pupil (347). Despite the inherent limitations of agency in servitude, Jane's active choice in seeking out servitude contains her self-interest and agency in shaping her life and escaping from the routine at Lowood that she has grown tired of. Thus, the righteous restraint that Jane learns from her mentor Helen Burns is used at the end of Jane's childhood as a tool for achieving her agency, despite the agency itself being a compromise in face of impossible true liberty.

As Jane becomes the governess at Thornfield Hall as her new servitude, she utilizes the learned concept of compromised, righteous restraint over her romantic feelings for her employer Edward Rochester to preserve her autonomy while also

allowing the expression of her emotional needs in face of threats to her emotional autonomy. As Jane's much older and wealthier employer, Rochester is in a more powerful station than Jane. Jane's emotional restraint is constantly juxtaposed with Rochester's emotional manipulation, as during courtship, Rochester constantly uses his power over Jane to evoke her romantic confession, for example trying to arouse Jane's jealousy by ordering her to be amongst his party of guests which includes Blanche Ingram, who Jane believes Rochester will marry. However, Jane resists this control by restraining from outward expressions of her feelings for Rochester by constantly reminding herself of the differences in their stations, asserting that "[it] does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior (...) and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it (244). This shows Jane's rationality in considering how having feelings for someone as superior to her as Rochester may cause her to lose all kinds of autonomy in her life, as Kate Washington argues that any secret love between Jane and Rochester "will not result in marriage, but in mistresshood" (1). Yet, Jane's restraint is not rigid and righteously allows for her natural expressions of emotions at times when her emotional autonomy is threatened. This is seen when Jane, thinking that Rochester will marry Blanche, counters Rochester's demands for her to stay in Thornfield through an emotional outburst, where she asserts that despite

her being “poor, obscure, plain, and little”, she has just as much soul and heart as Rochester, and their “spirits” stand equal at God’s feet, surpassing mediums of “custom, conventionalities, (...) [and] mortal flesh” (386). In asking Jane to stay, Rochester directly threatens Jane’s emotional autonomy, as she would be forced to permanently suppress her feelings and suffer in heart and soul without the freedom to express her love. While Jane is no stranger to restraint thus far, her autonomy is reinforced at least in her ability to leave Thornfield and Rochester at any time, yet as Rochester asks Jane to stay, he is essentially asking for Jane’s sacrifice of her emotions and her servitude towards his household that she is not part of, which is what Agnes Wickfield does as the Angel In the House ideal, as she suppresses her romantic feelings for David and participates in his home life with Dora. Yet, Jane refuses this ideal by revealing the passions of her love for Rochester in face of this threat to her emotional autonomy. If her prior restraint over her feelings addresses the class conventionalities and physical age and power imbalance between her and Rochester, her free expression addresses the opposite, focusing instead on the equal qualities in their relationship, starting with how their spirits both before God and are in God’s creation. After delivering this speech, Jane asserts her identity as “a free human being with an independent will” and plans to leave Rochester (386). This demonstrates how Jane’s expression is not so much a confession that is lured out of

her by Rochester's manipulation, but an assertion of her independent will that is carried out by her liberation of her restrained and suppressed emotions. In righteously delivering her emotions under the threat of her autonomy, Jane asserts her female agency, as she refuses to let Rochester control how she ought to feel and where she ought to go. Even after their engagement, Jane continues to exercise this righteous restraint through striking a balance between expression of affection and assertion of autonomy. Rochester's attempts of controlling Jane continue in their engagement, as in showing his affection, he showers her with luxuries and promises of travelling to Europe and thus reinforcing their roles as "giver" and "receiver" and neglecting the quality of an equal relationship that Jane seeks, further making clear the age, wealth and power imbalance between them which threatens Jane's autonomy and gives her "a sense of annoyance and degradation" (409). Gilbert and Gubar state that "Rochester, having secured Jane's love, almost reflexively begins to treat her as an inferior" (355). This is reflected in how she states she cannot "bear being dressed like a doll" by Rochester (409). A doll is an object with the sole purpose of making its owner happy, yet Jane's strong sense of agency does not allow her to bear this unequal relationship, as she instead actively writes to her uncle in hopes of possibly "bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune" and to have "ever so small an independency", and only after she has done this can she "venture once more to meet [her] master's and

lover's eye" (409). In restraining from open displays of affection, Jane is able to address the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax's concerns of "[e]quality of position and fortune" in their relationship (403), and resist Rochester's overwhelming affections which manifest in a sense of control that asks for Jane to "mechanically" obey him, and thus assert her independence and rejection of being under his control. Moreover, Jane outwardly rejects the angelic symbolism Rochester places upon her by referring to her as an "angel", as she states that he "must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of [her]" (396). By rejecting the symbolic feminine ideal and restraining from overwhelming romantic passions, Jane establishes a strong refusal to comply with Rochester's expectations. While she no longer restrains from loving Rochester, she continues to enforce restraint over the way she loves him. It is thus that Jane's restraint is "righteous", as it contributes to her necessary self-preservation while simultaneously allowing her freedom in emotional expression, as Jane herself advocates on the importance of female emotional expression that "women feel just as men feel" (167).

However, as Rochester's marriage to his "mad" wife Bertha Mason is revealed, Jane's righteous restraint takes another form where restraint trumps emotion instead of trying to balance with it, as strict emotional restraint becomes her best chance of self-preservation in face of the possibility of her being rendered a mistress and thus

losing her equal footing as Rochester's partner. The existence of Bertha means Jane cannot lawfully be wedded to Rochester and would technically be at best his mistress, not his equal. As Rochester recounts his past experiences, he terms having mistresses to be the "next worse thing to buying a slave" as their position is inferior "by nature", and "to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading" (475). It is thus that in becoming Rochester's mistress, Jane faces the threat of becoming inferior to Rochester "by nature", no matter how equal they are in mind. This threatens her wish for equality in their relationship and entraps her to the title of "mistress", which can be interpreted as a threat to her physical autonomy, given the salacious nature of Rochester's past mistresses and the physical obedience expected from one. Under this threat to her physical autonomy, Jane's righteous restraint requires her to physically remove herself from the threat and enforce emotional restraint to preserve her agency. This contrasts with how when Rochester threatens her emotional autonomy, her best possible solution then was to let go of restraint and express her emotions to assert her agency. It is thus that the righteousness of Jane's restraint, through its flexibility, helps Jane assert or retain her agency accordingly. In this situation, Jane's "Conscience, turned tyrant, held Passion by the throat (...) and swore that with that arm of iron [Rochester] would thrust her down to unsounded depths of agony" (453). "Conscience" and "Passion" are personified here with their respective capitalizations, and the violence

depicted by Jane's two emotional extremities conveys the weight of the situation, as Rochester's "arm of iron" reflects his physical strength and social power over Jane, who would under his influence be thrust down to the agony of losing her independence. However, Jane's "Conscience", as exemplified by her righteous restraint, gives her the power to resist Rochester's strength, as even against Rochester's brimming madness over her decision to leave him, Jane "was not afraid", as she "felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported [her]" (461). This power helps Jane with her internal struggles, as when she cries for help internally, a voice tells her she "shall tear [her]self away, none shall help [her]" (453), conveying that to preserve her autonomy and agency, she must act actively. This links back to Jane's early conversation with Rochester, in which she states that human beings "must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it" (167). In finding it impossible to leave Rochester, action is made possible through an internal voice that represents omniscience and knowledge. This voice is humanized later in Jane's dream, where a white human form speaks to her spirit: "My daughter, flee temptation", to which Jane replies "Mother, I will" (487). The maternal characterization of this figure further shows Jane's restraint as a tool for female agency, which helps her assert herself against Rochester's patriarchal control by first resisting her own Passion, as Jane states internally that the more solitary, friendless

and unsustained she is, the more she will respect herself (483). As Jane leaves Thornfield, her righteous restraint over her romantic feelings for Rochester helps her to enact her agency out of self-preservation, avoiding the fate of becoming a caged woman like Bertha in the masculine household which is a field full of thorns to her autonomy.

There are two main factors in Jane's stay at Moor House that contribute to her return to Thornfield. One being that Jane comes into her own fortune as an heiress and gains the independency she requires to assert her individuality as Rochester's equal, and the other being that Jane's cousin St. John's rigid, self-sacrificial ideals of restraint threaten Jane's autonomy and causes her to once again turn to emotional expression in self-preservation. At Moor House, when Jane discovers that she is an heiress to a hefty sum of fortune her uncle left her, the thought that "independence would be glorious" swelled her heart (582). This independence is something Jane had long sought, as her desire for independence is continually demonstrated throughout her life in her rejection of others' control over her, whether it is Mrs. Reed at Gateshead, Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood or Rochester at Thornfield. In the above situations, Jane utilizes restraint to assert a limited independence, as she was still heavily influenced and controlled by these figures due to her inferior position to them. However, in becoming an heiress of her own estate, her independence is absolute, and

she is for once not under the control of any other master. This independence thus allows her the autonomy she needs to resist Rochester's control over her, as it was proven in their relationship at Thornfield that their equality in mind is insufficient to overcome the inequality in their stations, as Rochester constantly enforces control over Jane through demonstrations of his economic power, such as buying her luxuries she does not want. As Maurianne Adams states, Jane cannot cross the threshold of marriage until she meets Rochester as his equal and partner, by virtue of her inheritance on top of their interdependence (152). While Rochester's power still presents itself in his superior wealth, age and class status, Jane's inheritance allows her to avoid complete independence on him. Even during their engagement, Jane was able to assert her autonomy by continually earning her salary as Rochester's governess. Therefore, the inheritance, being a much larger sum than her salary, will be able to do much more for Jane's independence. Yet, despite her newfound independence and disengagement of servitude, Jane's autonomy is threatened when St. John extends his personal standards of rigid restraint onto her, asking her to be his wife and join him in his missionary labors to India. Early on, Jane observes in St. John an infatuation with Miss Oliver, yet St. John restrains from these feelings just as how Jane restrains from her feelings for Rochester, as Jane states that St. John would not "renounce his wild field of mission warfare for the parlours and the peace of Vale

Hall”, where Miss Oliver lives (560). This demonstrates the similarity between St. John and Jane, where they are both unwilling to sacrifice their personal beliefs in exchange for domestic life. In Jane’s sudden claim to fortune, St. John observes from her selfless division of her wealth with her cousins that Jane “revelled in the flame and excitement of sacrifice” (615), seeing his own qualities of restraint and sacrifice in Jane. Yet, St. John’s restraint differs from Jane’s righteous restraint that acts for the sake of preservation of female agency and autonomy. Instead, his restraint is rigid and self-denying, as his status as a clergyman makes him eternally dedicated to servitude as a servant to an “infallible Master” (612), whom he can never be equal to. Thus his servitude necessarily places him at a humble, self-sacrificing position to carry out his master’s will. While his religious sentiment is similar to Jane’s childhood mentor Helen Burns’, Helen differs from St. John in that she uses religion for self-salvation and does not enforce on herself or others a rigid restraint that demands sacrifice. Naturally, this means Jane’s righteous restraint, learned from Helen, is also different, as Jane seeks to be equal to her human master Rochester, and rejects completely self-denying servitude. Yet, due to St. John’s persuasive nature and Jane’s veneration of him, she finds herself persuaded to accept his offer to go to India, but insists to go as his assistant and not wife. This decision shows Jane’s temporary and partial loss of autonomy as she becomes controlled by the patriarchal figure St. John, whose strong

insistence and noble religious beliefs touch Jane and affect her judgement. St. John's influence over Jane mirrors Rochester's influence over her, as she had contemplated obeying Rochester and staying at Thornfield after Bertha was revealed. Yet, while Rochester appeals to her passions which Jane understands need to be restrained for the sake of self-preservation, St. John appeals to restraint and sacrifice, rendering them as tools for causes that are noble to Jane, and thus contributes to her decision to yield, despite knowing how in going to India, she would be abandoning "half herself" and "straining to satisfy St. John till [her] sinews ache" (617), as her righteous restraint will be replaced by extreme submission and constant self-sacrifice. However, Jane does not make the decision purely out of self-sacrifice, and she does not fully give up her autonomy, as this decision is also made out of personal benefit, as she sees this as an opportunity to "seek another interest in life to replace the one lost" and "fill the void left by upturned affections and demolished hopes" (616), which reflects how she uses the mission to India as an active way to move on from the heartbreak and seek new purposes. This balance between sacrifice and autonomy shows how the decision to go to India is another superficial compromise Jane makes in face of the unattainability of true liberty. While she is physically liberated in the independence she enjoys in becoming the woman of her own estate, the heartbreak she experiences at Thornfield restricts her emotional liberty, acting as a void that cannot be filled even

in light of her happiness with her new family. It is thus that Jane accepts the mission to India to undertake a new servitude in face of impossible true liberty, just as how she undertook the servitude of becoming a governess at Thornfield when she was unliberated and unstimulated at Lowood. Moreover, Jane asserts her agency and emotional autonomy in agreeing to go to India as St. John's sister and not wife. This demonstrates how Jane sets up boundaries that assert her autonomy as a condition for sacrifice and restraint, as she tells St. John that she is ready to go to India, "if [she] may go free" (618). However, St. John insists that she must come as his wife, which actively threatens Jane's emotional and physical autonomy, as it denies her the experience of true equal love that she yearns for and in exchange gives her a loveless marriage that is a monstrous "martyrdom" she is unwilling to accept (617). Marrying St. John would also physically trap her in an Angel in the House role where she must physically be under St. John's control, as he searches specifically not for an assistant, but a wife that will fully be his possession, as his "sole helpmeet [he] can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death" (619). The word "retainment" alludes to his objectification of Jane, prizing her "as a soldier would a good weapon" (617). It is thus that Jane escapes St. John's control over her, realizing her "unconscious of folly at the instant" which stemmed from her veneration of him, "so strong that its impetus thrust [her] at once" to cease struggling and accept his offer

(638). She realizes St. John seeks to control Jane just like Rochester did, and Jane understands that yielding to Rochester “would have been an error of principle”, while yielding to St. John “would have been an error of judgment” (638), which demonstrates how Rochester appeals to Jane’s emotions whereas St. John appeals to Jane’s mind. Yet in both situations, Jane’s righteous restraint and passions help enforce her autonomy and resist patriarchal control that would inevitably lead to her total submission.

Ultimately, with her new and asserted independence, Jane’s return to Rochester puts her no longer in an inferior position to him where she is controlled, as she can now exist as his equal, both in mind and station. At Moor House, Jane gets the first impression that it is time to return to Rochester through hearing him call her in her mind. The voice of Rochester calling Jane to come to him contrasts with the voice of the white maternal spirit that had called Jane to “flee temptation” and leave him. Gilbert and Gubar argue that this telepathic communion is “made possible by [Jane’s] new independence and Rochester’s new humility” (367), as physically, he loses his sight and becomes mutilated in the fire that Bertha set to Thornfield Hall before she died; mentally, he like Jane, now “draws his powers from within himself, rather than from inequity, disguise, deception” (369). Rochester’s control over Jane is thus stripped down, as with Jane’s independence and his humility, he knows she need not

suffer to “devote [her]self to a blind lameter” (663). Yet Jane only repeats that she is her own mistress, which demonstrate how her devotion towards Rochester is not from a sense of servitude that he assumes, but from a personal willingness. It is only when their power imbalance is negated that Jane can love Rochester, and even better, as she can now “really be useful to [him], than [she] did in [his] state of proud independence, when [he] disdained every part but that of the giver and protector (680). Now as his “eyes and hands”, Jane can return to him the same giving and protection, and accept Rochester’s proposal of marriage, not as an Angel in the House that passively accepts marriage like Agnes Wickfield, but as a woman of her own estate, actively making the journey from Moor House back to Thornfield, where she looks back on “how desolate, and hopeless, and objectless” she was when she left (644), and see herself as the opposite now, returning as a rich, independent woman with the objective to reconcile with her love and meet emotional liberation. However, as one may note, Jane’s marriage to Rochester is only made possible after the burning of Thornfield which kills Bertha and creates a vacancy in the role of Rochester’s wife. Bertha mirrors the image of Jane in her childhood, where she actively posed a threat to the male security of the young patriarch John Reed, and was thus punished and caged in the red room, driven to madness like Bertha. Bertha thus represents Jane’s unrestrained vengeful expression, prior to learning the compromise of righteous

restraint from Helen Burns. Elaine Showalter argues that “before Jane Eyre can reach her happy ending, the madwoman must be purged from the plot and passion must be purged from Jane herself” (68-69). However, I argue that Bertha and the passion she represents is never fully purged from Jane. Bertha’s death, surrounded by the flames she set, frame her as a martyr to her desire for liberty, as she successfully burns down the establishment that had contained her, and does injury to her captor as retribution of her rage. It is these actions of passion for liberty that pave the way for Jane to take up the vacant space left by her death, and allows Jane to love Rochester better in his stripped-down pride after he faces a loss of physical independence from Bertha’s arson. Unlike how Gilbert and Gubar argue that “the symbolic death of Bertha frees [Jane] from the furies that torment her” (362), I argue that Bertha’s death and her furies are inherently embedded into Jane, as in taking Bertha’s place, Jane, to an extent, accepts Bertha’s rage as her own, as it is Bertha’s unrestrained expression that allows for Jane’s ultimate righteous expression of her love for Rochester. Yet, it is true that Bertha, representing the extremity of self-indulgence and unrestrained expression, cannot live on to build her agency and happiness. Like child Jane, Bertha is succeeded and replaced by a calmer, righteously expressive Jane, whose embodiment of the compromised middle ground between self-sacrifice and self-indulgence allows her female agency and building of her happiness. It is thus that the ending of the novel

reinforces once more that righteous restraint is a necessary tool for building female agency, whereas emotions like retribution and rage, while justified and at times necessary as well, cannot be fully indulged upon, and must be balanced out with rationality.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, by comparing the growth of the protagonists of the two Victorian Bildungsroman novels *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*, it is illustrated that in *David Copperfield*, gendered ideals of male proactivity and female restraint are constructed through the portrayal of David's growth into the gentleman ideal through proactivity and agency and Agnes Wickfield's growth as the Angel in the House ideal through restraint and domesticity. *Jane Eyre*, however, deconstructs the gendered constructs around these traits by equally representing these male and female ideal traits in Jane's growth, framing her restraint and domesticity not as tools for male servitude as an Angel in the House, but as tools for female achievement of proactivity and agency as she is established as a woman of her own estate who reaches physical and emotional liberty.

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Reflection 2

This project is definitely the most challenging writing assignment I have ever had to complete, as it requires the application of an abundance of skills I have learnt in all of my undergraduate studies, such as the close-reading of the primary text, the research of secondary sources and personal insight added onto academic criticisms, and the articulation of a focused, detailed central argument as well as clear, coherent sub-arguments. In completing this project, the biggest challenge I faced was dealing with the scope of my research. *David Copperfield* itself is a very long body of work to comb through, and adding *Jane Eyre* on top of that was a challenge to my time-management skills, as I constantly worried that I would not be able to finish my project on time, and to the extent that I would be satisfied by. However, with the help of my supervisor, I was able to set internal deadlines for the completion of each section that I strictly held myself to. This effectively taught me the importance of self-discipline and time management in an independent research project. I also faced challenges of managing the scope of my arguments, as I originally intended to write an extra section that looked at the “fallen woman” and “mad woman” characterization that is commonly found in both novels and exists as a recurring theme in the Victorian Bildungsroman genre. Yet as the existing arguments and sections I had written were already quite lengthy and focused, I decided to make minor adjustments to my central

thesis that would better accommodate the arguments I had already written, as I did not want to sacrifice quality for quantity. Throughout this process, I regularly maintained communication with my supervisor and sought his advice on the changes I intended to make to my project, as well as incorporating his feedback at different stages of my project, whether it is in the outline stage, historical research stage or main arguments stage. However, I believe that section of intended research I have sadly had to let go of due to the scope of this project will not be entirely lost, as in the future, I hope to pursue an Mphil in literary studies where I can bring those sections back onto paper and further expand my research interest in the Victorian Bildungsroman and its characterizations of different kinds of women, not just limited to *Angel in the House*. In completing this project, I have increased confidence in my ability to pursue postgraduate studies, as I believe I have learned how to complete an independent research project and how to incorporate supervisor feedback. I am also considering and hoping that I may pursue careers related to language and culture, such as journalism, publishing or translation, which I believe would be great opportunities to apply my writing and research skills that I have learnt in my undergraduate studies and in completing this project, as these skills have become crucial in my writing and thought processes.

While being the most challenging project in my undergraduate studies, this project is also the most rewarding assignment I have ever completed, and other than being an amalgamation of my undergraduate writing and research skills which I owe to the teachings and feedback of my past instructors, it also represents my passion for my studies of literature, and I hope that I can look back on this project however many years later and still be as proud of it as I am today, and still hold this passion for my studies.

Sunyongxue Kuang Catherine

ENGE4700 Independent Research Project

Supervisor: Prof. Li Ou

Deficiency of Representation: Musical Ekphrasis of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Introduction

When Tim Tim Cheng showed us this quote in the course "Song and Poetry", I was hit by an overwhelming surge of breath-taking beauty and perplexity all at once: "What sound, exactly, could be made by heavy, icy, drops of water falling in a dream on the breast of a drowned man in a lake?" (Dayan 7). The line is what George Sand, a French novelist of the European Romantic era, penned into words upon hearing Frederick Chopin's piano prelude. This act of translation between musical imagination with that of the literary representation fascinates me immensely. It brought me back to the "Ekphrasis" course taught by Professor Li Ou in my year one studies, where we delved into the realm of words and visual arts' encounter, discovering the complicated relations between the two art forms as they continuously illuminate but also rival with each other. This conceptual and analytical framework I acquired through "Ekphrasis" inspired me to apply the same logic to the relationship between literature and music: if you can explore the interrelationships of literature and the visual arts, the same approach surely could be expanded toward the ekphrasis analysis onto literature and music as well. With my enthusiasm of Romantic poetry since my first-year study of the "Romanticism" course, I became curious about the relationship between Romantic poetry and music since I have never come across the topic in the syllabus or readings. The interaction between Romantic poetry and music opens itself like

a mysterious and exciting unknown territory for me, waiting for me to embark upon an exciting new adventure.

To begin with this journey of exploring Romantic poetry and music, my attention is drawn to John Keats, the youngest but among the most prolific of the Romantic poets. In particular, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" which I first came across in the "Ekphrasis" class presents itself as an intriguing text to be studied. Primarily researched for its interrelationship with visual arts with its notional ekphrasis of an imaginary urn, the poem has been adapted to various musical compositions across time which have not garnered much scholarly attention. Among the adaptations is the third movement "Ode on a Grecian Urn (No.3)" from "Choral Symphony, Op.41" composed by Gustav Holst written in the years 1923-24. The composer explicated Keats's poem with his own interpretation, envisioned the non-existent urn carved out with his words and translated the imagination into melodies weaved together with soprano, mixed chorus, and orchestra. This process of translation, with its navigation of transforming or not transforming the essence from the multiple layers of artistic mediums, is what this essay aims to explore (51).

Although there are no previous scholarly works specifically on the musical ekphrasis of Keats's poetry, the theoretical foundation of transmedial aesthetics in the interdisciplinary study of both literary theory and musicology offered me solid groundwork to build my research upon. Musicologist and literary critic Lawrence Kramer's *Music and Poetry, the Nineteenth Century and After*, published in 1986 analyses the deep structural relations between music and poetry by highlighting their respective "gestural challenges", analysing the temporality present in music and poetry in insightful ways (13). His discussion of Beethoven, Wordsworth, Chopin, and Shelley serve as significant point of reference for my study of Keats and the relation to music in his poetry. German musicologist Siglind Bruhn's seminal work *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* published

in 2000 provides the most relevant theoretical background for my research, where she defines the concept of “transmedialization” and the various ways that one art form can relate to, respond to, and transform another fruitfully, specifically sonic responses to verbal and visual arts. Peter Dayan’s *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* published in 2006 contends the difficulty to explore the fundamental questions such as the possibility of translation between poetry and music, and the capacity of communication of the aesthetic mediums, by tracing the French literary and music traditions, probing the limits of analogy between poetry and music. Finally, *Word Like a Bell: John Keats, Music and the Romantic Poet* by John A. Minahan in 1992 analyses the ideas of music in Keats’s poetry, parallels between music and the sonic quality of Keats’s poetry, and the organisation of his poetry in relation to music. These scholarly works would serve as the theoretical groundwork for me to chart the unknown territory of musical ekphrasis of Keats’s poetry, offering me solid musical, literary, and philosophical references to draw from.

The essay will be divided into three sections. The first section will lay out the theoretical framework of musical ekphrasis. The much-contended definitions of ekphrasis, translation, and transmedialization will be discussed, as well as the fundamental differences and similarities between the artistic mediums of music and poetry. Theories and concepts proposed by Kramer, Bruhn, Dayan and Minahan will be referenced here as parts of the critical evaluation. The second section will focus on explicating the self-reflexive deficiency and ironic paradox of Keats’s notional ekphrasis in his poem. Keats’s acute awareness of the failure of poetic language or any representations of artistic forms is saturated throughout the poem, creating an irony and failure of ekphrasis. The third section of the essay will turn the attention to the musical ekphrasis of Keats’ poem, which is Holst’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn (No. 3)”. In the musical transmedialization of John Keats’ poem of notional ekphrasis “Ode on a Grecian urn” to “Ode on a Grecian Urn, No.3” by Holst, three layers of ekphrastic

attempts are present: the imaginary urn, Keats's ekphrastic poem of the urn, and the musical transmedialization of Keats's ekphrasis of the urn. By a close examination of the musical adaptation, the essay seeks to evaluate what is achieved and what is lost through the process of transmedialization. Through an investigation into this complicated multi-layered ekphrasis across artistic mediums, the essay aims to argue that the fundamental irony and paradox of artistic representation—no representation could possibly encapsulate human life, and any transmedialization of life itself is painfully deficient.

Part I: Musical Ekphrasis—A Theoretical Discussion

The historical dynamics between music and poetry has been one of fluctuations and mutual inspiration with alternating status of superiority and inferiority, constantly attempting to strive for the condition of the other. Intertwined for thousands of years, poetry started as singing, accompanied by music. The first lyric poets in ancient Greece, such as Homer, performed their poems in accompaniment of the lyre. In the Age of Antiquity and the Medieval Period, song has been associated with primal creativity and close proximity with the divine that poetry could not reach. The ancient Greek philosopher and Mathematician Pythagoras' claim that the movement of the cosmos created music, and its melodies were heard by the Muses, the goddesses of poetic inspiration, reveals the traditional superiority that music pertains over poetry. With the divine Word being represented as a 'tuneful voice...heard from high' in John Dryden's 'A Song for St. Cecilia's Day', the perception of music as the embodiment of a higher dimension of reality and language as a lower one is shown. The only way that poetry can arrive at a closer proximity with the source of creation is to be 'carried by the singing voice', which is the reason why poetry would be referred to as song when they are represented as 'vision, epiphany, or prophecy' (Kramer, 2). The ineffable element of music, the quality of being too great to be uttered or expressed in words, was deemed as an affinity to the harmony and union of the universe by ancient Roman writer Cicero and Renaissance poet Milton, penning 'the most delectable music of the devolving stars' (208). The transcendence of immediate reality into the divinity and its sense of infinity marks music as the superior art form in ancient times, whereas language is bounded to the ground and is dependent upon the melody to be elevated and transformed.

The alteration of attitude began since the Renaissance, when musicians became preoccupied with anxiety 'to be less than—or is it more than? —ineffable' (Kramer, 2). The condition of ineffability, which was so honourably cherished as the most defining quality of

music, became something musicians wanted to avoid. Instead, music began to aspire for the state of poetry to achieve the possibilities of poetic expressiveness. In the nineteenth century marked by the Romantic and Victorian period, the dialectic engagement of music with poetry became particularly intense, evident in the proliferation of program music and immense popularity and prominence of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" (Kramer, 3). Numerous nineteenth century musical compositions were written as ekphrastic responses to classic poems, such as Liszt's compositions on works of Lamartine, Goethe, Dante, Shakespeare, and so on. Examples include "Les Préludes" based on Lamartine's poem of the same title, "Faust Symphony" from Goethe's play, Symphony to Dante's "Divina Commedia", and the orchestral work "Hamlet" in response to Shakespeare's play. Furthermore, Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" explicitly serves the purpose to illuminate and explicate the arcane poem of Mallarmé, with the poet himself making the acknowledgement in the inscription he sent to Debussy. The incorporation of poetry in musical composition is pushed to even higher prestige by Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony", where he established the pattern of climatic resolution of the tensions built through the movement of a large-scale orchestral music by introducing a poem "Ode to Joy". The popularity of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" reinforced and consolidated the superiority of poetry over music in the Romantic era: only the power of poetic expressiveness is capable of resolving the built-up tension, music alone seems almost inadequate and deficient. Music longs and yearns for the effability of words, no longer content with its own ineffability which was treasured long ago.

Kramer writes in reflection that "In the beginning was the song. Is it fair to add that, once separated, music and poetry tend to become nostalgic for each other?" (3). This sentiment of nostalgia makes music yearn to be poetic and poetry aspire to be musical. The two art forms, as demonstrated above, demand both a collective and distinctive understanding, which the following analysis aims to achieve.

Both music and poetry are temporal arts, which “concretised and perceptually enriched” the experience of passing time “between a definite beginning and a definite ending” (Kramer, 8). The “framing effect” that music and poetry share in structuring and organising time and hence the lived experience of human life is among their most fundamental similarities. By bounding the temporal experience with specific beginnings and endings, the temporality of music and poetry creates an antithesis to the time-sense of routine life: “free-floating”, “perceptually tenuous”, one that is ambiguous and blurry with no clear bounds (Kramer, 8). In a way, music and poetry resist “our common, immediate, lived experience” by saturating the time frame with particular forms of expectations and desire, creating the effect of intensification that elevates the audience from the mundanity and plainness of everyday temporality (Kockelmans, 195). According to Kramer, this particular way of organising time requires heightened continuity and the coexistence of several forms of periodicity, which he refers to as “gestural” temporal movement (11). The cumulation and release of tension and pressure need to be achieved through a layering of multiple different senses of time simultaneously. Both art forms consist of multi-layered structural rhythms. In music, Cone argues that “there is a sense in which a phrase can be heard as an upbeat to its own cadence, larger and larger sections can be so apprehended. A completely unified composition would then constitute a single huge rhythmic impulse, completed the final cadence” (25-26). This pulse of rhythm is also essential to the layering and unfolding of poetry. In *Poetic Closure*, Smith explains that “the secretion of a poem’s structure, then, becomes to answer the question, ‘What keeps it going?’ To think of poetic structure in this way...is to emphasise the temporal and dynamic qualities that poetry shares with music” (4). This convergence of structural rhythm between music and poetry and their organisation of temporality thus mark one of the most significant similarities the two arts share. However, as the thesis would proceed to argue in the following sections, this very antithesis between the

poetic and musical organisation of time and the lived time of immediate experience made the artistic mediums incapable of capturing the authentic experience of human life. By the very structure of rhythms and dynamics to heighten temporality within the forms, the unbridgeable gap between representation and life itself is made noticeable.

In *Word Like a Bell*, Minahan makes a distinction between the ways in which words and music signify. According to Minahan, in musical signification, “combinatory meaning” is prioritised and gains the foremost attention (7). The individual units of notes, chords, and rhythms construct the meaning together by existing simultaneously in the composition only and can only be comprehended as a combinatory unit of whole. On the other hand, in verbal signification, “referentiality” is the most significant characteristic (Minahan, 8). Before attending to the context and arrangement of the words, the words first individually refer to particular objects, ideas, feelings, or thoughts. A verbal utterance is primarily referential, and the combinatory dimension has a secondary significance to be comprehended. Nevertheless, although secondary, combinatory meaning is always active and serves critical function in the making of meaning for a verbal utterance. As Minahan puts it: “Reference unfolds in time; combination is the way meaning enables patterns of time themselves to be significant”, and that the contribution of pattern in the construction of meaning in a verbal utterance makes it “an utterance that acts in musical ways, because in music such palpable patterns of time are the objects of primary attention” (9). This discussion of temporality leads Minahan to elaborate on the significance of musicality and temporality of Romantic poetry in particular. He describes Romantic poetry as in seek of “such time-saturated, musiclike utterances” (9). He referenced Thomas MacFarland, who proposes that the Romantic notion of time is “a simultaneity of nowness and passing away” (249). Time, in a sense, is not simple duration, it is duration broken by fragmentation and decay, filled with contradictions, complexities, and ultimately dynamisms. Every entity that exists contains both the past and the future

simultaneously, and it cannot fully be grounded in the present of every fleeting moment either (Minahan, 10). Paul de Man points out that Romantic poetry utilises “the rhetoric of temporality” (222-23). As Minahan brilliantly elaborates on this ironic temporality of Romanticism: “The Romantic self is endlessly caught in the impossibility of oneness with itself, because Romanticism is characterised by a sense of distance between the present and adequacy” (10). Thus is the temporality in Romantic poetry with its underlying musicality: while Romantic poetry seeks musiclike utterances with its time-saturated quality, it is trapped in a palpable rhythm that is forever insufficient to fully exist in the present, and forever in an ironic and futile chase for completeness that will never likely be accomplished. The self-reflexivity and heightened awareness on the failure of artistic representation to capture the present moment and reconcile with fleeting temporality are present in both Keats’s poem and Holst’s musical ekphrasis, which will be the focus of close analysis in the paper later on.

Ekphrasis, in antiquity, was utilised as a form of rhetorical device almost exclusively, translated from the traditional Greek rhetoric books as “a descriptive text which places the matter communicated clearly and distinctly before our eyes” (Graf, 144). With “ek” meaning “out”, and “phrazein” meaning “tell” or “pronounce”, the word refers to the act of “to speak out” or “to show in full” (Rippl, 1). This rhetorical device later expanded to refer to poems inspired by paintings or other forms of visual arts, or as Heffernan defines it: “ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a graphic representation” (299). While the relationship between words and images has been explored with immense scope and depth in scholarship, the musical equivalent of ekphrasis is a much more recent emerging field. Further expanding the definition of ekphrasis to encompass music as a medium, Bruhn coins it as “representation in one medium [here: music] of a text previously represented in another medium [here: poetry or painting]” (47). This process of transforming from one medium to another is called “transmedialization” by Bruhn, which highlights the transmedial essence of ekphrasis which

engages the interactions or dynamics between multiple mediums, emphasising the metamorphosis process of ekphrastic attempts. Another term that can be used interchangeably with the word “transmedialization” is “translation”, more widely employed by Dayan in his *Music Writing Literature* (10). As Dayan writes when discussing the relationship between raindrops and Chopin’s prelude, “the rain should be perceived in the music, not as a static sense, not as a signified (still less as a referent), *but as it is translated* [original italicisation], in the process of its own transformation into something else” (10). Evidently, both Bruhn’s “transmedialization” and Dayan’s “translation” underscore the importance of transformation, the process of changing from one medium to another using the expressiveness of that particular medium’s language. Through this metamorphosis, it is not mere imitation, not something static and rigid, but a fluid dynamic that probably makes the transformed product unrecognisable but capturing the essence of one’s own interpretation, both determined by the composers themselves and the changing mediums. Thus, in the following analysis of both Keats’s poem and the musical composition, the words “transmedialization” and “translation” will be employed interchangeably to indicate the transmedial process of transformation.

Part II: Keats's Ironic Ekphrasis—The Deficiency of Representation

Keats's ekphrastic attempt in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a strenuous interrogation of the necessary limits of representational arts, constantly ironizing the deficiency of artistic mediums to encapsulate the essence of human life marked by fleeting temporality. The first stanza initiates with an apostrophe, addressing the silent urn of Keats's imagination: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness" (1). With the pronoun "thou", the poet personifies the inanimate object and seeks to bring it to life through poetic language. From the use of "still" and negative prefix in "unravish'd", the ekphrastic attempt of narration is already evident: the impulse of narration, the desire of movement, and the prediction of the inevitable dissolution of the present frozen moment of perfection. Keats instils temporality onto the atemporal and static urn through the narrative urge, disturbing the eternal tranquillity. The poem proceeds to conjure up numerous metaphors in attempt to adequately convey Keats's excited imagination: "unravish'd bride", "foster-child of silence and slow time", and "sylvan historian", three consecutive comparisons in the first quatrain, as if the poet is constantly reaching for the right descriptions but not quite satisfied (1-3). The almost desperate grasp for metaphors reveals the limitation of language with its referential nature and the poet's painful awareness of it. Language needs to repeatedly chase after another referent, forever circulating in an arena of externality and straying further and further away from the immediacy of the subject itself. The poem then presents its first explicit comparison between artistic mediums: "who canst thus express/ A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" (4), positing the poet's current view of visual arts' superiority over that of poetry, which will be susceptible to fluctuations and hesitations later. The following sestet is quickened with a frantic series of questions halted by caesurae such as: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?" (9). The incessant questions of "who", "when" and "whither" are left unanswered, hanging there, demonstrating the poet's futile narrative attempts to engage the urn into conversation.

The second stanza begins with a bold statement on musicality: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter” (11). Again, the poet is not refrained from expressing his iconophilia, foregrounding the superiority of visual arts over both words and sounds. By juxtaposing “heard” and “unheard” melodies and emphasising that the latter is “sweeter” than the former, Keats revealed his obsession with the un-represented art, the unconsummated existence, in a sense the non-existent perfection before being manifested and perceived by earthly senses. This is further reinforced in the repetition of negatives in the following stanza: “Fair youth...thou canst not leave”, “nor ever can those trees be bare”, “never, never canst thou kiss”, and “she cannot fade” (16-19). With the repeated words of negation, an eternity brought by the atemporality of the sculpturesque medium is emphasised. It offers an antithesis to the impulse of narration, and the unstoppable flow of motion beyond the sculpted surface. Nevertheless, Keats’s attitude toward eternity is not as straightforward as it may appear but marked with subtle hesitations and contradictions. In *The Odes of John Keats*, Helen Vendler proposes that there are two senses of eternity present in the ode which Keats constantly fluctuates between. One sense of eternity is “an infinite sequence of temporal successions”, belonging to the “swelling reality” and amplifying the sweetness of a fleeting world which the poet deeply yearns for. Another sense of eternity is an “unchanged permanency”, a cold and static limitation of the atemporal medium that lacks the fullness and warmth of life in the imperfect temporal reality (Vendler, 130). “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss”, the repetition of “never” here highlights the second sense of eternity, a forced and terminal impossibility of consummation where the motion of union is eternally delayed and displaced by the atemporal medium (17). On the other hand, “For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!” is an exclamation of the first sense of eternity, one that rests in the “pregnant moment” forever and exists in the forever condition of sweet anticipation (20).

This paradoxical duality of eternity continues to exist in Keats's ode, as he struggles to come to terms with whether the fleeting but real human passion or the eternal yet cold and forever incomplete sculptural representation is ultimately more desirable. In the third stanza, the iconophilia established from previous stanzas is ironized and subverted. As the poet continues to celebrate the encapsulation of love on the urn, the cold indifference and monotonous nature of this represented love is unveiled through the ekphrastic failure of the poet's language. The poet seeks to express the beauty of eternal love; however, he could only resort to the repetition of dreary and colourless descriptions: "Ah, happy, happy boughs!" and "More happy love! more happy, happy love!" (21, 25). This stuttering of words with its flatness and dryness mirrors the condition of the lovers depicted on the urn: eternal happiness with no real human passion of twists and turns, the frozen continuity of one single state deprived of complexities and nuances, thus stripped off the very beauty of passion itself. This atemporal love is contrasted with the last two lines describing "breathing human passion": "That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd/ A burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (29-30). This marks a distinctive turn from the monotonous happiness repeated in the previous lines, transitioning to the disagreeable and sufferings of real human passion—one marked by complexities and intensity. Here, Keats's narrative urge takes dominance again which counters the atemporality of the urn, while the highly sensual descriptive words of "burning" and "parching" create a warm temperature as opposed to the coldness of the sculptural medium. Thus, Keats overturned the iconophilia established before—although torn with sorrow, the "breathing human passion" is more desirable than the dreary eternity on sculptural representation.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker turns his gaze upon a scene of ceremonial progression on the urn. Carrying on with his narrative urge, Keats begins to ask questions about what is not captured on the urn: the before and after of the scene represented, the silent

and forever unknown narrative buried from the chosen encapsulation of that specific moment on the sculpture's medium. "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?", "To what green altar...What little town by river...is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?", asks Keats curiously and insistently to the silent urn (31-36). The continuous verb form of "coming", as well as the preposition "to" indicating direction and movement, are attempts of setting the frozen moment into motion, enlivening the paralysed characters. The onomatopoeic word "lowing", mimicking the sound made by cows, envoices the soundlessness of the scene. Nevertheless, this ekphrastic attempt in the first quatrain turned into anti-ekphrasis in the following sestet, as the imaginary emptied village is forever frozen in soundlessness and silence: "little town, thy streets for evermore/ Will silent be; and not a soul to tell/ Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (38-40). Here, the poet is painfully aware of the exclusive and depriving nature of visual representation with its almost cruel undertone. The sculptor picked one moment, and perpetually freezes the moment through encapsulation: the town forever absent, a history forever untold, and villagers forever stranded, unable to return home.

While the first stanza addresses the urn by personifying it, the apostrophe of the last stanza highlights its lifelessness. By calling the urn "O Attic shape! Fair attitude!" and "Thou, silent form", the poet overturns the attempt of bringing the object to life with poetic language, but quite contrarily, emphasises the compositional elements that constitute the medium itself, deconstructing the urn back to its lifeless parts (41, 44). Here, Keats inserts puns to subtly point towards the deficiency of artistic representation: "with brede/ of marble men and maidens overwrought" (41-42). The word "brede" can refer to ornamental embroidery of interwoven patterns, while also punning with "breed", which is a necessary act of life that the depicted lovers could never consummate. On the other hand, the word "overwrought" can refer to something that is excessively ornamented or decorated, while also meaning emotional intensity and extreme agitation, an overstrained state which the characters on the urn could

never experience. These puns thus subtly point to the deficiency of art: it could never encapsulate the fullness of human life. The iconophilia is overturned completely when Keats lets out an accusatory exclamation: “Cold Pastoral!” (45). It is this exact coldness of the urn that fuels the poet with a sense of deception and anger. With all its verisimilitude, the urn is fundamentally cold and silent, a form that does not and could not contain all the fleeting complexities real to the human life. This strenuous interrogation on the superiority and limitation of representation finally reaches its suspending resolution: though seemingly superior and enviable with its atemporality and eternity, artistic representation cannot encapsulate the beauty of human life—one in which the fleeting temporality and transience add temperature, intensity, and complexities to human life itself.

Part III: Holst's Musical Ekphrasis

Gustav Holst's musical ekphrasis contains three layers of transmedialization: the imaginary urn, Keats's ekphrastic poem of the urn, and the musical transmedialization of Keats's ekphrasis of the urn. Holst's ekphrasis is an ironic one that engages and resists this multi-layered nature simultaneously, revealing the representational crisis of the urn, the poem, and the music itself. Furthermore, as a Choral Symphony, the mediation of lyrics using Keats's poem creates an extra layer of reflexivity, with the music interacting and subverting the very medium of poetry in its performance, making meta-ekphrastic commentaries on the mediums of representation.

Holst employs structural irony through the contrast between the verbal utterance of the chorus and its musical performance to draw the audience's attention to the contrasting mediums of representation. Starting with *pianissimo*, meaning to play in very soft volume, Holst's ekphrasis of the first stanza addresses the urn in a low tone of murmuring voice, as if cautious not to disturb the tranquil silence of the urn with its own sounds. While Keats's impulse of narration and imposition of temporality is revealed through the use of "still" and negative prefix, Holst divided the word "un-ravish'd" (1) across two bars marked by the dash. With the overall key being the A minor scale, Holst adds an accidental F sharp when the syllable "ra-" is played, while also changing the time signature from three-four to two-four at the transition between the first and second bars, quickening the pace. This act of elongation, separation, and manipulation of rhythm shows the musician's desire and tension to actualise the "ravish", to disrupt the atemporal nature of the urn by saturating the bars with heightened temporality. An urge to counter the urn and the poem is shown during the choral singing of "silence" (2): while the literal meaning points to an absence of sounds, the music rebelliously heightens its pitch by raising up one register, loudening its sounds, ironically subverting the condition of the urn and the original poetic utterance. While Keats's attempt to engage the urn

in conversation is met with cold silence, the music creates an echoing conversation within itself as Holst divides the chorus into two choir sections, singing the questions one after another consecutively. The second choir voice begins before the previous one ends; thus, the two choir voices intersect and layer upon each other, creating a sense of urgency and eagerness of asking the questions. The two voices unite into one at “What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (9-10), with increasing volume and tension building up toward an explosive climax at the syllable “ecs-”, which, however, suddenly dies down at the syllables “tasy”. This dramatic contrast of instant climax and anti-climax, strophe and anti-strophe, brings forward the urn’s silence in response to the passionate musical questionings. The dying sounds foreground a lingering silence, one that the music must acknowledge and cannot restore.

For the ekphrasis of the second stanza, Holst continues the strenuous engagement and self-conscious rivalry with the urn and the poem, wrestling with the different forms of representations and their limits. When playing Keats’s explicit statement of music’s inferiority to the urn, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter” (11-12), half-chorus rather than full sings in *pianissimo*, with sounds barely audible to the audience. This extremely soft and low sonic quality enhances as the chorus approaches the line “Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone” (14), played by one singular voice line with no instrumentation for accompaniment, as if attempting to achieve the idealised state of “unheard” and “no tone” of the urn worshipped by Keats. Ironically, despite its proximity, music can never attain the absolute state of silence. This act is thus a self-ironizing one, with music self-reflexively yearning and reaching for a state it can never achieve, internalising the claimed inferiority of heard music to the unheard one.

However, the music does not follow blind iconophilia and accept its own inferiority: it struggles, it resists, and ironizes the urn too through the utilisation of choral dissonance and

dynamic shifts. When the music approaches “Ah, happy, happy boughs” (21) from Keats’s third stanza, the tone contrasts with the uttered choral words. While the words are reiterating “happy” again and again, the melody sounds disturbing, mysterious, and ominous due to choral dissonance. Holst employs numerous accidentals in the melody of the chorus, including D-sharp, G-sharp, and F-sharp, altering the original A minor scale. However, he simultaneously alters the key to the clarinet accompaniment with an E-flat, changing its melody to another different tone. The clashing of the different keys in simultaneous melodies creates a shockingly disturbing atmosphere, unsettling the audience with its unexpected and unpredictable texture. This choral dissonance mirrors the discrepancy between the music and the words, reinforcing and enhancing Keats’s overturn of iconophilia in this stanza. At the line “forever panting, forever young” (27), Holst divides the syllables “pan-” and “ting” across two bars again, as if attempting to actualise “forever” with its elongation, mimicking the poetic act of enjambment by seeking to speak across the bars. However, ironically, despite the attempt to prolong the duration to become closer to “forever”, the temporal nature of music makes its ending inevitable: the music decreases in volume with a sudden *pianissimo*, as if hesitant or even guilty for its endeavour to transcend temporal bounds and eternalise “panting”. This play with volume continues with “and forever young”, with the sudden rise and fall again repeating the strenuous movement of strophe and antistrophe, showing the music’s entrapment in constant oscillation and hesitancy in its own representational power.

As the piece continues, Holst plays with structural irony again to interrogate the cruel eternity of the urn and reflect upon the extent of temporality that music is capable of. As the ekphrasis reaches stanza four, Holst changes the key signature from A minor to E major. While minor scales are often associated with darker and more melancholic atmospheres, major scales are usually related to luminous, optimistic, or peaceful moods. By changing from a minor to major scale, the music is trying to recreate and match the solemnness and

peacefulness of the ceremonial progression as depicted on the urn. Nevertheless, there exists a sinister and disturbing undertone to this grandiose major scale, as Holst continues to create minor deviations by inserting natural accidentals where the D notes are supposed to be played sharp, causing subtle dissonance under the overall harmonious progression. When the music reaches last phrase of the stanza, “can e'er return” (40), Holst separates the word “re-turn” into across two bars as indicated by the dash, changing the key signature from E major back to A minor at this transition. By changing or restoring the key signature back to its previous scale, Holst is ironically playing with the notion of returning: the characters on the urn are perpetually frozen in that moment, suspended, unable to return. In a way, the music attempts actualise the act of returning by resuming to its previous key, bestowing temporality and change to the non-actualised frozen eternity. Nevertheless, despite music’s effort to restore temporality, this is merely a return of a key on the score and in a performance. It can never substitute the lives suspended, and homes not returned, painfully accentuating the gap between representation and real life.

In the final stanza, the materiality of mediums is highlighted in a climactic way through dissonance and dynamic shifts, as the music makes the final verdict that no representation could be possibly adequate to encapsulate human life. Ekphrasis of the final stanza initiates with another interlay of choir sections singing “O Attic Shape” and “Fair Attitude” (41) interchangeably, one following another while the previous line isn’t quite finished, creating an echoing and urgent effect. This counters the way poetry is presented, where one line must come after another and be read in a linear progression. Holst subverts the original poetic arrangement, and experiments with the musical medium to achieve simultaneous progression, intentionally and explicitly comparing the poetic and the musical ways of representation. When reaching “with brede of marbles” (41-42), the music explodes into a high-pitched sound with a high-register F-sharp accidental note, as if screaming to

emphasise the materiality of sculptural representation of the urn, highlighting the hyper-awareness of artistic mediums and their materiality of the music itself. The music resumes choral harmony for a short interval afterwards, just to be disharmonised again by the C-sharp when the note “weed” is played (43). This C-sharp, with the word “weed”, continues as semibreve or whole note spanning across the next three bars, prolonging and continuing the dissonance. The next poetic line by another choir section proceeds under the elongation of the semibreve, as the “thou, silent form” echoes the C-sharp with even more accidentals including D-sharp and E-sharp adding in at “out of thought” (44). This increasing build-up of tension and dissonance reaches a climatic point at “Cold Pastoral!” (45), reinforced by the sudden rise of volume from *pianissimo* to *mezzo forte*, releasing a cathartic condemnation on the brutal coldness and lifelessness of the urn. However, the ekphrasis does not end here with an accusation of the urn. For the last two lines of the original poem, the music separates it into a distinct section marked by *Largo*, indicating a very slow tempo with a broad and expansive atmosphere to convey solemnity and grandeur. This is introduced by a *trill* from the trumpet—slow, ominous, as if giving the audience of warning from afar. Then a sudden *mezzo forte*, a loud cry from the entire chorus “Beauty is truth” shakes and scares the ears of the listeners, followed by another shocking transition into *piano* at the notes of “truth—beauty” (49). The full chorus fades out, however, when the music reaches “—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50), replaced with soprano solo singing in a singular voice. By utilising soprano solo to complete this last line, the music is singing, envoicing, and verbalising the mysterious utterance of the urn, bringing an impossible voice out of silence into reality. This strenuous ekphrastic engagement with both Keats’s poem and the urn through both imitation and subversive irony shows music’s paradoxical attitude toward the competing artistic representations, revealing the deficiency of all representations to ever encapsulate human life.

Conclusion

Both Keats and Holst engage in a strenuous, self-reflexive, and ultimately ironic exploration of the limitations of their own artistic mediums, exposing the fundamental incapability of any representation to capture the essence of human life—characterised by its fleeting temporality and passionate intensity. While Keats's ekphrasis ironizes the urn's cold eternity deprived of human temperature, the struggle and failure of his own ekphrastic language demonstrate how the gap between representation and life cannot be bridged. On the other hand, Holst's multi-layered musical ekphrasis exposes the limits of both the poem and the urn through utilising music's inherent temporality to ironically imitate, resist, and subvert them. Through the use of dissonance, dynamic shifts, and structural irony, Holst dramatizes the very struggle of encapsulating human life itself, showing that even music—the most temporal of arts—cannot resolve the problem. Ultimately, art cannot be life. It can only point to what life is, and in this process, inevitably revealing its own limitations.

This capstone project has been an amazing opportunity for me to conclude and expand my undergraduate education. While being undeniably challenging, the process of undertaking the project has been incredibly rewarding and serves as a testament to how I genuinely enjoy intellectual rigour and exploration. The most challenging part of the project is to analyse Gustav Holst's musical ekphrasis. Without prior academic training in musical theory and composition analysis, I independently learned the essential terminologies and theories relevant to the analysis to incorporate in my essay. To my surprise, there are many transferrable skills between close reading poetry and close listening to music. Drawing inspiration from the close reading skills of poetry such as the arrangement of words and sentences as well as the quality and texture of sounds, I managed to successfully apply the newly acquired music theory together with the existing close reading skills to analyse Holst's musical composition.

With the capstone project marking as a milestone to my undergraduate journey, I view it as a trial run to pursue postgraduate studies and career as an academic. With the overall positive and intellectually stimulating experience I have gained from undertaking this research, I am excited to carry the topic further in my potential MPhil project. While my capstone focuses on Gustav Holst's adaptation of only Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", my MPhil research would like to expand the scope to Keats's other poems including *Endymion*, "Extracts from an Opera", "Hymn to Apollo" and "Bards of Passion and of Mirth" and dig deeper into how music concretises the silent ideals of Keats's acousmatic poetic field, utilising contemporary musicology and sound studies theories. This capstone project is the first stepping stone toward my aspiration of entering the world of academia, and I am excited to embark upon new endeavours of this life-long journey of never-ending learning.

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**On Byron's Don Juan Considered as the Distorted Archetype of Nietzsche's Superman
(*Übermensch*)**

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ENGE4700 Capstone Project
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Preface

(New readers are advised that this preface is the fulcrum of the main essay which provides its stylistic foundation)

It has occurred to me, from years of reading and acute observation of other people's reading propensities, that most people would rather endure the inscrutability of the content of a book than read first the foreword or preface. With academic essays, this phenomenon is even more outrageous, because who would sacrifice their downtime for an academic reading session anyway? Not unless they are at a *Reading Circle* at E-Zone or victualing an afternoon tea with some pedantic scholar in Covent Garden.

But here is my gentle reminder for you (if it even interests you): if you are to grasp my main ideas and acerbic sense of humour in the essay (which is too grasping even of a statement), you should read this preface of mine. "On Byron's Don Juan Considered as the Distorted Archetype of Nietzsche's Superman (*Übermensch*)", such is the title for my capstone essay whose prominence is akin to the offspring of a tapir that withstands a 13-month long gestational period—though mine is almost four times longer.

That being said, I would like to open this preface with an introduction to my creative inspiration. It all began with the course *Romanticism* taught by the brilliant and erudite Professor Li, in the second semester of my freshman year of English studies. There I was introduced to the six major Romantic poets, which was a rite of passage for someone who studied nothing more than a few poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* bulk in high school. However, unlike most of my classmates who gravitated towards second-generation Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley, I was an oddity who had a gusto for none other than (let's just say I adore Keats too) the much-hated Lord Byron. I do not remember the exact reason for my initial spark, which could well be his unique sense of humour, but now that I have completed my capstone essay on Byron's *Don Juan*, I can tell you much more about his

remarkable virtuosity. You have been warned: this preface, along with my essay, will change your stance against Byron and his not-so-epic epic poem of the rake Don Juan.

My mock essay, as I like to call it (partly to lower your expectations of it) centres around the protagonist Don Juan and the bard pulling his strings: Byron himself, writer and narrator, to whose literary control Juan is subjected. The essay's core idea is as simple as this: Don Juan's nonchalant passivity (which Byron decides quite arbitrarily to be his character) proves peculiarly effective at keeping him alive while others around him become cadavers—you may say that he is at times *one foot* in the grave—but some others like Pedrillo are *two feet* in the grave. The two very physical episodes in Canto 2, though unsettling, are crucial for Juan's fate throughout his liberating life (for a libertine) that is compressed into 17 cantos. They also give Byron the opportunity to plant a surprise lover for Don Juan, who shortly takes him under her wing in her home island on the Eastern Isles, where Juan stumbles, almost accidentally but incidentally, to one of the requirements for becoming Nietzsche's Superman: to create his own values in a world that no longer grades them on any divine curve. This world, which I will reveal towards the end of my main essay, is close in appearance and atmosphere to the holy Garden of Eden, though as I shall tease out later, is one built not “in heaven, but on earth” (Abrams 57).

Juan's stride towards the Nietzschean “self-approbation” (in Nietzsche's words, self- or life-affirming) is done with his unique, powerful armour (like Achilles's shield and armour, yes) of passive resistance, that is coined by a Byron critic as the “[tolerant,] unembittered unbelief”. To substantiate my sprightly argument, I will give you an example. At the heart of Canto 2, Juan and his starving crewmen on the longboat work out a rather predictable solution to their privation of food—casting lots to decide who becomes the mutton of their peers. But just as the lots fall, poor Juan has a letter seized from him. What a pity for *them* (not so much for *him*,

for he could not care less about the dud letter)—it is ramified in *their* savage lots, the same way cannibalism becomes the ramification (though not unexpected) of their act.

Hey, you may exclaim, what has Juan been doing? Well, not much. But let me explain on his behalf. Yes, he has not much a reaction to the crewmen's snatching of Julia's letter, nor to their man-eating (that really needs not their mansplaining—justification). However, this in turn proves my point of Juan's "unembittered unbelief" as his tactic of resistance against his ordeals, that there is really nothing he can do in an extreme survival condition as such. Stop the cannibals, ye say? How—by biting them back? Does not sound like a better measure than staying silent and vigilant. In fact, such a passive reaction is effective: for Pedrillo, who is savagely "bled to death", is perjured to have given his "consent" to "*be* bled to death". See the difference here with the "be"? It is a yes and no. Yes, that it is Byron's decision as the writer and narrator, which he certainly notices a difference in his diction; no, that is, Pedrillo is to die whether he gives a consent or not. This is what Christensen, a scholar whose authority I irrevocably consult, says: "Pedrillo dies from a creditable excess of civility, for in resigning himself to death he can be said to follow through on a contract to which he had deliberately, if implicitly, subscribed" (Christensen 242). Thus, if this is a game of survival, is Juan not the greatest winner here who came through with his smart strategy?

My main argument proved, I shall now turn to the second aspect of my model that correlates Byron's Don Juan with Nietzsche's Superman—Byron's religious skepticism. But before this, I should account for the shift in perspective from the protagonist Don Juan to the poet himself. The vaunter he is, Byron is always seen digressing in his poems as he feels the urge to proclaim his own eminence or motives, and to disparage the Lake Poets—Southey and Wordsworth being the greatest victims of his vitriol. The narrator he assumes position of, Byron contributes immensely to Juan's character. That is, whether Juan has the free will to hold his "unembittered unbelief" we do not know, because it is under Byron's literary control. An exile

as Byron is, he kickstarts Canto 2 with his own lamentation that “*I can’t but say it is an awkward sight / To see one’s native land receding ...*” (*Don Juan* 2.12, with my own italics). Beginning the line with the pronoun “I”, Byron does two things: first, he delves into Juan’s voyage story; second, he reminds the reader that while it is him who pens the story, Juan is the one who takes the fall for the reader’s stricture.

Now, let us circle back to the second part of my model. Nietzsche had proclaimed in multiple books that “God is dead” is the predetermined condition for his Superman model. Christianity being the pioneering religion that has for centuries dominated Europe and most parts of the world, decided the acceptable moral values humans should abide by. Nietzsche, as a staunch hater of Christianity, especially Judeo-Christianity, renounced such values it established and announced the death of God. Please note here, that while “God” refers primarily to the Christian God, it could also mean any God that control humans on the morality they should follow. So, with the theoretical death of God (but we should still use the past tense), the world neatly split into two camps—*master-* and *slave-*morality. Derived from the history of slavery by the aristocracy, Nietzsche reckoned that they had assumed God’s place by calling their own whims *master-morality*. However, I italicise the word “*morality*” in my essay as it means not morality in the religious or ethical sense: for these *masters*, “good” and “evil” meant nothing more than *more* power or *less* power. With masters we then have the slaves. Too servile to flee the mental prison of their own inferiority, they swallowed whole their masters’ values. Then with no surprise came an indigestion—a mental regurgitation—but with it, their own rebranding of weakness as goodness. A crooked moral revolution, really—pity it is *ressentiment* born of defeat.

Here, I shall end this preface by returning to the relation between Don Juan and the Superman. The two threads of my model shall converge here—but let me only divulge this much before I segue into my main essay after this page. As Juan slips from one world to another

with an utter “unembittered unbelief” (a tongue twister indeed—hopefully did not just tie your tongue here), he becomes impervious to all external influences, including the moral facet of the world: though with him everything should be amoral, albeit there are obstacles as two *moral* factions that he needs to overcome—he does at the end. How Juan makes it to Nietzsche’s Superman pedestal, nonetheless—well, that is precisely the impossible conundrum this essay means to solve.

With all this preparation and information in mind, I wish you a smooth voyage reading my mock essay (as you should now know why I call it that—my mockery?), as rocky as it gets: *Bon voyage!*

On Byron's Don Juan Considered as the Distorted Archetype of Nietzsche's Superman (*Übermensch*)

I have been warned. Byron too had been warned. That his mock epic of the rakish Don Juan, or some would call an anti-epic, would gain no credit and might even lose some portion of the fame attached to “the supposed former delineation of *our* own sublime and pathetic feeling” (Harvard 7), is as injurious as calling the form of satire a “native Deformity” (Abbott and Tenterden 10). In fact, the mock genre could be traced back to 18th-century Britain where the 1st Duke of Wharton founded the Hellfire Club in London that delighted in mocking religion. As members of the “satirical gentlemen’s club”, these high-society lads would dress up as mock religious figures, gorge on dishes with creative names like “Devil’s Loin” and “Holy Ghost Pie”, and imbibe beer and cants of religious chants. The magnificent essayist Thomas De Quincey said of Brighton as a society formed for the “Suppression of Virtue” (De Quincey 17) but was “sorry” that “another exists in London”. Little did he know, however, that in Canto 11 of Lord Byron’s epic *Don Juan*, this suppression of virtue is exactly what Juan is introduced to in the aristocratic world of early 19th-century London. Just as De Quincey denounces the city for its “Encouragement of Murder”, Juan becomes a celebrated handsome foreigner after shooting a highwayman trying to rob him. What I am positing here is that Juan is not encouraging immoral acts like murder, nor is he encouraged to commit them; rather, he is only asserting his “*resistance* of an aristocrat” in this epic *novel*¹ of “middle-class emergence and self-justification” (Christensen xix), as Jerome Christensen calls it in *Lord Byron’s Strength*.

Should we consult the shipwreck episode of Canto 2 where young Juan enters a new larger world upon his exile, we will find Juan portrayed less as a protagonist than just another

¹ “Novel” as in Byron’s novel way of weaving a plethora of episodes for Don Juan’s adventures, that his epic poem makes the density and ingenuity of a novel

sufferer. In order to reassert his place in Byron's system, or rather, in order for Byron the narrator to reassert Juan's protagonist-ness in the world he creates, Juan's nonchalant passivity as a form of "resistance" to his ordeals allows him to survive them and generate his own values of "self-approbation" (*Don Juan* 8.4) in a vast, hedonistic world where such values cannot be evaluated, which later becomes Haidée's island in Canto 3. There is no rationale for Juan's creation of such "values" just as for him there is no "adrenal stimulus of the will to disbelieve" (Wilkie 223-4) his chance adventures and fate in each of them. If we put this into perspective with Nietzsche's Superman (*Übermensch*) model, whose self-approbation is done not merely through enduring everything he encounters "which happens of necessity ... [for] all idealism is falsehood in the face of necessity—but it must also be *loved*" (Nietzsche, *EH*, 10), I should venture to propose that with his "tolerant, unembittered unbelief" (Wilkie 223) accepting of all the struggles orienting him from place to place, Juan befits this prerequisite for becoming a Superman. It is not I who alone demonstrate such audacity, for there are scholars who attest that "Byron regards heroism as something alien to the familiar norms of human experience, as something either *contemptibly* fake or *superhuman*" (224, with my italics): Don Juan is on the latter dimension.²

If we invite a closer reading of the beginning of Canto 2, Byron's specification of "a devil of a sea" (2.11) in Cadiz's bay foreshadows Juan's seasickness, where polarised, vagarious attitudes towards parting grief, departure, and voyage, bespeak the entire episode. But if we take this a step further, this polarisation and vagary are exactly the outcomes of Juan

² But if one is to take this statement at face value, you will wind up in a most awkward position straddling the two sides: the side of Byron's critics that heroism for Don Juan is fake (but clearly missing that it is *contemptibly* fake rather than *completely* fake), and my side denoting my real intention to bring ties between Don Juan and the Superman.

and his shipmates, for the vagarious forces of nature sweep away possibilities of survival for both the lived and dying (Juan's dying tutor), thereby polarising the two hungry groups on the topic of "who should die to be his fellow's food" (2.73). Juan's seasickness, we can infer, is an inchoate but incendiary resistance to, or what Paul Elledge calls "an explosive physiological protest against" (Elledge 390), his enforced journey he seems not otherwise to have opposed, with the indentation in his brain a "tolerant, unembittered unbelief" of everything including his self-driven exile.

Juan's passive, all-accepting deportment is clear at the outset of the tempestuous episode, as Byron the narrator announces Juan's departure from Spain, but with a rhetoric rehearsal setting the episode up to be an exhilarating voyage oared by an inexperienced traveller:

And there he stood to take—and take again,

His first—perhaps his last—farewell of Spain. (2.11)

If we claim that the second textual thrust of the word "take" (as in "take off") is really what gets the wilful Juan launched, the repetition of "Juan stood" (2.11, 13, 14) only maximises his wilfulness, it being the only thing he could do arrested amid the gales and waves—to be "in stubborn resistance to the flux bearing him away" (Elledge 390).

Even within the conditions of composition, Byron the narrator would not forgo the chance to share an inkling of that resistance as he opens:

I can't but say it is an awkward sight

To see one's native land receding through

The growing waters; it unmans one quite,

Especially when Life is rather new ... (2.12)

This grudging admittance of his yearning for his native land registers Byron's own battle with the impulse to satirise the sentimentalisation of this valedictory scene, rather than Juan's. In his own defensive clause Juan bears witness to, Byron draws Juan closer to his literary control by subjugating him to the reader's sycophantic sympathy with his departure anxiety (which is his own) in hopes of discovering something new in the world awaiting Juan, thereby raising their expectations of Juan's adventures and hence his stakes (because they will sure be disappointed).

Byron's narrator reiterates his comically disengaged presence in the ensuing lines describing Juan standing "bewildered" (2.12) about his entry to a "nautical existence" (2.11). Consulting the authority of the voracious Byron critic, Professor Elledge, "bewildered" is a "psychological descriptive" (Elledge 391) word that "previews" the narrator's own "physiological upset"—homesickness—harking back to Byron's own exile. That this homesickness "about to usurp focus" is supplanted by Juan's imminent seasickness, for which the narrator jokingly suggests a "beefsteak" antidote, marks another example of Byron's literary control. Taking a page from Elledge's book, this offer of physiological remedy prescribes "an incipient aesthetic infection", for Byron's avowal that a beefsteak is "the best of remedies / against Sea-Sickness" (2.13), farcically betrays modern medical advice. However, as Byron pokes his head from the periphery of his narration of Juan's story and farces with his commentary as such, the reader may anticipate Juan and "his folly nipped in a stroke" (Elledge)—if he actually takes the narrator's advice to eat beefsteak to assuage his seasickness later on—which with its high fat will only aggravate his nausea and vomiting. As Byron vaunts that he has found for Juan this remedy, or in his own word, "answer" (2.13), he exploits literary control of the reader's impression and anticipation of the voyager's condition. What "answer[s]" the seasick Juan is not the physical expedient Byron's words contrive to signify, but the signifier words itself: if you would give me leave to twiddle with the semiotic concept of *signified* and *signifier*, the former should be called the signified and the latter the signifier.

You may ask why learning that Juan's actions and conditions are under Byron's literary control is important. The answer is simple, because this helps lay my groundwork for the presence of literary control by another character—Julia—who also contributes to my proposition of Juan's passive resistance strategy. Not long after Juan bids his farewell to his native land, he "drew / Her letter out again, and read it through" (2.18). Julia's letter, given to Juan towards the end of the first canto (before she becomes his old flame), closed on an acute note of wistfulness:

"I have no more to say, but linger still,
And dare not set my seal upon this sheet,
And yet I may as well the task fulfil,
My misery can scarce be more complete:
I had not lived till now, could sorrow kill;
Death shuns the wretch who fain the blow would meet,
And I must even survive this last adieu,
And bear with life to love and pray for you!"

This note was written upon gilt-edged paper
With a neat little crow-quill, slight and new;
Her small white hand could hardly reach the taper,
It trembled as magnetic needles do,
And yet she did not let one tear escape her;

The seal a sun-flower; “*Elle vous suit partout,*”

The motto, cut upon a white cornelian;

The wax was superfine, its hue vermilion. (1:197-8)

With the seal Julia’s task for Juan’s development (in terms of both *her* character appearance and *his* character development³) is complete, so is “her sentimentality, her beauty, her vanity” (Christensen 234) literalised conclusively in her letter. But as the French motto of the seal here means “she follows you everywhere”, her exit from Juan’s life and Byron’s poem marks also a literary performance of promise. Her promise to follow Juan everywhere hinges upon the preconditioned universal concept that *everywhere* is encompassed by a cosmic revolution that makes *everywhere* the same, as if she and her love are encompassed by the earth’s orbit that perpetually follows around the sun. Professing love for and sealing Juan as a sunflower, Julia’s promise to follow him everywhere is rather a promise to the sunflower trope, that it is entrenched in its pursuit of the sun. Just as the *everywhere* is a mere pretence of flowery words, her promise to always look upon Juan like a sunflower is as futile as Clytie’s doomed metamorphosis in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for between the sun and the sunflower there is only but an archipelago of *somewheres* “through which Juan sails, swims, and drifts” (235)—the smoking gun being Haidée’s island on the Aegean Sea. So, like Christensen puts smartly, there is “always ‘some new one’ under the sun”, which we see at the end of Canto 2 where Juan is taken under Haidée’s wing. There, Juan instantly picks up the “What’s in It for Me?” marketing principle “from Haidée’s glance” that he thinks is “better” than “any graven letter” (2.163),⁴

³ Which she hopes with her letter of “good advice” (2.9) that “he would improve”

⁴ Because Juan “never [meant to] read it” (2.9)

which in a way becomes his opportunistic starting point to market himself to his new tutor (after Pedrillo) and lover, Haidée.

But Julia's letter is more than some kind of quixotic, possessive love. Circling back to my elaborate account of her literary control with her letter, we see it evinced in the crucial episode of cannibalism. As the gust of wind and deluge of waves abate after the hapless shipwreck, Juan's surviving crew find that they "ate up all they had, and drank their wine" (2.69) in their "Rum and true Religion" (2.34) *spirits* (in good spirits for alcohol indeed, for spirits are strong distilled liquors), and soon enough they could no longer stick it out in the famine and turn their want for food to their peers. The feral men, "having no paper, for the want of better, / [they] took by force from Juan Julia's letter" (2.74). Julia's letter, all the pathos and promise it carries, perishes in "the Lots [that] were made, and marked, and mixed, and handed" (2.75). As the crewmen cast lots to determine who should be devoured, the lots become a ghoulis expedient for curing their "savage Hunger" (595). The letter is severed in their savage lots, just as it turns into an invisible yet incendiary device that severs the shipwreck survivors into "the disparate eaters and the dismembered eaten" (Christensen 237), in which the latter befalls Juan's "luckless Tutor" (2.75), Pedrillo.

Here you may ask, why does Juan not react to those tearaways tearing Julia's letter? And further, you may ask, does it not just prove that his love has already eluded Julia? Let me answer your curious questions accordingly. Firstly, if you would give your shots at understanding the level of "silent horror" and "savage Hunger" (2.75) the crewmen demonstrate, or more precisely, Pedrillo's spurious "consent" to "be bled to death" (2.75), it is safe to conclude that any acts of rebellion or resistance to their savagery are nugatory. Pedrillo's "consent", if we construe by Byron's brevity and cant of him "died as born, a Catholic in faith" (2.76), is forced by his recognition of "his" lot, in the name of its (his lot's) embodiment of "a little Crucifix" (607). With Pedrillo's ghastly death as an augury for the fate of others on the

same boat, Juan is pushed to the brink of his passive resistance. Secondly, that Juan carries with him Julia's letter indicates that he has fidelity shaping part of his character, notably in his love for Haidée, but unlike the barbaric crewmen, Juan simply does not resort to physical forces to avenge.

So, if we are to believe that Juan's passivity to the crewmen's purloining Julia's letter is his own "unembittered" resistance to their barbarism, we should in the same way believe in Byron's absurd moral that the exercise of prudence in *Don Juan* is "no less a venture in control and no less futile than the epistolary gesture" (Christensen 237). That is, Julia's letter which leaves no trace in the vast ocean, is after all a paltry attempt to bind herself to Juan that in turn propels the barbarians towards their barbarism—as the beginning of the lot casting prognosticates Pedrillo's death. On this note, to all prim Byron readers and critics, instead of channeling your animosity towards Juan, why not blame Julia for piggybacking on Byron's literary license?

Now, if the above delineations have served their purpose of convincing you of Juan's susceptibility to the literary control under Byron's pen, please allow me to reorient your attention toward the affinity between Juan's passive resistance strategy and Nietzsche's Superman (*Übermensch*) model. Byron alludes to various accounts of the shipwreck throughout the canto, with his own additions to the severity of the situation and the plights of Juan and his crewmen. In one account Byron possibly read and riffed off, *Remarkable Shipwrecks*, it elucidates that "the unhappy person, with manly fortitude, resigned himself to his miserable associates" (*Remarkable Shipwrecks* 358-9). Juan's resistance to becoming the unhappy person like his "luckless Tutor" (2.75) allows him to survive the savagery and to qualify for Nietzsche's Superman model—to be in constant struggle with overcoming himself. Now that "near two hundred Souls / Had left their bodies" (2.55), Juan is left to struggle alone with Ocean's "insatiate grave" (2.108).

The foundation of Byron's literary art having once been laid, it is pitiable to see how it is vilified by one severe Byron critic, LaChance, who dedicated a long essay to calling it "a problem, like all things". His emphatic stance that *Don Juan* (and its hero) praises "egoistic assertiveness in an individual who overrides group interest and egalitarian choice" (LaChance 280), attests to the idea of "native Deformity" (see Abbot and Tenterden's quote on my first page) of Byron's satirical work which my work is defending. I have gone to great lengths expatiating Juan's passive resistance to the happenings around him, however unpleasant they are, even in times of a shipwreck and cannibalism. That Juan prioritises his personal egoistic assertiveness over the interests of a group, which is too barbaric to even redeem a person's concession, is a clear example of facile, deformed reading. But to give LaChance a fair shot at redeeming his name, there is one statement he proposes that I chime with: "Nietzsche's ideal of 'the strong man' [*Übermensch*] informs Christensen's idea of 'Byron's strength'. Like Christensen's 'strong poet' who 'gives rules to himself',⁵ Nietzsche's Superman provides for himself 'a goal, a why, a faith'" (LaChance). Indeed, there are subtle correlations between Nietzsche's pensive model of the Superman and Byron's preposterous model of the passively resistant hero, that even a facile reader of Byron's literary art could discern.

Now again, why am I reprising this very phrase "literary art" it has almost become my catchphrase? First, it is, like I have banged on insofar one may think it my central idea, Byron's literary control in a way shapes Juan's character and gives way to his existential propensities. Second, Byron's literary art that underlines his motif of skepticism "in casual detail [is] in some ways even more revealing than overt and lengthy discussion" (Wilkie 189). Skepticism as in religious skepticism, pervades the shipwreck episode of Canto 2 and the Garden of Eden episode of Canto 3. Byron vouchsafes Juan his ability to maintain an unembittered unbelief in all situations, but in his own satirical writing he renounces the idea of the Christian world as a

⁵ Who is Byron himself with his strong literary *rule*—his literary control that is comparable to a monarch's rule

new and supremely better world where Juan or any other characters like Haidée or Julia should subscribe their faith to. In simpler terms, that Juan can exhibit heroism (by refusing to devour his tutor and dog) but shows no ethical rationale other than his inconceivability of the thought of eating them, seems to chime with the uselessness of religious faith Nietzsche denounces Christianity for. It is not religious ethics that underpin Juan's decision-making propensities, but merely what my strong ally Christensen says here: "an instance of good manners—manners that were not taught him by Pedrillo's [ethical instruction] but bred in him" (Christensen 250). The "God is dead" theory Nietzsche anticipates being the precursor and prerequisite for the future arrival of the Superman (*Übermensch*), comes in handy then not as a theory, but rather as a theory in practice by Byron and his archetypal Superman, Don Juan. In consequence, my essay will navigate a new aspect of the Superman model, religious skepticism, which, as part of Byron's literary model (as I like to call it now), elucidates Juan's Superman position that overcomes⁶ the two factions of *morality*⁷ spawned after the death of God.

As mentioned earlier, "God is dead" is surely one of Nietzsche's most notorious soundbites (which he has a portfolio of). For one to parse the complete arsenal of meanings of his theory, one should wade through a welter of aphorisms in his major productions, *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Whenever that is the case or thought to be the case, farewell to your wholesome brain. For if you are sticking around only for some twist or breaking-the-fourth-wall confession that I have been boshing through and through, reading *extensively* and *deeply* does not sound the soundest suggestion of mine. And if you know me

⁶ "Straddles" but in a more refined way of expression

⁷ Whenever I italicise a word or phrase it is with good reason, not that it is my whim to distinguish it from the dizzying rest of my manifesto. So here I am italicising the word "morality" precisely because these two factions, the master- and slave-morality, in Nietzsche's philosophical parlance, did not bear the same notion of morality spawned by the Christian world, which I will explain at length below.

well enough from the last ten pages, you should know that every theory I cite (and *incite*) is not just some pithy statement. So the fact is, “God is dead” is not a mere death certificate of the Christian God. The “holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned” (*The Gay Science* 181), His death waged a destructive war on the universal values He authored and the haven-like Heaven He constructed.

In the wake of this war, there were two outcomes. The first outcome, there bloomed the brave and brazen men of aristocracy who took it upon themselves to fill God’s shoes—that is, to become the “determiner of values” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 201), where without anyone’s approval, they passed the bill of *master*-morality. The *master*-values, if divided into good and evil, only meant aggrandising or atrophying their feelings of power, which would all determine their order of rank among all human beings. This elevation of the type of man, the *master*, has since the birth of Jesus been the work of an aristocratic society “believing in a long scale of gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings” and “requiring slavery in some form or other” (197). If in Jesus’ heyday we had him the *master* teach his 12 *slave*-disciples his noble values of faith, selflessness, and humility, the now aristocratic *master* would then skewer his *slaves* with his stare that someone would stoop so low as to think those values worthwhile. The slaves, who were too self-negating and impotent to extricate themselves from the imprisonment of their own inferiority, could not help but succumb to the practice of their masters’ *master*-values. With the failure to live up to their masters’ standards and the ensuing detonation of their *ressentiment* (Nietzsche’s rendition of “resentment”, as in the slaves’ revolt in morality), the herd turned to invert the *master*-morality into their own *slave*-morality. Construing their enemies as “evil”, those who practised the good old “good” values of the master-morality are now deemed “evil”. The former slaves then became the new *masters* of their own faction, marking their transcendence from reactive resistance to an active recreation of values, though this transcendence was but a magnified and distorted result of *ressentiment*.

The second outcome, the death of God meant the destruction of the Heaven from which He descended and to which He returned. Christianity had chiefly focused on the afterlife, as Jesus proclaimed in the Bible: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.” (John 11:25, NIV). At its core, Christianity was hostile to society and human endeavours grounded on earth such as philosophy, art, and science—in a word, to reality. While it promised its faithful believers, who are really the *slaves* before they prevailed their *masters*, an afterlife in heaven, it encouraged them to deny and despise the reality of their current life by envisaging for them a perfect, imaginary world. Heaven, like its homophone *haven*, bespeaks a sense of safety, complacency, and otherworldly pleasures. A paradise it seemed, if we denude it of its guise, had done nothing but renounced one’s earthly life for the sake of a deeper spiritual existence. Worldly pursuits of virtuous deeds as prerequisites for otherworldly pleasures: does it not sound mind-bending to you? Despisers of life were these faithful believers of Heaven— “decaying ones and poisoned ones themselves, of whom the earth is weary” (*Zarathustra* 7). Once sinning against God was the greatest sin; now that God died, and therewith also those sinners. God was but a conjecture, its superhuman visage conceived by human minds so that it would become a compelling creator of values beyond the humanly conceivable. Thus, we could alternatively declare that “dead are all the Gods” (83), and now do we desire the Superman (*Übermensch*) to descend upon Byron’s unembittered hero.

With so comprehensive the religious context of Nietzsche’s Superman model I provided, I shall finally return to Byron’s religious skepticism that would splice the ties between Don Juan and the Superman. To ease your brain and to put two and two together, I will reply respectively to the two outcomes adumbrated above. First, the destruction of the out-of-this-world Heaven. After the shipwreck that takes up much of Canto 2, Juan is rescued by Haidée, the “greatest heiress of the Eastern Isles” (*Don Juan* 2.128). Regaining consciousness and

health under Haidée's care, Juan begins to relish "The Best of Life" (2.179) with intoxication, where he "vie[s]" with the absence of "Hock and Soda-Water" (2.180). The personification of "Hock of Soda water" impishly squares the food imageries with holy imageries of "Heaven" and "Godsake" in the following lines: "I would to Heaven that I were so much Clay— ... / I say—the future is a serious matter— / And so—for Godsake—Hock and Soda water!" (*CPW* 88). Byron had this same gusto for hock and soda water that he felt the need to repeat this in different parts of his poem, blurring altogether the boundaries between the idealistic and the materialistic, the sacred and the desecrated. Religions of different types have hitherto aimed at drawing a line between two states of human society: the sacred and the desecrated. Likewise, the Christian conception of heaven has made the same demarcation between its faithful believers who would enter heaven after death and unbelievers who would not. However, the religious intoxication we see with Byron and Don Juan anticipates the dissolution of such a division. The narrator's roguish equation between "Rum and true Religion" (2.34) and the ensuing disorder amid the shipwreck, imply that in an extreme survival condition, religion does not maintain harmony and order, but provokes the very thoughts and actions that are religiously prohibited.

Immediately at the onset of Canto 3, Byron prepares us for, while postponing, the major scene of Haidée's harrowing death, by picturing first the halcyon days of the happy young couple. That "thus the frail beings we would fondly cherish / Are laid within our blossoms but to perish" (3.2), Byron posits that it is better that the happy young couple should die while they are still young, than living on until they have lost their joy to the misery of ageing. The rest of the canto, therefore, delineates scenes of Haidée and Juan idling, dancing, and feasting which hark back to those of Penelope's suitors regaling themselves at Odysseus' house, after a brief mourning period for Lambro's (Haidée's pirate father) spurious death. This island on the Aegean Sea has thus become the Garden of Eden suffused with uninhibited entertainment,

though it is one built “not in heaven, but on earth” (Abrams 57). Unlike Adam and Eve who were evicted by God for breaching His rules, Juan and Haidée are untrammelled by divine intervention—until after Lambro returns home and consternates at the idyllic scene—though with the lack of action Byron endows him with, he is much less a god than the Christian God. If you have imbibed anything I said about Nietzsche’s earthly Superman, it should not surprise you that I now acclaim that Juan has found the apt opportunity to “remain true to the earth” and “not believe those who speak to [him] superearthly hopes” (*Zarathustra* 7) while manifesting the recreation of his hedonistic values. Or, in other words, Juan is now the paragon of the *down-to-earth* Superman who tries to make the most out of his present life rather than devaluing it in favour of an otherworldly afterlife, for the Superman that Nietzsche preaches is “the meaning of the earth” (7).

My second reply to the two outcomes of the death of God: Juan identifies with neither master- nor slave-morality and has thus overcome the problems of both factions, making him the exemplary archetype of the Superman. Nietzsche’s Superman, after all, is neither slave nor master. He belongs to neither case of *master*-morality (including the slave-morality that contrived to create its own *master*-values), for the values the Superman re-evaluates and recreates have nothing to do with nobility the master-morality concerns itself with. Instead, they derive from a drastically different system of his own that transcends the hubris of the master and the nihilism of the slave.

At large, Juan’s passive resistance strategy—swaddled in that unembittered unbelief of his—places him in a liminal position (a rather undignified limbo to dangle in). Being neither a *master* nor a *slave*, and belonging to neither faction, he should be excluded from their squabbles—both quite unbecoming to his character and position. It is a delectable irony of the mind and hand to arrive at this point of my recapitulation: Juan has, against all odds and perhaps against Nietzsche’s better judgement, stumbled through the two obstacles that lead him to the

Superman's throne. Why, you may ask yet again, which I shall answer one last time: with no goal nor flag to skirmish for, Juan manages to overcome them as mere ramifications of his unembittered, unbelieving endurance of whatever comes his way (a rereading of the second page of my main essay is advised).

Personal Reflection

This capstone project, with its density, proves that it is not a doddle. Indeed, its starting point was not the easiest, nor was there even a plausible, tangible topic to start with. It all started on one late night before the narrow desk in my hotel in New York over the summer, when it was just a few days before the deadline of submitting the three topics for supervisor allocation of the project. I had been devouring Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* thus far and had decided no matter what topic my project would finally land on, I had to piggyback on Nabokov's novel narrative structure for it. To provide a brief context, Nabokov's titular novel engages a cutting-edge non-linear narrative structure that is disguised as a scholarly edition. The novel is divided into four sections: a foreword, a 999-line poem written by the dead fictional poet named John Shade, a commentary and intentionally misleading index by his editor as well as unreliable narrator, Charles Kinbote. While Shade's actual poem is about the tragedy of his daughter's suicide and the grief that ensues, Kinbote's commentary of the poem veers onto telling his own story as the exile king of a fictional country called Zembla, where he weaves his narrative into annotations, straying far from the poem itself. (I hope any of you who are reading my essay may find this likeness in digression and self-referentiality!)

Circling back to where I was at, my thoughts on what topics my project should partake in had meandered around various literary texts of the Romantic and Victorian (Gothic) eras. There were three routes, I decided, which were to write a critical essay on a Romantic Gothic poem, Coleridge's "Christabel", for example, or Byron's "Manfred", which is in fact a play; or to write a critical essay on one of the Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* being one of my favourites. The third and final route was that I do a hybrid project that yokes together critical essay writing and creative writing. For some reason, perhaps on top of a welter of reasons was my urge to impress people with my work for its ingenuity, I knew I had to pick the third route as the mode of my project. With the adamance tinged with determination to

make it work, we see a rather proud writer impressing upon her readers her polemical interpretations of Byron's *Don Juan* in her hybrid project comprised of a preface (a mini mock essay) and a main mock essay.

I still remember fretting about my first consultation with Professor Li Ou a day before it happened, as I had no serious idea of what thesis statement was for my finally chosen text, Byron's *Don Juan*, or which canto(s) to focus on. In my second meeting with Professor Li after submitting my faulty thesis statement, I found myself unable to account for the rationale for producing my thesis statement. Perhaps I had wandered for too long in my copious reading of secondary sources that there was no real reason for comparing Byron's rake protagonist and Nietzsche's self-affirming Superman. On whatever unfathomable note my project began, I have arrived at a favourable end product that has given me much pride and taught me many lessons.

Besides training my knowledge on Byron's poem and his literary styles, the nature of the capstone project as self-led has allowed me to conduct research on an area of literature I am most interested in, using my own research methods. It is half a shame to say that my research method is a most organic one, as throughout the process I have only been reading copiously different journal articles and books of critical reviews: wherever I found insightful or useful for my essay, I jotted them down in my own journal with various sections, highlights and notes. As I made more notes elaborating or refuting the quotes or arguments of other critics, I gradually developed sufficient arguments of my own and honed the satirical tone in my writing. The process, however, was convoluted. One day I would sit before my laptop feeling as if satire possessed me and would type up sentences I felt complacent about, other days I would watch aimlessly my derailed essay, and watch the clock like a clock-watcher who is dissatisfied with their work and wants to quit it once and for all. I am grateful, nonetheless, that Professor Li was always so supportive for my progress, and would hearken to my struggles and self-doubts in our meetings. While my initial drafts often read confusing to her, with my loose

arguments and verbose sentences, she always managed to give me constructive feedback. I still remember in one meeting, she said that I would be most proud of my own work if everything worked out. Thanks to her kind words, it worked out.

I am also thankful that Professor Li has given me most freedom to feel for inspirations and explore a new genre—a mock or satirical essay. In my own defence, I did not invent the genre. In fact, satirical literature was a pivotal medium to convey the salient social and political changes in 18th-century England, shaped by the emergence of print culture and an expanding room for public debate. Satire became weapons for writers to engage with sensational societal issues while circumventing censorship. This genre of satire also became a favourable weapon for me to propose my unique interpretations of the text and characters, at times twisting words of critics of the text to turn them in my favour, while circumventing sharp strictures by readers, as they know anything I write in my mock essay may mean otherwise.

Looking upon the future, while it is a shame that I will not be pursuing further studies in English Literature, I am certain that the skills I have gained from various English courses and this capstone project will not go for a toss. But let me share this great news with you: I will be studying law in the UK in the coming September, as I have received offers from universities including University of Birmingham and Queen Mary University of London. Though I apprehend that the learning mode for law studies will hugely differ from that for literary studies, I believe my solid foundation in critical analysis, essay writing, and debate will become transferable skills that will aid in my future studies in law. Nonetheless, while a sharp wit and tongue are pivotal skills a lawyer should possess, they may need a little tweak as I take them from my literary experience to the law field (which is somewhat a battlefield): satire and puns will not cut the mustard there, as law, I predict, will not be so forgiving. If a sharp tongue and wit for me *here* means saying something with conviction as if it really means that, *there* it will

mean using hard-core logic and hard-nosed evidence to say something you mean, that will *convict* a guilty person or entity.

But really, with the wonderful (self-respecting) puns that I have done with words and their sounds throughout this project, I should not fret too much about my own wit and eloquence—and should save all the explaining already.

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