

Writing about sex

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Writing about Sex

1. Introduction

Sex, after all, is more than a popular sport and marketing tool: it is a truth-telling vehicle. (*Nerve: Literate Smut*, 1998: xv)

When the musical score needs the highest and lowest notes, when the canvas requires its most vivid colours: this is when the sign of sex comes into operation. In the world of language, this is the function of the sign of sex: it cannot escape from its privileged position...sex in every single literary production determines how values are assigned within the text. (Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, 1997: 66-67)

Sex has everything in it: Drama, excitement, suspense. Resolution. Confrontation. Conflict. Loss of control. Societal and personal taboos. A good sex scene can get into the unconscious layers of a character's psyche, reveal what's really going on between people under the surface.

In any piece of writing, the reader is a voyeur into other people's lives. Those lives affect the protagonists in a particular way – but how they affect the reader is up to the person pulling the strings. A character's death may be comic or tragic. Other people's sex lives may – or may not – be arousing to the reader, depending on the purpose of the story. This is perhaps the major difference between “erotica” as a genre and other kinds of literature that feature sex.

This paper is about the latter, and deals with two aspects of sex in literature: the process of its writing and the corollary of that process – the way in which sex is used as a vehicle for revealing the truth. The process and its outcome are linked: because the best writing about sex takes the author into his or her most private and unconscious lives, it is able to reveal some of the most penetrating truths.

This critical study is divided into four sections:

1. My **Introduction** will look at the dilemmas I faced as a writer in dealing with sex scenes, and go on to describe the basic conceptual tools that I will use in this paper as a means of exploring the writing of sex scenes in literature: a mapping of the creative process itself, and the use of language.
2. **The Literature Review** considers the background reading I undertook, and lays out the critical tools that I will use in the analysis of sex scenes. My own interest has always been with what writers themselves have to say about the process and outcomes of writing, and with the broader analysis of the structure of the personality, myths, dreams, metaphors and symbols as organising narrative principles. Those interests are mirrored in the choice of my background reading and the thrust of this paper.
3. **Analysis: sex scenes revealed** involves a close critical reading of two sets of texts in order to understand how the writers achieved their effect, with special attention to the elements of symbolism. The texts analysed are divided into short stories – "Nightlight"¹ by Hanif Kureishi, and my own story "Night"² – and novel excerpts from Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, and *They Whisper* by Robert Olen Butler.
4. **Some conclusions** pulls together the strands of this study and returns to the original question posed: how does an understanding of the process of writing sex scenes, and the way in which the best writers achieve heightened effect and deeper meaning, impact on my own writing.

1.1 Mapping the Creative Process

My own best writing comes from an unconscious place. That is when the pen is gliding along the page and I am making associations, inventing metaphors, seeing images appear before me on an imaginary wide screen, or sentences that whisper to me in a voice that isn't quite my own. I have rituals and exercises that I use to get me to that place: I walk every morning, stretch my (probably imaginary) meridians, convinced that it will make energy flow. I have a place and a time I write, beginning my day with a description of what's around me – it always leads to somewhere else.

Once I am writing a particular story, and certainly while I was writing my novel over the past few years, I discovered that each piece had its own rituals and place where it got written. I found that if I changed locations in the middle, the story would grind to a halt or take twists that didn't fit in. The voice would change.

In their seminal guide, *Art and Fear*, artmakers and authors David Bayles and Ted Orland make the following observation, which seems equally true for all forms of artistic creation:

Most of the myriad of steps that go into making a piece...go on below the level of conscious thought, engaging unarticulated beliefs and assumptions about what artmaking is...Ask yourself why (for instance) you listen to country western music while you're painting? (Does it encourage you to use brighter colours?) Why do you leave your studio unheated even when it means working with your overcoat on? (Does it make your brushstrokes crisper?)... We rarely think about how or why we do such things – we just do them. (Bayles & Orland, 2002: 59-60)

To change the outcome, one needs to identify the automatic processes. And if we are stuck, the authors claim, then we've probably abandoned one of our practices which has always been a sure pathway in.

When writing sex scenes, I realised that the process was slightly different to my usual method of writing. I would write the scenes in bed, most often, dozing in and out of afternoon sleep – perhaps (in retrospect) because that is my most private place, and the state of being half-awake, half-asleep is conducive to less conscious thought.

In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande writes about the role of the unconscious in writing:

There is every reason to believe...that it is the great home of form; that it is quicker to see types, patterns, purposes than our intellect can ever be... To be able to induce at will the activity of that higher imagination, that intuition, that artistic level of the unconscious – that is where the artist's magic lies, and is his only true 'secret'. (Brande, 1981: 151-153)

Later, she actually prescribes lying down and in a dim room without moving as a way of inducing the 'Artistic Coma':

Lie there, not quite asleep, not quite awake...after a while...you will feel a definite impulse to rise, a kind of surge of energy. Obey it at once; you will be in a slightly somnambulistic state indifferent to everything on earth except what you are about to write... (ibid.: 169)

Because of this link between process and outcome, I felt that my analysis of writing about sex required more than just the reading of sex scenes themselves. I needed to know about the process that the writers went through in the writing of those scenes. For me, this was the most encouraging and liberating aspect of their literature. I don't really connect with Philip Roth's fiction writing, but I read much of what he had to say about writing it, and was fascinated. If he found it difficult to do, and could reveal the process, then my seemingly insignificant fears and tribulations made sense, they were legitimate – and I could learn how to overcome them (not by reading *Portnoy's Complaint...*). And so someone like Roth, who is preoccupied with sex as a way into his characters' psyches, becomes important for me and my writing.

My exploration of how and why the best sex scenes succeed as a "truth-telling vehicle" includes more than just the writings themselves, and is not usually connected to the biographical details of the authors' lives. Instead, it is a 'conversation' between writer and reader (or writer and fellow writer, in this case), predicated on their own descriptions of how a specific scene came into being.

1.2 The language of sex

Hebrew has no special names for the genital organs, neither for male nor female, nor does it have any explicit terms for copulation, semen, or ova. All of these terms are described by euphemisms or metaphors or allusions.

The point is clear: we should be chaste and discreet about such matters. And if we must discuss them, then we should do so modestly by using euphemisms and metaphors.

(Maimonides)³

Rule Number Two: ...avoid euphemisms – all those words and phrases writers generally think sound better than the actual Latin terms... Rule Number Five: To describe the obvious in compelling new ways, consider unusual words and phrases... Rule Number Six: Don't think you'll come up with a new sex vocabulary by perusing a textbook on human anatomy... (Marianna Beck, *The Ecstatic Moment*)⁴

I had to practise writing sex scenes, perhaps because it just didn't come naturally. Our written language for sex is too often either literal and pornographic, or fuzzy romantic fade-out with waves crashing. As a writer and a reader, I had not been habitually exposed to original, effective writing about sex to the same extent as other themes. And then there was the added element of embarrassment: what if it just ended up sounding ridiculous? Somehow, the risk of writing bad sex was worse, and more exposing than, say, writing an ineffective death scene.

In the beginning, then, writing sex demanded commitment and practice. And research, which meant reading some of the best writers to see how they did it. And, I suppose, to give me “permission” to do it myself.

The first time I remember obtaining that kind of permission was early on. I was doing my high school leaving exams when I first picked up a copy of Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, it’s what I read in between studying ancient history and physics. It was 1979, and it wasn’t new, no one told me not to read it. But it was the first time I’d read anything that graphic that wasn’t from the top shelf of a newsagents, where I had to stand on a chair if I wanted to get to it. It was literature (sort of), it was written by a woman and she was Jewish.

Later, it was Anais Nin and Marguerite Duras whose writing kept reminding me that the issues I wanted to write about were not melodramatic or inconsequential – if you knew how to do it right. You could write about sex without doing it like Erica Jong (whose writing I loved to read but didn’t want to emulate).

Still, I found it difficult. I felt that in many of my stories there was too much “fade-out” when there needed to be something happening, that I was avoiding something because it was too hard to do. To begin with, I needed a language of sex that was mine.

To find it, I needed to analyse the way that other writers did it. Which words did they choose? How much space was devoted to the scene, and at what point in the narrative does it appear? What layers have been built up below the surface, through the use of symbolism and imagery? To accomplish this, I decided to spread my net wide, to incorporate in my analysis both short stories as well as novel excerpts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fiction and author interviews

Most of my background reading for this paper has in fact been largely re-reading. Sources include my favourite writers, the ones I am always capable of revisiting and who have particular expertise at invoking the layers of meaning in sex scenes: Milan Kundera, Hanif Kureishi, Marguerite Duras, Anais Nin, Amy Bloom, Raymond Carver. In addition, I sought out short story anthologies which highlighted writing about sex: *Nerve: Literate smut*; *The Good Parts*; *Granta, Love stories*; *The Best of Libido Magazine*. The last two decades, in particular, has seen a spate of anthologies that are specifically devoted to literary writing about sex, and though many are touted as "erotic writing" that is not always the case. The sex scene in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, for instance, excerpted in *The Good Parts*, is not (for me) a piece of erotic writing. It is, however, a wonderfully accomplished piece of writing about sex that caused me to buy the novel.

It was through this background reading that I chose the texts I would concentrate on in my analysis section of this paper. I sought out scenes that I could keep re-reading, scenes that stuck in my mind and kept me thinking long after I had put them down.

At the same time, it was important for me to begin to define why these scenes were so compelling. In my reading, I turned to author interviews and articles by writers about the significance of sex within a text. Milan Kundera, interviewed by

Philip Roth in the *New York Times Review of Books* (17/05/98) had this to say about the function of sex in literature:

A person asks himself: Isn't it nonsensical for me to get up in the morning? To go to work? To strive for anything? To belong to a nation just because I was born that way? Man lives in close proximity to this boundary, and can easily find himself on the other side. That boundary exists everywhere, in all areas of human life and even in the deepest, most biological of all: sexuality. *And precisely because it is the deepest region of life the question posed to sexuality is the deepest question.* (my italics)

Kundera does not go so far as to claim that "the key to all human relations is to be found in sexual relationships" ("I don't know," is his answer to Ian McEwan's question in a 1984 interview).⁵ But when McEwan comments that Kundera's starting point is always an affair or marriage, that there is "an obsession with constant love-making" in his work, his response is: "Yes, but it either reveals the essence of a situation or it has no place in the novel. When my characters make love, they grasp, suddenly, the truth of their life or their relationship." He goes on to elaborate:

...When Sabina makes love with Franz, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, she suddenly becomes aware that he is like a puppy feeding from her breasts, sucking. She sees him as an animal – a small animal who has come to depend on her – and this aspect of him suddenly disgusts her. At a glance, she sees the truth of their relationship.

This idea, that a sex scene can uniquely reveal the essence of a situation, the truth of a relationship, is echoed by other authors who write about sex, and Elizabeth Benedict's book, *The Joy of Writing Sex* (1996), was an invaluable source of author interviews on the topic. Russell Banks's interview, particularly, encapsulates the function of a sex scene within a text:

At that point [mid-way through writing the novel *Continental Drift*] I realized what a powerful and wonderful metaphor a sex scene can be in a story, for things utterly other than sex. *How you could use a sex scene to develop and dramatize themes in the book that had nothing to do with sex...* This was when I began to realize the literary possibilities of a sex scene and didn't just use it either sentimentally or to indulge myself in a sexual fantasy. (Benedict, 1996: 32) (my italics)

2.2 Writers on the writing process

On writing process, my sources are mostly writings by writers (and in one case, artists): Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* (1996); Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (1977); Stephen King, *Writing* (2000); Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* (1986); Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (1934); David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear* (1993); Brewster Ghiselin (ed.), *The Creative Process* (1955).⁶ Again, most of these sources were re-read in the context of preparing this paper, and many have formed the backbone of my own writing experience and obsessive interest in the writing process.

For many authors, writing about sex is an act so private that they must believe their work will never be read, or else they'll never get down the words. This is reflected in the literature and writer interviews about the process of writing about sex. As Joseph Olshan comments in *The Joy of Writing Sex*:

Your best stories, your best material, your most lyrical lines are the ones hardest to get to because there's something in you that doesn't want to come out, that doesn't want to be exposed... If I thought about all the people who were going to read the scenes when I sat down to write them, I probably wouldn't do it... (Benedict, 1996: 12-13)

Olshan's experience is that his best and deepest work comes from a place "that doesn't want to be exposed." Philip Roth echoes this sentiment in *Reading Myself and*

Others, claiming that his best writing about sex could not have taken place had he believed that someone might read it. Describing his writing of the famous masturbation scene in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth refers to this process as “playing (in the mud if you like)” rather than writing or even experimenting.

This monologue was delivered by one of those lecturers who used to go around to schools and churches...my slide show, delivered in the dark and with a pointer, and accompanied by running commentary...consisted of full-color enlargements of the private parts, fore and aft, of famous people...except that buried somewhere in the sixty or seventy pages were several thousand words on the subject of adolescent masturbation, a personal interlude by the lecturer, that seemed to me on rereading to be funny and true... (Roth, 1977: 32)

Roth goes on to say that he could never have deliberately written about the topic and “...come up with anything so pointedly intimate.” Rather, in the midst of what he felt to be unpublishable rantings about Mickey Mantle’s penis and Margaret Mead’s breasts, he was able to relax his guard. “For me writing about the act had, at the outset, to be as secret as the act itself” (32-33).

Anais Nin’s writing about sex, too, seemed to be at its “best” – according to her biographer, Dierdre Bair – when it was conceived in secrecy. Her earliest erotic writings, such as those later collected in *Delta of Venus*, were written anonymously for an unseen “collector”, and were never intended for the general public. Bair believes that it was precisely because of this that Nin allowed herself to let go, and wrote what Bair considers to be her best fiction:

She wrote it very quickly for money, so there was not the same booby trap that she got into when she tried to write her own fiction... Certainly most fiction writers take the stuff of their lives and the lives of the people around them and convert it into a form of fiction...Nin was always so afraid of being discovered for this transgression or that transgression, that she was never able to do that. Whereas, with the erotica, it was going into a private collector's hands, it was never to be seen again in the world, and she was just sort of sitting down at the typewriter and belting it out. And that was it.⁷

A similar point is made by the Israeli poet Karen Alkalay-Gut, whose sensuous poetry is characterised by its sexual themes.⁸ Alkalay-Gut, who moved to Tel Aviv

from the U.S. in 1972, claims that writing in her native English within a Hebrew-speaking environment is what gives her the freedom to say whatever she wants without worrying about what the neighbours think. Language itself is her buffer against the perceived intrusion of the outside world while she is writing:

Only after a number of poems had appeared in English did I realize I had been publishing my most intimate and private thoughts. The isolation and anonymity I had become accustomed to and comfortable with was suddenly gone. People began asking me how I dared expose myself so openly. And really, all I could say was – it was a question of living in a private language in a public land.⁹

For Alkalay-Gut, a barrier to the unconscious that she taps in her poetry has been removed just by the fact of her not writing in the place she came from.

For novelist Nikki Gemmel, it was the assumption that her name would not appear on her work that enabled her to write freely about sex. *The Bride Stripped Bare*, source of a recent literary scandal when the identity of its author was leaked to the press just prior to publication, is a "tell-all" novel based on a woman's story of sexual adventure, and was originally intended to be published anonymously. In her Afterward to the novel, Gemmel explains her motivation for keeping her identity a secret:

You may be wondering why I chose to write this book anonymously... I wanted to write a scrupulously honest account of a woman's secret life, and the only way I felt comfortable doing that was to withhold my name. Once I'd made that decision I felt liberated; I was suddenly able to write with an exhilarating freedom, to say things I'd never dared...¹⁰

In the end, the "revelation" of Gemmel's identity gave her work a great deal of media exposure: many people bought the book because of it, lured by the invitation into a private world that most people keep secret. Believing, perhaps, that the writing about sex would be better because of this.

If the act of sex itself is about abandonment and not being in control, not thinking, so is writing about it. The most unconscious of drives demands that the writer access his or her own unconscious in order to render it successfully, and this can only be done under certain conditions: away from the light of potential criticism...in amongst other things, hammered out quickly without thinking, in secret.

2.3 Symbolism and The Magic Object

On the connection between literature and psychology, which touches on both the writing process itself and the mechanism of symbolism, my sources mix the literary theories of writers, critics and psychologists. They include: Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1992), *The Literature Machine* (1987); Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (1951); William York Tindall's *The Literary Symbol* (1955); *Spring Journal*, "Archetypal Sex" Issue (1995); Celia Hunt, *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (2000); Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (1964); Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (1972).¹¹

The literature I have referred to as a jumping-off point for my analysis of symbolic language in writing about sex is based on psychological analysis. In *Man and his Symbols*, Jung proposes that "Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully understand" (21). The mechanism of symbolism as a way of

layering a literary text with meaning, is defined by Erich Fromm in *The Forgotten*

Language:

Symbolic language is a language in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are experienced as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world...It is a language which has a different logic from the conventional one we speak in the daytime, a logic in which not time and space are the ruling categories but intensity and association. (Fromm, 1951: 7)

Fromm goes on to define a particular subset of symbolic language which is especially relevant in the analysis of texts where sex itself is the symbol being utilised:

The universal symbol [Fire, water, darkness, night, woman, the sex act] is one in which there is an intrinsic relationship between the symbol and that which it represents... (16)

Here, the use of sex – in the form of sexual arousal, sexual tension, and the sex act – becomes a symbol in itself.

The use of sex itself as a universal symbol is succinctly expressed by Octavio Paz in his book *Labyrinth of Solitude*:

What we ask of love (which, being desire, is a hunger for communion, a will to fall and to die as well as to be reborn) is that it give us a bit of true life, of true death. We do not ask for happiness or repose, but simply for an instant of that full life in which opposites vanish, in which life and death, time and eternity are united. (Paz, 1985: 185)

A symbol, simply defined, refers to "the process by which a person, place, object or event comes to stand for some abstract idea or condition", usually by analogy or association. In literature, "It differs from metaphor in that the connection between the subject and its referent is never explicit; it is left for the reader to discover."¹²

William York Tindall, in his work *The Literary Symbol*, spends much time defining the meaning of a symbol in the context of literary analysis, and his attempts at definition form the backbone of my own analysis in this paper. For Tindall, the literary symbol is essentially "a visible sign of something invisible" (5) and as such it is at once "calling for explanation and resisting it" (11). It functions in a similar way to the unconscious creation of symbols which occurs naturally in dreams:

Though definite in itself and generally containing a sign that may be identified, the symbol carries something indeterminate and, however we try, there is a residual mystery that escapes our intellects... The symbol conceals what it carries and resists total explanation because it is founded upon analogy, which, philosophers say, is primitive, childish, and irrational. (11-12)

For Tindall, the literary symbol is like a dream "before Freud has got around to it" (169), mysterious and open to individual response.

Thus, interpretation of symbols in literature remains an essentially subjective endeavour, and in this act of interpretation, Tindall suggests that "anything goes" (27), including the image and context of the object, the author's intent, and the function of the symbol in pulling together the work as a whole. It is this primary function, "the power of the literary symbol to put parts of a literary work together in the service of the whole" (16) that Tindall emphasises and explores:

By uniting the separate it can organise experience into a kind of order and, revealing the complex relationships among seemingly divided things, confer peace... (16)

It is in this context that he goes on to refer to Jung's idea of the symbol as a reconciler, uniting the unconscious with the conscious. In many ways, this is part of the process of creating literature itself: for if the origin of imaginary worlds lies in the author's unconscious, then his or her conscious expression of these images perform a task of internal reconciliation, the creation of meaning.

While the "meaning" assigned to a text may be a subjective matter, the accomplished use of symbolism does create a textured and complex whole with which to communicate. Here, Tindall quotes author Joseph Conrad:

...the symbolic conception of a work of art has this advantage, that it makes a triple appeal covering the whole field of life. All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and in that way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty..." (87)

Although William York Tindall's seminal work was first published in 1955, it remains in print and is as relevant today as ever.¹³ At the same time, I have found Italo Calvino's idea of "the magic object" to be a useful conceptual tool in taking both Fromm and Tindall's approach one step further.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the writer Italo Calvino enlarges on the traditional concept of the literary symbol, creating a sub-category that he terms the magic object:

The magic object is an outward and visible sign that reveals the connection between events. It has a narrative function... The symbolism of an object may be more or less explicit, but it is always there. (Calvino, 1996: 32-3)

By identifying this "object" and exploring its symbolic associations, the text reveals additional layers of meaning. Calvino claims that the magic object is "the real protagonist of the story":

...because it is the movements of the [object] that establishes the relationship between them...I would say that the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. (32-3)

3. Analysis: Sex scenes revealed

3.1 Short stories: “Nightlight” and “Night”

In many ways, “Nightlight”, a short, 8-page story by Hanif Kureishi, and my own short story “Night”, are opposites. “Nightlight” is narrated in the close third person, in a male voice, set in the basement of a flat in urban London. “Night” is a first person, female narration, taking place in a small rural community, and nobody ever touches, physically. Yet both describe the alienation and deep connection wrought by the sexual impulse, in a claustrophobic world where there are taboos imposed on certain forms of communication. These taboos on communication, whether self-imposed or societal, form the basis of the characters’ internal conflict. Their actions are dictated by the fear of discovery, and the emergent vulnerability that might threaten the existence of the sexual connection. At the same time, the fragile state of mind of the main characters and the redemptive force of their relationship is only revealed to the reader, heightening the emotional and sexual tension of the stories.

“Nightlight” begins: “She comes to him late on Wednesdays, only for sex, the cab waiting outside...” (138). The main, nameless character goes on to describe the facts of his “shabby” life whose emotional centre has become this weekly meeting.

Divorced and jobless, “he misses the sense that his well-being, if not happiness, is increasing and that each day leads to a recognisable future. He has never anticipated this extent of random desolation” (139). Stripped of all external sources of meaning, he has come to live in a world where the usual things no longer make any sense. His wife has taken the house he built with her and he rarely sees his kids. He no longer enjoys a simple drink in the pub with his mates, whose lives seem to have a structure he can no longer relate to.

As the story progresses, the man begins to realise that he wants more from this anonymous woman (“He has no idea where she lives or where she is from”) who has wordlessly entered his life.

When she’s gone he masturbates, contemplating what they did, imprinting it on his mind for easy reference...he is both satisfied and unfulfilled...balked by the puzzle of his own mind and the impossibility of grasping why one behaves so oddly, and why one ends up resenting people for not providing what one hasn’t been able to ask for. (140)

It seems to him, at this point in the conversation with himself, that he has always resisted getting emotionally close to anyone.

One week the woman doesn’t come, and he wonders what he did to make her stop. He recalls the way his relationship with his ex-wife, her expectations, had made him into someone he was not, until “he kept his mouth shut, for fear of what would come out” (141). He wonders if he has become capable only of this: loving a silent stranger in a dark room, but dismisses the idea of speaking to her in case it brings more disappointment. In their silent meetings, he admits, there is a kind of perfection. If he never discovers who she really is, and while sex is their only form of communication, he can stay in love, keep projecting his fantasies onto her. And yet “he is starved for want of love.”

The woman returns the next week, and at one point during their lovemaking:

...he opens his eyes to see her watching him. It has been a long time since anyone has looked at him with such attention...there is so much love he almost attempts conversation... (144)

And yet, on second thoughts, the narrator rejects the idea of talking, since:

...words come out bent, but who can bend a kiss? If only he didn’t...think that something should happen, as if friendships, like trains, have to go somewhere. (145)

There is very little explicit sexual language in this story, and yet it is infused with sex. A few simple sentences scattered throughout the story fire the reader’s

imagination, so that, undescribed, the sexual act appears before our eyes, implied and imagined, mirroring the unspoken words of love between the characters.

“She invites him to lie in different positions; she bids him to touch different parts of her body. She shows him they can pore over one another.” The man imagines her when she is gone: “She is on her stomach, him on the boat of her back, his face in her black hair forever” (140). When next they meet “he lies on his side in her, their mouths are open, her legs holding him.” He can only gauge her mood by the way that she makes love. “Sometimes she merely grabs him; or she lies down, offering her neck and throat to be kissed” (144), just as we are only given the clues about the act itself. “She is tender. How he has missed what they do together” (141), says the man, and the reader is left to imagine what that is. As Kureishi says, when speaking of love, “not knowing, surely, is beautiful, as if everything one learns detracts from the pleasures of pure imagination” (141). In this story, that only happens once, and it is grating. “He thinks of the fluffy black hairs, flattened with sweat, like a toff’s parting, around her arsehole” (140). As a reader, I would have preferred not to have been offered that particular image.

In the end, resolution comes when the man apparently alters his expectations of the relationship, in a final conversation with himself:

As long as there is desire there is a pulse; you are alive; to want is to reach out beyond yourself into the world, finger by finger. (145)

“Night” is the story of the narrator’s schizophrenia, her constant dialogue between her different selves – the social persona and the nameless woman who is pulled towards the story’s unnamed man. In “Night”, the characters communicate their desire with body language and secret letters; on the surface, they are forced to behave as if those

communications did not exist. "She seems like she's bursting in this place and there's no relief. The way that we're so huddled together, you have to keep your boundaries or things could overflow" (106). In "Night" everything is separated, even the characters are alienated from themselves, only dimly recognising their own actions.

"Night" begins with the main character, the narrator, sealing mail after dark, afraid of getting caught.

Night. I love it just after the sun goes down...my skin hides me...That is why I prefer sunsets, twilight, charcoal swathes across the sky. Shadows. That's when I come alive. (104)

In the light, she's not her real self, a part of her has become alienated and hidden. She speaks of her two selves as distinct personalities, with different pronouns: "When she walks by me, I lose my balance," the narrator says (105).

There is little direct sexual language in "Night", just as there is no direct communication between the characters, only letters with oblique messages that taunt the imagination: "watching you" they say, "I fantasize about you" or "I want to know what you like." The woman seals the envelopes with her juices "so he can bury himself in the smell" (106) but in the night they never meet, despite vague attempts to set a place and time.

And yet, it is this increasingly frequent communication which changes her:

Now there is an energy to her that's unmistakable: a swing in her hips when she wears those jeans, buttoned, settled just under the waist; the clinging shirts with no bra.

At the start, her emerging sexuality feels foreign, the way it has begun to slip into her ordered, daytime world. "On the outside everything is as usual...but the world has taken on a different tinge..." (105).

Then, at some point, the narrator allows herself to be taken over by her impulses, to accept them as a part of her. "I recognise the writing. It is mine" (106), she says one

night after stealing the mail, and yet the separation of selves does not completely disappear, though it has become conscious, at this point. "I watch from another place as if she is a separate entity. As if she isn't me" (107).

Finally, as the two selves begin to merge, there is the revelation of her fear – what he will think of her "when daylight shows her imperfections" (107), the fear that grasps all lovers when they reveal themselves fully and become vulnerable. Night and separation, fantasy, the community which makes their relationship forbidden and forced into secrecy are the cloak protecting her from her own explosiveness, keeping part of her constantly in check.

As in Kureishi's "Nightlight", the constant internal dialogue between the longings of the self – to be fully known by the Other, to touch them completely, emotionally and physically – are thwarted by the situation and the fear that in attempting to reconcile the pieces, something pure and basic, the sexual urge which fires the relationship, will be extinguished.

When she's with him, something dims in her; it's the idea of him that's keeping her alright...she wants to reach out but something stops her, it always does...

At the end of the story, the external situation remains unchanged:

Their eyes meet between spoonfuls of soup... 'Hi' I say to him, breaking their line of communication. 'How are your kids?' (107)

Though there is no apparent resolution to the story – as in "Nightlight", where the barriers to communication are never broken – the barriers to a newly honest internal dialogue have been breached.

In *Six Memos for a New Millennium*, Italo Calvino develops the concept of a special kind of symbol: The magic object. He describes this as the narrative link that holds the episodes of a story together. In these two stories, the "magic object" is combined with

the power of universal symbols, whose meanings are intrinsic rather than dependent on context for their layers of meaning – sex, desire, darkness, silence – in heightening the power of the narrative.

In "Nightlight", I would argue that the woman is the narrative's "magic object" – in this case, a sex and/or love object. She has no name, and few identifiable characteristics: she's in her thirties and has dark hair. In fact, outside of the recurrent acts of sex which dominate this story – and are dependent on the woman's appearance or non-appearance – the narrative of "Nightlight" focuses on what's happening inside the narrator's head: memories, musings, regrets. Only when the magic object appears – or does not appear, its non-appearance a pivotal event in itself – does the narrative move forward. She is the magic object, 'Woman', Everywoman, in a sense, that binds together the narrative, and the life of the main protagonist.

It is this stripping down of external elements that magnifies the act of sex itself, until it takes up all the page – and is elevated to symbolic status. The characters are nameless. Their meeting takes place in an almost empty basement, in the dark. In silence. All other aspects of the protagonist's life have collapsed: he has no job, no marriage, he cannot even verbalise his thoughts and feelings. What remains is the act of creation, the essential spark from which all life flows.

The dark, the basement, night – all these are recurring images in "Nightlight" which serve to intensify and deepen the meaning of the sexual act itself. The basement alludes to what is hidden, underneath, concealed, transgressive. It is the place of secrets: secret longings, regrets, needs. It represents, in symbolic form, the man's secret desire for love. It also signifies all that is repressed – the shadow personality. Similarly, the symbol of silence resonates and heightens this theme: Sex becomes a

symbol of communication in a world where communicating through other channels is made impossible by circumstances.

In "Night", the magic object is the letters: it is their appearance and their words that move the story along. This skewed form of communication carries within it the characters' fantasies and longings, their secret lives, the ambiguity of all forms of communication. It is the letters that awaken the narrator's sexuality, and motivate her to spy and steal. They are the source of everything in her daily life becoming layered with extra meaning, ending with an externally routine meal in the kibbutz dining room, transformed into a scene of sexual tension and inner conflict.

In this story, again, the symbols of darkness and light, or night and day, are pivotal to the story's effective evocation of mood and depth of meaning. It is strengthened by the motif of schizophrenia, the narrator's perception that she has actually been divided into two personalities: the sexual, immoral, thieving character of the night, and the hard-working upright and uptight member of her community. The natural process of night becoming day becoming night again is reflected in the narrator's attitude. She does not judge her behaviour as good or bad. The process of describing herself from the outside allows her to suspend thought and feeling – and judgement.

In "Night", it is the symbol of arousal rather than the sex act itself that forms the underpinning of the story's symbolic meaning, since the sexual act never in fact takes place. "Arousal is at the origin of life and like all origins is fundamentally concealed from the clarity of understanding...all beginnings are fantasies...maybe, even, sexual fantasies" (James Hillman).¹⁴ In this case, the beginning is the narrator's acceptance and increased identification with the sexual side of her nature, the essential energy

that is released into all aspects of life. "...Now there is an energy to her that's unmistakable" (107).

Both "Night" and "Nightlight" take place in pared-down worlds, in which sex and desire take up all the remaining space. Hanif Kureishi creates a world that has shrunk down to a weekly act in a basement. In "Night", the small, claustrophobic community means that the characters' repertoire of public forms of expression has shrunk down to the formulistic and conventional. The symbol of a small, constricting outer world is reflected in the characters' inner life, intensifying and magnifying each small movement into a universal struggle to be free of imposed constraint. Sex, or the life force, with all its nuances and associations, is what pushes this struggle forward.

3.2 Novel excerpts: A Thousand Acres and They Whisper

In a novel-length work – and both these novels are substantial in length¹⁵ – the placement of a sex scene in the story and the amount of space it takes up are worthy of investigation in their own right. And yet, I bought both these books on the strength of a single sex scene, excerpted in the anthology *The Good Parts*, which claims, in its title, to be "The best erotic writing in modern fiction."

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Robert Olen Butler's novel *They Whisper* are both told in the first person, past tense, and are haunted by the undercurrent of childhood incest. The excerpts I have chosen to analyse are not directly connected with this narrative event, but are tied down to it, extracting very different meanings. In

Smiley's book, it is the narrator's revelation of a repressed memory, while Butler's narrator is confronting the issue through his wife's experience and its implications. And yet, in both these books, it is the amount of space that the sex scenes take up, as a literary device, that is most striking: seven pages in *A Thousand Acres*; almost every page of *They Whisper*, since it is through the understanding of remembered sexual encounter that the protagonist attempts to find meaning.

A Thousand Acres takes the plot of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and transforms it into a modern, mid-western American story, told from the point of view of the eldest daughter Ginny. Larry, the family patriarch, decides to divide his precious thousand-acre property between his three daughters, but it is only the two eldest who take an interest in continuing to work the land, so he cuts his youngest out of the deal. Eventually, the two eldest daughters turn on him, the father goes mad, and then everyone loses everything.

In Jane Smiley's version, Ginny, the narrator, fills in the gaps of this Shakespearian tragedy with her quiet, downtrodden voice and the revelation of having been "fucked and beaten" by her father as a teenager. This plot and character twist, slowly built-up in the early parts of the novel, becomes explicit around halfway through the 400-page book. Twenty pages earlier, are the novel's only sex scenes, taking up a total of less than seven pages, and interwoven with one of the book's major symbols: the farm's poisoned wells, contaminated by the unseen, underground water table that's been collecting the run-off from the farm's insecticides for decades.

Ginny begins this scene:

I lay awake in the hot darkness, naked and covered by the sheet. Every so often, I looked under it, at my blue-white skin, my breasts, with their dark nipples, the foreshortened, rounded triangles of my legs, my jutting feet. (173)

The narrative, written in the past tense, begins by creating a sense of alienation, of Ginny's lack of connection with her body which is described like a foreign object, her "foreshortened legs" seen from the outside like an artist's model. Ginny goes on:

I looked at myself while I thought about having sex with Jess Clark and I could feel my flesh turn electric at these thoughts, could feel sensation gather at my nipples, could feel my vagina relax and open, could feel my lips and my fingertips grow sensitive enough to know their own shapes. (173-4)

Here, the process of sexual awakening, the beginnings of desire, are something obviously foreign, and described with a kind of absent, literal detail. And yet, for the briefest moment, Ginny feels herself from the inside, and then watches as the moment disappears into something more recognisable, guilt and revulsion at her own instincts:

When I turned on my side and my breasts swam together and I flicked the sheet for a bit of air, I saw only myself turning, my same old shape moving in the same old way. I turned on my stomach so I wouldn't be able to look, so that I could bury my face in the black pillow. It wasn't like me to think such thoughts, and though they drew me, they repelled me, too. I began to drift off, maybe to escape what I couldn't stop thinking about. (174)

Then Ginny feels her husband's erection pressing into her leg, and though "normally I hated waking in the night with him so close to me", she is "doused in a hot wave", and puts her hand around 'it', and turns toward 'it'... "for once I couldn't stand not touching it, knowing it was there but not holding it in my hand." Even her husband is an object in this sex scene, someone who she has never fully connected with, and before they even have sex, the repeated naming of her husband's erection as 'it' brings home the true nature of their relationship. "Don't open your eyes," he tells her, and then afterwards: "I liked that. That was nice," he says, without looking at her. "His voice carried just a single quiver of embarrassment" (174).

This two-page description is the only one in all her 399 pages of narrative where Ginny has sex with her husband. It encapsulates the core of their relationship, which is plagued by mysterious miscarriages and the as-yet unremembered incest of her childhood which have pushed the couple apart sexually and emotionally.

Ginny moves on in her narrative straight into a description of having sex with Jess Clark the next afternoon. Even here she remains, at first, divorced from her body: "My skin looked strangely white...I didn't watch while he unbuttoned my shirt." With Jess, Ginny doesn't go into any detail of the sex act. He unbuttons her shirt, and she asks him to continue, "...it was humiliating to ask but that was okay, too. Reassuring in a way. He smiled. That was the reward." The sex is 'awkward' and it is not until afterwards that she fully feels the wave of desire, "As I realised what we had done, my body responded as it hadn't while we were doing it – hadn't ever done, I thought" (175).

At this point, Ginny asks him to hold her and keep talking, no longer scared or humiliated, rather than move away immediately as she had with Ty, and he gazes at her for a long minute or two. Finally, Ginny has an orgasm, in between some banter about farm business:

He laughed a warm, pleasant, very intimate laugh and said something about let's see, well the Sears man would be out tomorrow, at last, and I came in a drumming rush from toes to head. I buried some moans in his neck and shoulder, and he hugged me tightly enough to crack my ribs, which was just tightly enough to contain me, I thought. He kept talking. (175)

Later, she describes his face as "...deeply familiar to me, as if I'd been staring at it my whole life..." (176) whereas her husband – who presumably didn't make her come – felt like a stranger, embarrassed to look at her afterwards.

Jess goes on in this scene to immediately talk about the wells on the farm, one of the unseen sources of her family's poisoning. In every sense, he has seemed to connect

Ginny with a new sense of herself, a new way of perceiving herself in relation to her surroundings.

In *A Thousand Acres*, there are many recurring symbols; however it is the symbol of the sow, the female pig, which keeps reappearing in these sex scenes. It is a perfect example of what Tindall describes as "The power of the literary symbol to put parts of a literary work together in the service of the whole."¹⁶

It is in her scene with Ty that Ginny first begins to feel like a sow, "...my back came to seem about as long as a sow's, running in a smooth arc from my rooting, low-slung head to my little stumpy tail." And then, "The part of me that was still a sow longed to wallow, to press my skin against his and be engulfed" (174). Later, after sex with Jess, she thinks about asking him what it meant, "...last night when I dreamt I was a sow" (176).

The symbols of the pig, swine, boar and sow appear in almost every culture, and it is interesting that in the monotheistic religions, it is a negative symbol: of sin, taboo, uncleanness, whereas it is associated with desire and fertility in many other cultures.¹⁷ For example, swine were sacred to Demeter, the ancient Greek goddess of the earth's fertility, and the Celtic mother goddess was a white sow. Ginny, in this novel, is unable to conceive as a result of the earth's poisoning by generations of male farmers, which makes this symbol even more appropriate. Ginny and her husband also raise domesticated pigs as a business, and the concept of a pig as someone who is greedy, taking more than they need, is a powerful theme in this story of male domination and the domestication of Ginny and her sisters, brought up to believe that "when we are good girls and accept our circumstances, we're glad about it...when we're bad girls, it drives us crazy" (99).

In the sex scenes, however, the idea of a sow as taboo and greedy and forbidden, a symbol of desire, is presented in a positive light. Ginny finally flouts taboo by enjoying sex, fantasising about a man who isn't her husband, and then sleeping with him without guilt or remorse. These scenes foreshadow her complete throwing-off of her father's domination and the stranglehold of the farm.

In some Buddhist traditions, the squeal of the sow is also considered as a presence that shatters illusions.¹⁸ In this story of Ginny's personal transformation, in which she also ends up losing all her worldly possessions, the squeal of the sow, like Ginny's orgasm in the sex scene with Jess, heralds what is to come.

In *They Whisper* by Robert Olen Butler, the protagonist Ira Holloway is a man whose life is lived through his senses, and whose history is the history of his sexual encounters: "All the women I've ever loved still exist somehow inside me." While the sex scene in Jane Smiley's novel is pivotal, I could have easily chosen any one of a hundred scenes from *They Whisper*: it is, in essence, the story of a man who is obsessed with the female body, and believes that his passion will somehow lead him to redemption. In this context, it is the cumulative force of the story-telling which is important in this novel, rather than the placement of a particular scene.

The context of all these remembered sex scenes is the narrator's dysfunctional relationship with his wife, who has fallen silent and become a raging jealous Roman Catholic obsessed with purging the guilty memory of childhood incest with her father. Ira Holloway's memories are interspersed with the imagined voices of the women themselves, and remembered sex serves as a reminder of the narrator's humanity, as well as a form of escapism and a desperate search for meaning in his life story.

The excerpt I will consider here is the one that appears in the anthology *The Good Parts*. It appears about halfway through the novel, and retells an encounter from the year before, at a bathing pavilion on a riverbank near Zurich, where the women sunbathe topless. "...it always seems to me that no one else is noticing when it all fills me up so full that I have trouble appearing sane" (148) he says in introduction to the scene.

They Whisper is written in a "stream of consciousness" form, with long, loosely punctuated sentences that emulate the narrator's thought processes. It is a particularly apt choice of style for the description of sex and the creation of an obsessive and claustrophobic world, as in this single sentence:

I changed into my swimsuit and went up onto the upper deck and I strolled in this Swiss garden of nipples and it was very difficult for me to breathe, though it was a very strange place, really, like so many strange places around Europe in recent years, a place with single sunbathers, of course, but also husbands and wives together and boyfriends and girlfriends together and fellow workers together, men and women, and all the women come and they sit in the sun and they pull the tops of their suits down and their nipples are naked and there is an air of quiet about the place, the quiet of elaborate casualness and everyone here is trying to turn nipples into elbows or wrists. (149)

For Ira Holloway, a man for whom elbows and wrists and feet – in fact, all parts of the female anatomy – are erotic, this is a difficult place to be in and remain casual.

"His deepest yearning is to be inside the woman – physically, literally, but also emotionally and spiritually," says Butler about his narrator, in an interview with Dan Hughes.¹⁹ "For him to feel love, or feel compassion, or feel empathy for a woman in any way that is not sexual resonates through his sexuality and vice-versa. That's the hard truth that's in this book.

"There is a view of the world [in this book] that's nakedly me," he continues. "Do I adore women's bodies and find almost any woman beautiful in her own way? Do I see

sexuality as a kind of secular sacrament wherein the woman's body is uniquely herself, a metaphor for her deepest self? I do feel these things."

In fact, Ira thinks about little else. His is a search for the symbolism of sex, the meaning of women's bodies as magic objects. In this scene, struggling with whether to let his eyes settle on the naked breasts of a woman offering him an orange, he says: "If she thought that I did not wish to look wouldn't that make her a little sad? This was a form of her hidden self, wasn't it?"

It is the sensual description of their bodies, the intense focus on the body parts that excite him, which characterises Ira's narrative.

We did not speak again. She slept and sunned and I sat and watched her and after a while she turned onto her back and I memorized her nipples – the iron clay red of them, the thumb and forefinger size of them, the little V gash of their tips. And this was all thrilling to me of course. But what stirred me the most, after a time, was the rise and fall of her midriff. Her breathing seemed lovely to me. Just that, the rise and fall of her breathing made me love her and yearn to speak with her and learn how she used this wonderful body of hers to tumble and to soar. She lay there with her breasts naked and she was breathing. She was alive. (152)

Ira's (and Butler's) fascination with the female form itself is a kind of goddess worship, a deep belief that it is through the female form itself that true empathy and union can be achieved. It carries with it the symbolism of ancient female-centered religions, and eschews any kind of guilt or feeling of sinfulness or taboo that is associated with sex in later, patriarchal religions. The female body as an object of sin and taboo in itself, particularly in Catholicism, the chosen path of the narrator's wife, is highlighted in contrast.

4. Some conclusions

I started writing this paper because I was struggling with writing sex scenes myself. At first I couldn't work out how to do it, what language to use and how much to tell. Now that I feel comfortable with *how* to write about sex, I've become more concerned with using the scenes to achieve emotional depth and resonance. Since I have moved in my own work from concentrating on the short story form to the novel, I have also come to appreciate the challenges inherent in making these scenes work fully within a larger context.

In this context, I have developed a deeper appreciation of symbols as a means of holding together stories. While the creation of, or decision to use symbols is usually spontaneous (and for me, largely unconscious), they are an aspect of my writing which is later developed more consciously with rereading, editing, getting outside feedback, and continuing with a longer piece.

I am writing this paper at an interesting crossroads in my writing life. My short story collection *The Book of Changes*, which I have submitted for my M.Phil degree, has evolved into two books: a novel based on the set of Australian stories in that collection, and a group of short stories linked by their setting (kibbutz) and recurrent narrators. The novel is largely done, but not yet far away enough to analyse. The stories, however, have become more closely linked in my mind, and this has given me the opportunity to more clearly define what I'd been doing unconsciously all the time: creating a set of symbols, or "magic objects", which pushed a loose collection of things into something whole. I have also become more strongly aware that each story hinges on a symbol, or "magic object", as an organising principle: The lake (which is

also a major water source for the region), a tree (planted by the community's founders and the source of an argument between neighbours), a new house (imbibed with the personality traits of its prior inhabitants).

If the process of creating symbols is largely unconscious, then so is their effect on the reader. Unless they are required to pick a piece of literature apart, the average reader won't be aware of the alchemy that's taking place. Reading is like entering a dream world, just as writing is. A writer will often recognise an unconsciously created symbol, and heighten its effect, just as a reader might suddenly join the dots as to why a piece has so much resonance, how it is that the details of an imaginary life are able to say something universal.

In writing this paper, I was able to gain insight into my own writing about sex by understanding the mechanics of this process, from the act of creation to the workings of a finished piece. In the words of Italo Calvino: "...when the canvas requires its most vivid colours: this is when the sign of sex comes into operation." ²⁰

Notes

¹ Published in Kureishi's collection *Love in a Blue Time*, Faber and Faber, 1997.

² My story "Night" appears in *The Best Of Carve Magazine Volume Three*, 2002.

³ Maimonides (Rabbi Moses Ben-Maimon, 1204-1135), quoted in Rosenthal, G.S. (ed) *Maimonides*, Funk and Wagnals, 1969, p31.

⁴ "Eight Dos and Don'ts for Safe Sex Writing", pp312-315, in her Afterword to *The Ecstatic Moment*, an anthology of *The Best of Libido: The Journal of Sex and Sensibility*.

⁵ "An Interview with Milan Kundera" in Bradbury, Malcolm (ed) *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, Fontana, 1990.

⁶ Dates of first publication.

⁷ Interview with Cynthia Joyce, salon.com, (29/07/96).

⁸ In particular, her volume *The Love of Clothes and Nakedness*, Sivan, 1999.

⁹ "Notes on Writing in English in Tel Aviv", *Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series, #4. Winter 1993-4, 13-16.

¹⁰ Anonymous, *The Bride Stripped Bare*, Fourth Estate, 2003.

¹¹ Dates of first publication.

¹² Quinn, Edward, *Collins Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Collins, 2004, p329.

¹³ Tindall, William York, *The Literary Symbol*. Latest print edition: Peter Smith, 1981

¹⁴ Hillman, James, "Pink Madness, or, Why does Aphrodite Drive Men Crazy with Pornography", in *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture*, No. 57, Spring 1995, p p39.

¹⁵ *They Whisper*, Vintage 2002 edition, 329 pages; *A Thousand Acres*, Ivy Books 1996 edition, 399 pages.

¹⁶ Tindall, p16.

¹⁷ The examples quoted are from the website <www.khandro.net/animal_swine.htm>

¹⁸ In particular, the symbolism of the animal head that crowns the Tibetan dakini *Dorje Phagmo*, known as the 'indestructible sow'.

¹⁹ Eye.net, 31/3/94.

²⁰ *The Literature Machine*, p. 66.

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