Analysis: The Custom of the Country

**Edith Wharton: The Custom of the Country**

**Eleanor Holton, The Stephen Perse Foundation Sixth Form**

Every new twist of the evening adds to the disappointment felt by Miss Undine Spragg. She is disappointed in the lack of fashion, the simplicity of the food and decor, and even the age of her companions. The conversation is dull, with too little gossip and too much about books. As the evening progresses, however, it becomes obvious that it is Undine who is dull.

Besides her obvious cultural ignorance, Undine lacks understanding of the social world and of herself. It is no surprise that ‘all was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations’. She misreads others and fails as an active contributor to the evening’s conversation. She is also ignorant of her own delusions, which cause her to mistrust the attentions of her hosts, and misjudge those of Marvell. Her shallow view of society and self-deception leave her vulnerable to disappointment.

Edith Wharton demonstrates this with subtlety. Despite seeing the evening through the eyes of Undine, the reader ends up knowing far more than she does, both about the other characters, and about herself.

Social misreadings are commonplace for Undine. The affair between Mrs Peter Van Degen and the ‘sweet’ young Marvell becomes obvious to the reader when they arrange a rendez-vous at the door, but Undine deludes herself that he ‘had really no eyes for any one but herself’. Undine sees Mrs Peter Van Degen as ‘one of the choicest ornaments of the Society Column’, but fails to note that not everyone agrees. Mrs Fairford and Mr Bowen reveal quiet disdain toward the lady when her reason for being painted is that Mr Popple is ‘doing everybody this year’. We are aware that Mrs Van Degen is a slave to fashion, but this is beyond Undine, who is equally enslaved and earlier ‘thought it dull of Mrs Fairford not to have picked up something newer’ for the menu.

Undine’s self-ignorance is gently mocked in the passage. ‘Married men’, are ‘intrinsically uninteresting’, yet by the end only Mr Fairford has the stamina to attempt conversation with her. ‘Having white hair’, is enough to make one lady utterly uninteresting, unless of course she is talking about Mr Popple. Undine finds ‘silent people awkward’, yet answers all questions in trite monosyllables, ‘promptly but briefly’. To her, ‘pretty-coloured entrées in ruffled papers’, and ‘electric bulbs behind ruby glass’, are much more important than the kindness and generosity of her hosts, who are continually snubbed in their attempt to involve her in the conversation.

We are aware that Undine has an attitude that leaves her both disappointed and disappointing. To Undine’s eyes, everything is ‘shabby’, ‘dull’, and ‘dowdy’, lacking in the fashionable extravagance she had expected. In reality, it is Undine who is dull – in her conversation, her thoughts, and what she holds important. Wharton’s achievement is to give us a broad picture of a lively social scene, through the narrow viewpoint of one girl, blind to it all.
Minnie Watson, Marlborough College

In the extract from *The Custom of the Country* we see stark contrasts between Undine's expectations of the dinner party and the reality, but also the contrast between her opinion of herself and that held by the other guests. This centres around the theme of her 'disillusionment', which becomes increasingly apparent throughout the extract.

The contrast between Undine's gaudy and tacky expectation of how a smart dinner party might look, with 'gilding' and 'a bower of orchids' reveals her snobbish naivety, betrayed by her instant disappointment at the 'untidy' fire and the 'disappointing' meal. Here we get a sense of Undine's disillusionment, as her fantasy of a high society dinner party becomes ridiculous in reality. This highlights her lack of classy taste, which suggests further the sense that she doesn't belong in this circle of society.

This sense that she does not belong is well emphasised in this extract, as the differences between Undine and her fellow guests become clear. Just as a young child, she finds the situation 'blurred and puzzling' – revealing her naivety and exposing her shallow expectations based on pure snobbish fantasy, as we wonder if she has ever attended such an event before. The metaphoric transition of Mrs Fairford into a conductor of conversation, taking 'particular pains' to give Undine her 'due part in the performance' shows the burden that Undine's presence has caused on the evening, as her restraint from conversation is both rude and condescending. This is emphasised by the fact that Mr and Mrs Fairford were keen to rescue the other guests from talking to her and to 'take her off their hands' – almost as a parent would do to a child, revealing how her naivety and unjustified snobbery is reflected in her behaviour to the whole dinner party. The most violent contrast between Undine and the other guests comes with her lack of culture, betraying her lack of class, as she 'did not even know there were any pictures to be seen.' These signs of Undine's inferiority to the other guests makes it all the more ridiculous that Undine considers herself important enough to 'dismiss at a glance' another guest who was 'wearing a last year's ‘model’'. This highlights Undine's disillusionment, as she seems to think she is important enough to cast aside those of a higher class despite her inferiority – of which she is as yet unaware.

Undine's aim to break into the high society becomes humiliatingly transparent to the reader, as she immediately becomes interested in Marvell having observed that the 'Van-Degen set' called him 'Ralphie Dear' – having previously dismissed him as 'sweet.' She is again disillusioned and self-important enough to believe that 'he had really no eyes for anyone but herself' – again, she is mistaken as he does not escort her home as she immediately expects he will.
**Analysis: The Custom of the Country**

**Elinor Williams, Hereford Sixth Form College**

The entirety of Miss Spragg's being revolves around her ravenous desire to be amongst the social elite, at the epicentre of all that is stylish and novel. When placed in such a position, however, it's immediately evident that her expectations differ from reality, leaving Undine feeling exposed and disillusioned. Throughout the passage, many allusions are made to the vivid expectation of the Fairford dinner that Undine has invented, taken from ‘the customs of country’ to which she is acclimatised. The ‘gilding’ and ‘lavish diffusion of light’ are both examples of such ‘customs’, which are referred to throughout the passage, contrasting the constrictive and exacting ways of Apex with the liberal intellect of Mrs Fairford’s outfit. Through comparing Fairford’s house to ‘the old circulating library’ that existed before the ‘new marble building’ was erected at Apex, Undine inadvertently exhibits the superficiality of her conceptions of worth and wealth. She discounts a place of curiosity, heritage and substance for the ‘new marble building’, the only notable features of which are its modernity and extravagance. This is perhaps a manifestation of the immense value Undine places on the new and her disregard for the old. Undine yearns for ‘brilliant youths’ and discounts others as ‘hopelessly elderly’. She is instinctively drawn to young socialites such as Mr Popple and the ‘Van Degen set’ who encompass the ideals of status that she aspires to, and yet under the discerning eye of Mrs Fairford and her company, these youths are found to be frivolous and vain. For them, true novelty is found not in the proclamation of being a ‘gentleman’ as Mr Popple does or through dressing ‘elaborately’ like Mrs Van Degen, but in the act of conversation and having a genuine interest in others. When Mrs Van Degen attempts to defend her wish to be painted because ‘he’s doing everyone’, this is immediately dismissed as a ‘Van Degen reason’; a transparent excuse for indulgence in vanity. Similarly, the ‘bower of orchids’ that Undine expects to view other guests through is replaced here by a simple centre dish of ferns, emphasising the focus on the real people through the removal of any superfluous obstructions. Undine questions whether, in the absence of such things, the Fairford dinner can be called a ‘proper dinner party at all’, highlighting her precise vision of what exactly constitutes ‘high society’. Undine is left with her ‘perceptions bristling’ in this new environment as the true nature of people such as Mrs Van Degen are revealed beneath the pomp of the society columns. This lawless world of ‘half-lights’ and ‘half-tones’ is mystifying to Undine, who struggles to do anything but sit ‘straight and pink’, exposed by her ignorance when it comes to the contemporary art, books and pictures that people such as Mrs Fairford set such store by. This is a world in which no ‘rules’ apply, and only the strength of your wit and perception can afford you acceptance. Alien, it would seem, to ‘the customs of the country’.
The Anthology – Prose Fiction: The Custom of the Country

Edith Wharton: The Custom of the Country (1913)

Though she would not for the world have owned it to her parents, Undine was disappointed in the Fairford dinner.

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of ‘Back to the farm for Christmas’; and when the logs fell forward Mrs Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily.

The dinner too was disappointing. Undine was too young to take note of culinary details, but she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrees in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognise – as if they’d been dyspeptics on a diet! With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs Fairford not to have picked up something newer; and as the evening progressed she began to suspect that it wasn’t a real ‘dinner party,’ and that they had just asked her in to share what they had when they were alone.

But a glance about the table convinced her that Mrs Fairford could not have meant to treat her other guests so lightly. They were only eight in number, but one was no less a person than young Mrs Peter Van Degen – the one who had been a Dagonet – and the consideration which this young lady, herself one of the choicest ornaments of the Society Column, displayed toward the rest of the company, convinced Undine that they must be more important than they looked. She liked Mrs Fairford, a small incisive woman, with a big nose and good teeth revealed by frequent smiles. In her dowdy black and antiquated ornaments she was not what Undine would have called ‘stylish’; but she had a droll kind way which reminded the girl of her father’s manner when he was not tired or worried about money. One of the other ladies, having white hair, did not long arrest Undine’s attention; and the fourth, a girl like herself, who was introduced as Miss Harriet Ray, she dismissed at a glance as plain and wearing a last year’s ‘model.’

The men, too, were less striking than she had hoped. She had not expected much of Mr Fairford, since married men were intrinsically uninteresting, and his baldness and grey moustache seemed naturally to relegate him to the background; but she had looked for some brilliant youths of her own age – in her inmost heart she had looked for Mr Popple. He was not there, however, and of the other men one, whom they called Mr Bowen, was hopelessly elderly – she supposed he was the husband of the white-haired lady – and the other two, who seemed to be friends of young Marvell’s, were both lacking in Claud Walsingham’s dash.

Undine sat between Mr Bowen and young Marvell, who struck her as very ‘sweet’ (it was her word for friendliness), but even shyer than at the hotel dance. Yet she was not sure if he were shy, or if his quietness were only a new kind of self-possession which expressed itself negatively instead of aggressively. Small, well-knit, fair, he sat stroking his slight blond moustache and looking at her with kindly, almost tender eyes; but he left it to his sister and the others to draw her out and fit her into the pattern.

Mrs Fairford talked so well that the girl wondered why Mrs Heeny had found her
lacking in conversation. But though Undine thought silent people awkward she was not easily impressed by verbal fluency. All the ladies in Apex City were more voluble than Mrs Fairford, and had a larger vocabulary: the difference was that with Mrs Fairford conversation seemed to be a concert and not a solo. She kept drawing in the others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow harmonising and linking together what they said. She took particular pains to give Undine her due part in the performance; but the girl's expansive impulses were always balanced by odd reactions of mistrust, and to-night the latter prevailed. She meant to watch and listen without letting herself go, and she sat very straight and pink, answering promptly but briefly, with the nervous laugh that punctuated all her phrases – saying 'I don't care if I do' when her host asked her to try some grapes, and 'I wouldn't wonder' when she thought any one was trying to astonish her.

This state of lucidity enabled her to take note of all that was being said. The talk ran more on general questions, and less on people, than she was used to; but though the allusions to pictures and books escaped her, she caught and stored up every personal reference, and the pink in her cheeks deepened at a random mention of Mr Popple.

'Yes – he's doing me,' Mrs Peter Van Degen was saying, in her slightly drawling voice. 'He's doing everybody this year, you know –'

'As if that were a reason!' Undine heard Mrs Fairford breathe to Mr Bowen; who replied, at the same pitch: 'It's a Van Degen reason, isn't it?' – to which Mrs Fairford shrugged assentingly.

'That delightful Popple – he paints so exactly as he talks!' the white-haired lady took it up. 'All his portraits seem to proclaim what a gentleman he is, and how he fascinates women! They're not pictures of Mrs or Miss So-and-so, but simply of the impression Popple thinks he's made on them.'

Mrs Fairford smiled. 'I've sometimes thought,' she mused, 'that Mr Popple must be the only gentleman I know; at least he's the only man who has ever told me he was a gentleman – and Mr Popple never fails to mention it.'

Undine's ear was too well attuned to the national note of irony for her not to perceive that her companions were making sport of the painter. She winced at their banter as if it had been at her own expense, yet it gave her a dizzy sense of being at last in the very stronghold of fashion. Her attention was diverted by hearing Mrs Van Degen, under cover of the general laugh, say in a low tone to young Marvell: 'I thought you liked his things, or I wouldn't have had him paint me.'

Something in her tone made all Undine's perceptions bristle, and she strained her ears for the answer.

'I think he'll do you capitally – you must let me come and see some day soon.' Marvell's tone was always so light, so unemphasised, that she could not be sure of its being as indifferent as it sounded. She looked down at the fruit on her plate and shot a side-glance through her lashes at Mrs Peter Van Degen.

Mrs Van Degen was neither beautiful nor imposing: just a dark girlish-looking creature with plaintive eyes and a fidgety frequent laugh. But she was more elaborately dressed and jewelled than the other ladies, and her elegance and her restlessness made her seem less alien to Undine. She had turned on Marvell a gaze at once pleading and possessive; but whether betokening merely an inherited intimacy (Undine had
noticed that they were all more or less cousins) or a more personal feeling, her observer was unable to decide; just as the tone of the young man’s reply might have expressed the open avowal of good-fellowship or the disguise of a different sentiment. All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene.

Yet in the drawing-room, with the ladies, where Mrs Fairford came and sat by her, the spirit of caution once more prevailed. She wanted to be noticed but she dreaded to be patronised, and here again her hostess’s gradations of tone were confusing. Mrs Fairford made no tactless allusions to her being a newcomer in New York – there was nothing as bitter to the girl as that – but her questions as to what pictures had interested Undine at the various exhibitions of the moment, and which of the new books she had read, were almost as open to suspicion, since they had been answered in the negative. Undine did not even know that there were any pictures to be seen, much less that ‘people’ went to see them; and she had read no new book but ‘When The Kissing Had to Stop,’ of which Mrs Fairford seemed not to have heard. On the theatre they were equally at odds, for while Undine had seen ‘Oolaloo’ fourteen times, and was ‘wild’ about Ned Norris in ‘The Soda-Water Fountain,’ she had not heard of the famous Berlin comedians who were performing Shakespeare at the German Theatre, and knew only by name the clever American actress who was trying to give ‘repertory’ plays with a good stock company. The conversation was revived for a moment by her recalling that she had seen Sarah Bernhard in a play she called ‘Leg-long,’ and another which she pronounced ‘Fade;’ but even this did not carry them far, as she had forgotten what both plays were about and had found the actress a good deal older than she expected.

Matters were not improved by the return of the men from the smoking-room. Henley Fairford replaced his wife at Undine’s side; and since it was unheard-of at Apex for a married man to force his society on a young girl, she inferred that the others didn’t care to talk to her, and that her host and hostess were in league to take her off their hands. This discovery resulted in her holding her vivid head very high, and answering ‘I couldn’t really say,’ or ‘Is that so?’ to all Mr Fairford’s ventures; and as these were neither numerous nor striking it was a relief to both when the rising of the elderly lady gave the signal for departure.

In the hall, where young Marvell had managed to precede her. Undine found Mrs Van Degen putting on her cloak. As she gathered it about her she laid her hand on Marvell’s arm.

‘Ralphie, dear, you’ll come to the opera with me on Friday? We’ll dine together first – Peter’s got a club dinner.’ They exchanged what seemed a smile of intelligence, and Undine heard the young man accept. Then Mrs Van Degen turned to her.

‘Good-bye, Miss Spragg. I hope you’ll come – ‘

‘– TO DINE WITH ME TOO?’ That must be what she was going to say, and Undine’s heart gave a bound.

‘– to see me some afternoon,’ Mrs Van Degen ended, going down the steps to her motor, at the door of which a much-furred footman waited with more furs on his arm.

Undine’s face burned as she turned to receive her cloak. When she had drawn it on with haughty deliberation she found Marvell at her side, in hat and overcoat, and her heart gave a higher bound. He was going to ‘escort’ her home, of course! This brilliant
The Anthology – Prose Fiction: The Custom of the Country

youth – she felt now that he WAS brilliant – who dined alone with married women, whom the ‘Van Degen set’ called ‘Ralphie, dear,’ had really no eyes for any one but herself; and at the thought her lost self-complacency flowed back warm through her veins.

The street was coated with ice, and she had a delicious moment descending the steps on Marvell’s arm, and holding it fast while they waited for her cab to come up; but when he had helped her in he closed the door and held his hand out over the lowered window.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, smiling; and she could not help the break of pride in her voice, as she faltered out stupidly, from the depths of her disillusionment: ‘Oh – good-bye.’

You can read close readings of this text by students Eleanor Holton, Minnie Watson and Elinor Williams on pages 156 to 158.
Close Reading Competition
2015 RESULTS

We are delighted to announce the results of the emagazine Close Reading Competition 2015, this year judged by emagazine editors and Professor John Mullan.

Winner:
• Harriet Fisk, Berkhamstead School

Runners-up:
• Eleanor Burke, Highgate School
• Theodora Critchley, Withington Girls’ School

Highly commended:
• Toby Lucas, King Edward VI School, Stratford-Upon-Avon
• Ciara Farrelly, King Edward VI School, Stratford-Upon-Avon
• Hannah Chukwu, Xaverian College, Manchester

Congratulations to Harriet, Eleanor and Theodora and to the students whose work was highly commended. You can read Harriet’s winning entry here and Eleanor and Theodora’s pieces in emagplus on the emagazine website.

Harriet Fisk

The physicality of life in Nairobi is evoked in the passage through drawing on our senses. We feel the ‘sore eyes’ and ‘heat ripping off the pavements’; we see ‘brown grass’ and ‘red tin of insecticide’; we hear the ‘piping’ of the phone; we feel the touch of the flies when ‘squidged or rubbed’ on the skin and we smell the dryness in the air where even the ‘jacarandas’ are ‘waiting for the long rains.’ What a sense we get of a stiflingly hot and uncomfortable atmosphere as the central character, Woodrow, is introduced on ‘just another bloody Monday’.

We learn more about Woodrow from the third person narrative than from his direct speech. The former gives us access to his stream of consciousness: his seething resentments about his working life and the petty rumblings in this diplomatic outpost where ‘reviewing guidance material from London’ is a key task. The sarcasm and resentful tone of the language builds a picture of a man tightly wound by the structures and constraints of his role where even attendees at a regular meeting are viewed with cynicism by Woodrow as ‘special-interest prima donnas’, all out for themselves. His depiction of his colleague as ‘shiny, overweight’ and the derogatory nickname further draw a picture of small-minded office politics and an ordinary routine.

The simplicity of Woodrow’s direct speech brings a contrast to the mass of images, ideas and anxiety whirling through his mind expressed in the third person. The deliberate change in voice in the extract marks a shift from Woodrow the regular bureaucrat with a wife and two children, into that of a man with secrets. It brings into sharp focus the direct connection, as yet unexplained to the reader, between Woodrow and the murdered woman – ‘Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?’

Le Carré’s injection of aggressive, forceful vocabulary (such as when he ‘took it like a bullet, jaw rigid’) into the narrative emphasises the impact on Woodrow that the announcement of Tessa Quayle’s death has. We are left in no doubt that this is a turning point in his life. He goes over the sequence of events, for example when he remembers that ‘he certainly barked his name’ - so that the moment when he hears the news becomes frozen in time, so that he can replay and re-examine it.

The sense that Woodrow is somehow implicated is reflected in his forceful reaction where he is ‘fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept’. Our suspicions are raised about his ‘secret memories of her’ being furiously edited out and his swift reference to the ‘unimpeachable’ alibi of the military attaché.

The mechanical language of the final paragraph, where he is ‘moving by numbers’ shows us how different a person Woodrow is by the end of the extract. From the ordinariness of ‘straightening the photograph’ at the beginning to ‘hackles up, nerves extended’ on hearing Mildren’s news, Woodrow is acutely aware by the end that he is facing ‘a long journey’.

emag editors’ comments

This year’s entries were of a very high standard. We selected six entries to send to Professor John Mullan, who chose our winners and two runners up. The remaining three were highly commended.

What made these students’ writing stand out for us? While we saw plenty of other good writing, we felt that these students all showed a genuine engagement with the passage. They provided a sustained and coherent reading of the text, rather than dotting around randomly, noticing features of language here and there. The interpretation they provided was plausible and convincing and they avoided over-egging their points or exaggerating the linguistic and literary effects they chose to write about. They explored significant features of the text, rather than latching on to minor details of little importance. As well as this, they wrote clearly, managing to make sophisticated points in simple and direct language.

Finally, what was striking about all of our shortlisted students was the fact that they were really thinking for themselves. Their writing suggested a genuine, active reading of the text, rather than a routine, formulaic ‘going through the motions’. For us, as for advanced level examiners, reading writing like this makes one’s heart leap!
The news hit the British High Commission in Nairobi at nine-thirty on a Monday morning. Sandy Woodrow took it like a bullet, jaw rigid, chest out, smack through his divided English heart. He was standing. That much he afterwards remembered. He was standing and the internal phone was piping. He was reaching for something, he heard the piping so he checked himself in order to stretch down and fish the receiver off the desk and say, ‘Woodrow.’ Or maybe, ‘Woodrow here.’ And he certainly barked his name a bit, he had that memory for sure: of his voice sounding like someone else’s, and sounding stroppy: ‘Woodrow here,’ his own perfectly decent name, but without the softening of his nickname Sandy, and snapped out as if he hated it, because the High Commissioner’s usual prayer meeting was slated to start in thirty minutes prompt, with Woodrow, as Head of Chancery, playing in-house moderator to a bunch of special-interest prima donnas, each of whom wanted sole possession of the High Commissioner’s heart and mind.

In short, just another bloody Monday in late January, the hottest time in the Nairobi year, a time of dust and water shortages and brown grass and sore eyes and heat ripping off the city pavements; and the jacarandas, like everybody else, waiting for the long rains.

Exactly why he was standing was a question he never resolved. By rights he should have been crouched behind his desk, fingering his keyboard, anxiously reviewing guidance material from London and incomings from neighbouring African Missions. Instead of which he was standing in front of his desk and performing some unidentified vital act – such as straightening the photograph of his wife Gloria and two small sons, perhaps, taken last summer while the family was on home leave. The High Commission stood on a slope, and its continuing subsidence was enough to tilt pictures out of true after a weekend on their own.

Or perhaps he had been squirting mosquito spray at some Kenyan insect from which even diplomats are not immune. There had been a plague of ‘Nairobi eye’ a few months back, flies that when squished and rubbed accidentally on the skin could give you boils and blisters, and even send you blind. He had been spraying, he heard his phone ring, he put the can down on his desk and grabbed the receiver: also possible, because somewhere in his later memory there was a colour-slide of a red tin of insecticide sitting in the out-tray on his desk. So, ‘Woodrow here,’ and the telephone jammed to his ear.

‘Oh, Sandy, it’s Mike Mildren. Good morning. You alone by any chance?’

Shiny, overweight, twenty-four year-old Mildren, High Commissioner’s private secretary, Essex accent, fresh out from England on his first overseas posting – and known to the junior staff, predictably, as Mildred.

‘Can’t it wait till after the meeting?’

‘Well, I don’t think it can really – no it can’t,’ Mildren replied, gathering conviction as he spoke. ‘It’s Tessa Quayle, Sandy.’

A different Woodrow now, hackles up, nerves extended. Tessa. ‘What about her?’ he said. His tone deliberately incurious, his mind racing in all directions. Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?

‘The Nairobi police say she’s been killed,’ Mildren said, as if he said it every day.

‘Utter nonsense,’ Woodrow snapped back before he had given himself time to think. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. Where? When?’

At Lake Turkana. The eastern shore. This weekend. They’re being diplomatic about the details. In her car. An unfortunate accident, according to them,’ he added apologetically. ‘I had a sense that they were trying to spare our feelings.’

‘Whose car?’ Woodrow demanded wildly – fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept – who, how, where and his other thoughts and senses forced down, down, down, and all his secret memories of her furiously edited out, to be replaced by the baked moonscape of Turkana as he recalled it from a field trip six months ago in the unimpeachable company of the military attaché. ‘Stay where you are, I’m coming up. And don’t talk to anyone else, d’you hear?’

Moving by numbers now, Woodrow replaced the receiver, walked round his desk, picked up his jacket from the back of the chair and pulled it on, sleeve by sleeve. He would not customarily have put on a jacket to go upstairs. Jackets were not mandatory for Monday meetings, let alone for going to the private office for a chat with chubby Mildren. But the professional in Woodrow was telling him he was facing a long journey.
emagazine Close Reading Competition 2015

Close readings of the opening to John le Carré’s *The Constant Gardener* by Theodora Critchely and Eleanor Burke’s, runners-up in the *emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2015. The extract is included after Theodora and Eleanor’s readings.

**Eleanor Burke, Highgate School**

Sandy Woodrow, Head of Chancery at the British High Commission in Nairobi, learns that an acquaintance, Tessa Quayle has been killed in a suspicious car accident. This news affects Sandy strongly as he battles to retain his composure.

The mundane circumstances make the news more unexpected. Mike ‘Mildred’ is comically ‘chubby’ and inexperienced as he is ‘on his first overseas posting’, thus the last person Sandy expects to bear such news. The news is made even unexpected by arriving at such a dull time, a Monday morning in ‘late January’.

Sandy’s adoption of different personas shows his devastation. The mention of Tessa puts his ‘hackles up’ like a territorial animal, showing his anxiety, whilst the news itself makes him a ‘professional’, showing his attempt to retain control over his distress. His nonchalant ‘what about her?’ contrasts strongly with his anxious thoughts ‘oh Tessa. Oh Christ’, showing his attempt to conceal his emotions. Sandy also seeks to control these emotions by forcing them ‘down, down, down’, where the repetition reflects the effort this takes. Sandy even restrains his actions, as he is ‘moving by numbers’ suggesting that he is so concerned about controlling his grief that he cannot complete basic actions instinctively. Moreover, Sandy is ‘facing a long journey’, thus his emotional recovery will be slow.

The episode is narrated as Sandy’s flashback, enabling us to see how the news affected his memory. The news was so shocking that Sandy cannot remember exactly where he was. His assumption that he was ‘straightening the photograph of his wife…and sons’ shows that he feels more protective towards his family now as a result of the shock. Alternatively promoting family values, with his ‘secret memories of her [Tessa] furiously edited out’, could be an attempt to deny an infatuation with Tessa.

Le Carré’s portrayal of nature as malign alludes to the dangerous and corrupt environment of the High Commission, making Tessa’s death seem sinister.

The High Commission suffers ‘continuing subsidence’ connoting a decline in morality. Whilst the mention of the ‘plague of Nairobi eye’ suggests that this is a dangerous environment and implies that a morally corrupt perspective is contagious. Such a noxious environment makes Tessa’s death seem sinister.

The circumstances of Tessa’s death also seem suspicious. Mildren claims ‘they’re being diplomatic about the details’, suggesting that perhaps she was murdered. The fact that other employees ‘wanted sole possession of the High Commissioner’s heart and mind’, shows their corruption as they will stop at nothing to advance their own position. This degenerate environment makes such a sinister death credible.

Sandy appears removed from this corruption as he criticises his colleagues. He calls them ‘prima donnas’, mocking their egoism, whilst he feels Mildren announced the news like ‘he said it every day’, criticising his cold professionalism.

© emagazine and EMC
Published on the emagazine subscription website April 2015
Yet Sandy is more like them than he realises. He has a ‘divided English heart’, connoting divided loyalties and strives to remain professional. This hypocrisy suggests that Sandy, just like Tessa, could not avoid the High Commission’s corruption.

**Theodora Critchley, Withington Girls School**

The scene is set; ‘a time of dust and water shortages…and heat ripping off the city pavements.’ Sandy Woodrow, Head of Chancery at the British High Commission, Nairobi, is in his office. John le Carré introduces the plot through Woodrow, for whom straightening a picture is considered to be a ‘vital act’.

It is human nature to revisit significant, shocking and tragic events. Woodrow’s wanting to clarify the very moments of, and leading up to, his being told of Tessa Quayle’s death is entirely understandable. Though Woodrow’s obsession with apparently irrelevant details – ‘exactly why he was standing’ – is not. And with this, more is learned of the character from whose perspective the news is received.

Woodrow is governed by memory and routine, ‘moving by numbers’. His days are very much reliant upon schedule; reflected largely in the language used by le Carré. Aside from the obvious, ‘the… meeting was slated to start in thirty minutes prompt’, Woodrow’s use of precise time; ‘nine-thirty on a Monday morning’ and sense of duty, ‘by rights he should have been…’ convey the well-structured organisation of his life. Down to his use of lists; ‘twenty-four year-old Mildren, High Commissioner’s private secretary, Essex accent…’ reminiscent of information from an important document, or perhaps ‘guidance material’, Woodrow is a man of order and discipline.

When this order is upset and balance disrupted by ‘the news’, Woodrow demands ‘wildly’, finding the concept ‘mad’. His feelings for Tessa Quayle are ‘deliberately’ repressed; he appears ‘incurious’ about her towards Mildren, though his mind is ‘racing in all directions’ and during his panic and inability to accept Tessa's death, he ‘[edits] out all his secret memories of her.’

Quite a contrast to Mildren’s delivering the dreadful news, ‘as if he said it every day.’

Clearly, Woodrow is a man who suppresses emotion. Le Carré shares some of Woodrow’s personal details – of his young family, of the High Commission and his critical views of others, namely the ‘bunch of special-interest prima donnas,’ even local knowledge of ‘Nairobi eye.’ But Woodrow’s memories of Tessa Quayle remain completely confidential; seemingly dying with her.

With his ‘editing out’ of the memories, the reader becomes immediately interested, suspicious even, especially when these are replaced with memories of the ‘unimpeachable’ company of military men, a far cry from the ‘secret’ of his time with Tessa. Woodrow knows much of Tessa, ‘Oh Christ. What have you done now?’ but is holding back from Mildren, the reader, and ultimately himself.

The event which has occurred on the ‘baked moonscape’ of Lake Turkana stuns Woodrow, who appears to have control over even the most miniscule of details. This is unsettling, especially as ‘the professional in Woodrow’ surfaces, taking control in a way that ‘Sandy Woodrow’ simply could not. The reader is drawn into the stifling heat of the Kenyan January, to the scrupulous Woodrow, and the suffocating panic that accumulates with the news.

And thus, le Carré has laid down the foundations of what undoubtedly will be a ‘long journey’.
The Constant Gardener

The news hit the British High Commission in Nairobi at nine-thirty on a Monday morning. Sandy Woodrow took it like a bullet, jaw rigid, chest out, smack through his divided English heart. He was standing. That much he afterwards remembered. He was standing and the internal phone was piping. He was reaching for something, he heard the piping so he checked himself in order to stretch down and fish the receiver off the desk and say, ‘Woodrow.’ Or maybe, ‘Woodrow here.’ And he certainly barked his name a bit, he had that memory for sure: of his voice sounding like someone else’s, and sounding stroppy: ‘Woodrow here,’ his own perfectly decent name, but without the softening of his nickname Sandy, and snapped out as if he hated it, because the High Commissioner’s usual prayer meeting was slated to start in thirty minutes prompt, with Woodrow, as Head of Chancery, playing in-house moderator to a bunch of special-interest prima donnas, each of whom wanted sole possession of the High Commissioner’s heart and mind.

In short, just another bloody Monday in late January, the hottest time in the Nairobi year, a time of dust and water shortages and brown grass and sore eyes and heat ripping off the city pavements; and the jacarandas, like everybody else, waiting for the long rains.

Exactly why he was standing was a question he never resolved. By rights he should have been crouched behind his desk, fingerling his keyboard, anxiously reviewing guidance material from London and incomings from neighbouring African Missions. Instead of which he was standing in front of his desk and performing some unidentified vital act – such as straightening the photograph of his wife Gloria and two small sons, perhaps, taken last summer while the family was on home leave. The High Commission stood on a slope, and its continuing subsidence was enough to tilt pictures out of true after a weekend on their own.

Or perhaps he had been squirting mosquito spray at some Kenyan insect from which even diplomats are not immune. There had been a plague of ‘Nairobi eye’ a few months back, flies that when squidge and rubbed accidentally on the skin could give you boils and blisters, and even send you blind. He had been spraying, he heard his phone ring, he put the can down on his desk and grabbed the receiver: also possible, because somewhere in his later memory there was a colour-slide of a red tin of insecticide sitting in the out-tray on his desk. So, ‘Woodrow here,’ and the telephone jammed to his ear.

‘Oh, Sandy, it’s Mike Mildren. Good morning. You alone by any chance?’
Shiny, overweight, twenty-four year-old Mildren, High Commissioner’s private secretary, Essex accent, fresh out from England on his first overseas posting – and known to the junior staff, predictably, as Mildred.

Yes, Woodrow conceded, he was alone. Why?

‘Something’s come up, I’m afraid, Sandy. I wondered if I might pop down a moment actually.’

‘Can’t it wait till after the meeting?’

‘Well, I don’t think it can really – no it can’t,’ Mildren replied, gathering conviction as he spoke. ‘It’s Tessa Quayle, Sandy.’

A different Woodrow now, hackles up, nerves extended. Tessa. ‘What about her?’ he said. His tone deliberately inquisitive, his mind racing in all directions. Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?

‘The Nairobi police say she’s been killed,’ Mildren said, as if he said it every day.

‘Utter nonsense,’ Woodrow snapped back before he had given himself time to think. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. Where? When?’

‘At Lake Turkana. The eastern shore. This weekend. They’re being diplomatic about the details. In her car. An unfortunate accident, according to them,’ he added apologetically. ‘I had a sense that they were trying to spare our feelings.’

‘Whose car?’ Woodrow demanded wildly – fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept – who, how, where and his other thoughts and senses forced down, down, down, and all his secret memories of her furiously edited out, to be replaced by the baked moonscape of Turkana as he recalled it from a field trip six months ago in the unimpeachable company of the military attaché. ‘Stay where you are, I’m coming up. And don’t talk to anyone else, d’you hear?’

Moving by numbers now, Woodrow replaced the receiver, walked round his desk, picked up his jacket from the back of the chair and pulled it on, sleeve by sleeve. He would not customarily have put on a jacket to go upstairs. Jackets were not mandatory for Monday meetings, let alone for going to the private office for a chat with chubby Mildren. But the professional in Woodrow was telling him he was facing a long journey.

Reprinted by kind permission of Curtis Brown Group Ltd, London on behalf of David Cornwell