

Candidate 1 evidence

An analysis of the narrative techniques employed by Laurie Lee and Lorna Sage to explore the theme of childhood in their novels "Cider with Rosie" and "Bad Blood" respectively

In "Cider with Rosie" by Laurie Lee and "Bad Blood" by Lorna Sage, both writers explore the theme of childhood through skilful employment of the technique of narration. Despite these two memoirs being set many years ago, they retain an evocative account of the reality of growing up. "Cider with Rosie" describes Lee's happy childhood in the village of Slad, Southern England (close to the Welsh border) post World War I. "Bad Blood" details Sage's lonely childhood in the village of Hanmer, North Wales (close to the English border) post World War II. The authors' experiences inform their differing narrative styles, and these narrative styles illuminate their contrasting childhoods. In order to explore the theme of childhood through effective narration, Lee and Sage create distinctive voices as first person narrators; bring other characters to life by giving them their own words; include humour to enliven their stories and use detail to build convincing childhood worlds.

Laurie Lee's narrative voice is poetic and his careful word choice, metaphors and similes create striking images. His writing consists largely of descriptive passages, creating a "prose poem", put succinctly by author Michael Morpurgo¹. For example, Lee describes the winter night when he sees Jones's goat clanking down the lane in his broken chains as "frost-bright, moon-cold".² Why did he use this word order? Sam Jordison states: "There's no rational reason, but the result is strangely magical...It's a tiny touch - but the cumulative effect of these flourishes is one of energy, verve, life and sheer delight in language."³ With his poet's imagination and its influence on his narrative style, Lee evokes something that is hard to feel, or even remember as adults: the otherworldly quality of our childhood.

This ability to render the nature of a child's experience through poetic use of imagery can be seen within the first lines of the novel. Lee describes the grass in which he is placed, aged three, as:

"...tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark and a wicked green, alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys."⁴

The image of the blades of grass being as sharp as knives, coloured an unsettling deep green and reminiscent of jungle vegetation filled with camouflaged tigers and strange, noisy creatures, takes us into the mind of a terrified and bewildered little child. As a reader we are there in the grass too, the vivid description bringing the scene to life in a visceral way. We understand how things would have seemed to the young Laurie Lee (and

¹ Jordison, Sam 2014. *Cider With Rosie is a heady blend of joy and horror*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/08/cider-with-rosie-laurie-lee-horror-d-arkness>. Consulted 13.10.22

² Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p29

³ Jordison, Sam 2014. *Cider With Rosie is a heady blend of joy and horror*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/08/cider-with-rosie-laurie-lee-horror-d-arkness>.

⁴ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p9

perhaps recall comparable memories from our own childhoods) even as we, as adults, recognise the fact that there was no real threat at all. The long sentence with its repetition of “and” conjures up a sense of the breathless storytelling of children. The alliteration and onomatopoeia of “chirped” and “chattered” emphasise the alien quality of the environment (the insect filled garden of his new home) the child found himself in. Lee’s narration provides a rich, colourful “child’s eye view”, immersing the reader in his childhood on a sensual level but also enhancing his understanding of childhood in a more intellectual way too. Some may see Lee’s narrative style as long-winded purple prose, but writer Robert Macfarlane discredits this idea: Lee’s style creates a “lushness of language in which elaborate metaphors serve not as ornaments, but rather as the means of most closely evoking complex experience”⁵. The metaphor of the garden as a jungle is a good example of this.

Comparatively, Lorna Sage’s first person narration is not poetic, but rather more analytical and direct. The main focus of her writing is to make sense of her difficult childhood, to understand its impact on her character and to acknowledge how we are influenced by our ancestors. We can see this in a quote from chapter seven, “Council House”: it wasn’t that the house was cramped because it was small, but:

“...it was a case of emotional claustrophobia. There’s something cloying and close about living in a proper family that has always brought out the worst in me and it started back then.”⁶

Instead of seeking to immerse the reader into the experience of her childhood by creating poetic images to replicate the emotional landscape of it, Sage succinctly considers the impact of her past childhood upon her present self. Sage’s “current” voice in “it started back then” emphasises to the reader that Sage’s character remains affected by her childhood experiences.

This analytical adult perspective gives her narrative voice an omniscient quality, allowing her to “look down” and to observe the truth of her childhood. Through this, both she and the reader gain the clarity she lacked as a child, and this is therapeutic for Sage. Early on in the novel she alludes to books being a form of therapy in order to escape from her uncomfortable home and familial situation: “...they were my comfort, refuge, addiction, compensation...”⁷. As an adult, she uses the process of writing this novel to confront the confusion of her childhood, therefore an all-knowing, experienced voice is used. This can be seen when she comments that her parents’ marriage was “exclusive and inward-looking” which made their relationship: “one story between them and it wasn’t at all easy for me or my brother to inhabit it.”⁸ Her parents’ devotion to each other

⁵ Macfarlane, Robert 2014. “Robert Macfarlane: in the footsteps of Laurie Lee”. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/20/laurie-lee-centenary-birth-english-travel-writer-walking-robert-macfarlane>. Consulted 26.10.22

⁶ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p99

⁷ Ibid, p29

⁸ Ibid, p127

deepens Sage's solitude, as she is left without attention and is "free to 'run wild' outdoors".⁹ The theme of childhood is developed here as it is conveyed by Sage as isolating.

However, Sage does not always write from the perspective of adulthood. She channels a childlike wonder through diction in "At harvest times there was a carnival quickening in the air", the short, sharp "c" alliteration giving a sense of the excitement of children.¹⁰ Sage's skill as a writer is made evident through the fact that she can apply scrutinising commentary to her narration whilst still giving a more emotional understanding of her childhood. For example, she recounts her grotesque grandmother's trick where she would "pull a ghoulish face" with her false teeth, the word choice of "ghoulish" conveying the fear one would feel as a young child.¹¹ Immediately after this description, she adds: "This clownish act didn't conceal her real hunger, however. She projected want."¹² Here, Sage has distanced herself from the childhood feelings of confusion and terror by explaining the grandmother's behaviour from the safer vantage point of adulthood.

Just as Sage does not only write from an adult perspective of insight, but also evokes the feelings of childhood in a more imaginative way, so too Lee does not always use the poetic language and child's eye view that was noted earlier. He also sometimes narrates with the insight and maturity only an adult has, looking back. His mother's skittish and dreamy nature is often described warmly, but her hysteria over their cottage being flooded has a disturbing element: she is described as "demented"¹³ and would "wring her hands and roll her eyes about".¹⁴ Lee notes that "It was not till much later that I reasoned things out:..Mother's frenzies and scares belonged to something else altogether".¹⁵ We later find out that the grief of losing her only daughter, Frances, at the age of four, probably contributed to some emotional difficulties within Lee's mother. In much of the novel Lee shows childhood as a period of blissful ignorance, and it is rare for him to comment in an analytical way - but when he does it is all the more powerful.

A key aspect of Lee's narration is his frequent use of authentic dialogue. He reproduces exactly what the local people said, in their own dialect. This adds realism, whilst increasing the readers' intimacy with these believable characters who influenced Lee's childhood. Lee's portrayal of their voices highlights his fondness for them and there is a great sense of wistfulness and longing in "Cider with Rosie": we can feel his desire to relive his childhood experiences, hear again these familiar voices and be reunited with past friends and family. The final chapter, "Last Days", in which he describes the end of his childhood and the end of village life as he knew it (industrialisation having eventually come for his Cotswold valley), makes this desire especially poignant.

⁹ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p100

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p136

¹¹ *Ibid* p32

¹² *Ibid* p32

¹³ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p38

¹⁴ *Ibid* p39

¹⁵ *Ibid* p40

Lee's dialogue is often very humorous. A memorable example is found in the chapter "Grannies in the Wainscot", where he recaptures the fiery, funny arguments between the two feuding "grannies", Trill and Wallon. Trill screeches about Wallon's appearance: "Er's bald as a tater root! Wicked old hump, I'll see her gone!"¹⁶. The harsh assonance of "tater" and "wicked" emphasises her anger and West Country dialect. Both these eccentric old ladies died (within days of each other) during Lee's childhood but his faithful reproduction of their words brings them back to life. Similarly, the accidental wit of his young classmates enlivens the account of his school days when we hear them making excuses for the lessons which have become "too tiresome" : "'Please, miss, I got to stay 'ome tomorrow to help with the washing - the pigs - me dad's sick'; 'I dunno, miss, you never learned us that'; 'I 'ad me book stole, miss. Carry Burdock pinched it.'" ¹⁷

This kind of comedy and faithfully reproduced dialogue is not Sage's style - but then her childhood, unlike Lee's, was not characterised by warmth and friendship. Sage notably makes little use of dialogue in the novel, although she gives voice to the people in her childhood through other means. Her father's tough, militaristic manner (developed after having served in World War II) can be heard through Sage's narration in which she repeatedly associates him with brusque sayings: "...for my father it [nationalisation] stood for Red Tape, a brigade of Pen-pushers and Yes-men who Had No Incentive to work or Stand on their own Two Feet..."¹⁸. This capitalisation is often used in relation to her father, and conjures up an aggressive, "shouting" voice that Sage must have been intimidated by as a little girl. It is made clear that, as a child, Sage saw him as authoritative ("His characteristic tone of voice was a sort of self-righteous yell...") and, as a result of this, emotionally absent, increasing her sense of childhood isolation.¹⁹

The most prominent voice in the narrative, other than Sage's own, is her late grandfather's. We hear it during the first third of the book, when quotes from his personal diaries (discovered and read by the adult Sage) are included in order to explain his impact on her during her childhood and later on in life, as well as to elucidate why her family is as dysfunctional as it is. Sage's grandfather's voice is given the "spotlight" to speak to the reader directly, as well as an "immortality" (just as Lee does, in a different way, for his key characters through his use of authentic dialogue). The "squalor of insignificance" that Sage's grandfather fears is avoided by her inclusion of his diary writings which were largely his explanations for his behaviour.²⁰ She explains her grandfather's writing was simply for himself and that "If you write things down, however compromising..." then you are "*making it all real*", and "He is justifying himself".²¹ This comment seems deeply self-referential, and perhaps encapsulates her reasons for

¹⁶ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p83

¹⁷ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p56

¹⁸ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p117

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p118

²⁰ *Ibid*, p77

²¹ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p77

memoir-writing: to accept that her unhappy childhood, together with the “bad blood” she has inherited from her grandfather, are the driving forces for her own personality. His life was unfulfilled: trapped in a parochial countryside community (he was the local vicar) and a vindictive marriage. Sage strikingly introduces him quoting “Hamlet” whilst watching a gravedigger in the churchyard (“Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well...”), and writes “I thought he was making it up as he went along...I suppose the scene struck him as an image of his condition - exiled to a remote, illiterate rural parish, his talents wasted and so on.”²²

The use of the diaries enhances Sage's understanding of how deeply her grandfather influenced her. Frances Wilson writes that “In a sense this is what autobiography is about: the ways in which your own story is not really yours at all, but a version of the tale of your parents or grandparents”.²³ The first line of the novel is “Grandfather's skirts would flap in the wind...and I would hold on”, symbolising how Sage latched onto her grandfather rather than her parents, looking for affection and a kindred spirit.²⁴ The image of Sage traipsing behind him could also hint at how she would follow in his footsteps, as he instilled in her a love for English Literature (she became a celebrated literary critic as well as Professor of English at the University of East Anglia) along with a tendency to break with convention, especially in matters of a sexual nature (Sage became pregnant at sixteen). In her narration, she repeatedly uses the word “ineluctable” which connotes inescapability. Sage is preoccupied with the extent to which we may be trapped by the failings of our ancestors, and with how our lives may eventually become our own. The fact that Sage wrote her memoir during a period of ill health (she died soon after it was published), and dedicates it to her own descendants (her daughter and granddaughter), gives her work extra resonance.

Sage does not use humour in the same way that Lee does in terms of recreating amusing dialogue, but they both share a dry wit. We see this in Lee's chapter “Sick Boy” when he says, on succumbing once again to fever, “There were times when I was almost moved to tears at the thought of my anxious people, the invisible multitudes up and down the land joined in grief at this threat to their king”.²⁵ Similarly, the wry humour of Sage's narrative voice occasionally emerges from the sidelines with an affectionately mocking tone towards her grandfather. After commencing an extra-marital affair with a nurse, he writes in his diary “The end of a wonderful month for me. Thanks be to God”.²⁶ Sage comments that contrary to his usual brooding, “He has to admit to having a good time...like a saintly stoic accepting the delights the Lord has seen fit to pelt him with”.²⁷ She laughs at his salaciousness but, unlike Lee's gently self-deprecating tone, she is still criticising her grandfather for his flaws. As an adult, she regards him not with the

²² Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p4

²³ Wilson, Frances 2000. “What the blood remembers”.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/09/biography>. Consulted 13.10.22

²⁴ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p3

²⁵ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p158

²⁶ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p56

²⁷ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p56

reverence she did as a child when she “basked in his reflected glory”, but rather as someone weaker, more human, whereas Lee’s adult interpretation of himself and the people around him remains good natured and indulgent.²⁸

Having looked at the way in which Lee and Sage develop their first person narrative style, incorporate dialogue (or other means to give their characters a voice) and include humour, the use of detail to build a convincing childhood world will now be analysed in the final section of this dissertation. Both author-narrators use a considerable amount of detail in order to make their childhood worlds credible to their readers. Both, for example, include geographical detail early on in their novels to create a clear, realistic setting for the story of their childhoods to take place. Lee’s beloved Slad valley is “narrow, steep and almost entirely cut off; it was a funnel for the winds, a channel for floods.”²⁹ Sage’s village of Hanmer is “in this little rounded isthmus of North Wales sticking out into England...”.³⁰

However, Lee tends to use detail in the form of long sentences, layering detail upon detail to create an immersive, sensual experience for the reader much as he does in his creation of poetic imagery. Sage, on the other hand, tends to use more singular, telling detail to create her world with concision and precision. For example, in the chapter “Winter and Summer” Lee builds the atmosphere of a summer’s day thus: “The garden, dizzy with scent and bees, burned all over with hot white flowers, each so blinding an incandescence that it hurts the eyes to look at them.”³¹ Four of the five senses (taste is not involved) are present in the detail of this sentence, the heat, buzz, colour and fragrance of the garden made almost palpable, deepening the reader’s understanding of the very “texture” of Lee’s childhood. Sage, by contrast, often uses particular, pertinent details to create a clear visual picture of her childhood situation as, for example, in her description of her grandmother’s presence in the childhood home: “She’d stay up late in the evening, alone, reading about scandals and murders in the “News of the World” by lamplight among the mice and silverfish in the kitchen...”.³² The details of the “mice”, “silverfish” and sordid “scandals” create an image of dirtiness. Sage’s use of detail adds to the grotesque image of her grandmother and emphasises her continuing disgust of her in adulthood.

Both writers make powerful use of detail in the sections pertaining to their sexual awakening, the details chosen giving an insight into what was on their minds. These awakenings occur towards the end of both novels and thus act as harbingers for the end of their childhood. Sage creates an electric atmosphere at the beginning of Part Three as she describes images of the god-like rock idols she and her friend Gail adored: “He [Elvis] had a coke bottle tilted to his lips, his hair was spiky with grease and sweat, and

²⁸ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p16

²⁹ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p29

³⁰ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p5

³¹ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p149

³² Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p7

his other (right) hand with the signet ring hung loose from the armrest, long fingers idly splayed".³³ Lee, by contrast, is less interested in the exactness of his description than the emotion involved: the hot summer's day of his encounter with Rosie is "amber-coloured"³⁴ (like the cider they drink), he feels like he has been dipped in "hot oil"³⁵ and there are "festoons of untrimmed grass"³⁶ around the wagon under which they lie (the sharp blades of grass he feared as a toddler are long gone and, reflecting his current emotional state, the grass is now lush, wild and fertile).

However, Sage is able to use detail in a more emotive way when she chooses, and Lee is able to write in a spare and economical way when it suits his purpose. At the beginning of the seventh chapter of "Bad Blood" in which her grandfather dies, the opening sentence uses the sensory details of touch and smell to evoke the childhood memory of her grandfather: "He would rub dry leaves between his palms and mix them with shreds of tobacco, and when he lit his pipe it smelled like an Autumn bonfire".³⁷ Lee occasionally does away with his customary accumulation of evocative detail and uses starker language instead. The effect of this contrast is to convey the shocking reality of the sad, frightening events that sometimes take place alongside the joy and beauty of his rural idyll, as well as to suggest the intense way in which children often experience their life.

We see Lee's use of simpler, more direct language in his anecdote about Miss Flynn, a mentally ill villager who drowned herself. Eager and excited, he goes to see her body: "I stole off and ran down the lane"³⁸, "This was the pond that had choked Miss Flynn"³⁹, "The pond was empty".⁴⁰ He only includes the vital details in order to tell the story. The shortness of the sentences creates a tone of stunned shock, and the simplicity of them makes clear the disturbing reality of the situation. This is a scene of death, not some entertaining adventure for Lee. The darkness of such incidents makes the light of his childhood glow more brightly, more dazzlingly.

To conclude, Laurie Lee and Lorna Sage have narrated their richly detailed childhood memoirs with sensitivity, insight and humour. Lee's writing is sensuous but precise, the poetic qualities of his narrative voice not obscuring the truth, but creating a heightened sense of it. The beauty of his childhood, and of childhood itself, is made stronger by the skill of Lee's lyrical writing. His use of authentic dialogue adds energy and intimacy to his novel, and this technique, combined with the accumulation of detail he uses, memorialises the people he knew and records his experiences of what it was like growing up in a lost world. Lee's distinctive voice, along with his sense of humour and his use of

³³ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p193

³⁴ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p207

³⁵ *Ibid*, p207

³⁶ *Ibid*, p208

³⁷ Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers, p80

³⁸ Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, p103

³⁹ *Ibid*, p103

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p104

dialogue and detail, engage the reader in the manner of a *gr at raconteur*. Sage, with the acuity and clarity of a literary critic, has brought understanding to a difficult childhood. She also memorialises characters in her novel by giving them a “voice”, but this is for the reader to see the impact they had on her, rather than to be “there” with them. Her detail is concise and her humour is dry. However, there are echoes of Lee in Sage’s narration, and vice versa, in that both utilise an adult perspective to give insight into the theme of childhood whilst revealing the intense emotions and experiences we have as children. Thanks to such compelling narrators, their novels are complex, astute and informative works that explore the theme of childhood extremely well. The lasting impression created by both these novels is a message to value childhood, and the power of great storytelling.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Lee, Laurie 2002. *Cider with Rosie*. London: Vintage, Hogarth Press

Sage, Lorna 2001. *Bad Blood*. London: Fourth Estate, HarperCollins Publishers

Secondary sources:

Jordison, Sam 2014. *Cider With Rosie is a heady blend of joy and horror*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/08/cider-with-rosie-laurie-lee-horror-darkness>. Consulted 13.10.22

Macfarlane, Robert 2014. “Robert Macfarlane: in the footsteps of Laurie Lee”.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/20/laurie-lee-centenary-birth-english-travel-writer-walking-robert-macfarlane>. Consulted 26.10.22

Wilson, Frances 2000. “What the blood remembers”.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/09/biography>. Consulted 13.10.22