

**A. L. Kennedy**

**(b. 1965)**

"When I write, my aim is to communicate, person to person. I am a human being telling another human being a story which may or may not be true, but which hopefully has a life and truth and logic of its own"

# Prolific writer

- 1993: *Granta* voted her as one of twenty best novelists
- Various short stories collections
- Four novels to date (some in the magic realist vein: e.g. *So I Am Glad*, 1995)
- Drama and screenplays for film and television
- Poetry collections

## Her main concerns

- Emotional territory of the quotidian: desire, memory, loss, love ...
- Simultaneous banality and profundity of life's minutiae (*domestic sublime*): individual experience confronted with larger systems of meaning (partly in decline at the millennial threshold – 1990s sense of transition and exhaustion of old systems of belief and compact ideologies)
- Evocations of cruelty and violence

- Quests for female identity – often elusive
- Awareness of paradoxes of life (= an accelerating series of journeys and crises)
- “There is a reality that is external and yet given immediately to the mind. [...] Not things made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining states, but only changing states, exist. Rest is never more than apparent, or, rather, relative” (Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1913))

# Characterisation

- “It’s always the same aim. I keep things very, very simple. Having got a cast together, I’m trying to find out more and more about what they want, what they want to do, and how do I make them real?”
- “I try to think of my people as real. I am the first reader of my work – if I can’t find my people real, no one else will”

- Defeated individuals, victims of external and internal forces, but never losing hope completely, aware of “possible dances”, meanings and readings of existence
- Emotionally and politically disenchanted, but ready for re-enchantment – usually through emotional engagement with another human being
- Exploration of or obsession with erotic experience as a process of self-discovery, though rarely leading to certainties

# Narrative technique and style

- Instability of tense: past and present lives are always in proximity
- Non linear chronology
- Associative method
- Usually female perspective
- Female narrators often finding themselves at odds with the social world's sexual codes and conventions of desire



***Looking for the  
Possible Dance***

**(1993)**

# Setting: Time and Place

- Present narrative: 1990s (reference to John Major)
- Flashbacks to the 1980s and the social riots vs Thatcher's restrictive measures in the street parades
- Location: mainly Glasgow and London; briefly Kilmartin and ancient Scotland

# Narrative technique

- No linear chronology; analepsis used from the incipit: Margaret's memory of her father during the train journey to London
- Dissolution of past and present boundaries
- Web of associations and recollections
- Quick shifts present-past and consequent verb tense instability (innumerable examples throughout. E.g. Doctors mentioned by James-Her father return from hospital, p. 126)

## ■ p. 93: fire associations

"Margaret sees her father's head bend over hers and kiss her hair and feels something spread, a thing she sees like fire around her legs [...]  
Margaret wakes a little, feeling one tear fall, surely from her daddy and not from her, and make a warm place on her arm. Daddy squeezes her up against him and presses her into somewhere without pain, but with fire. Her mind dips down into another summer's day. Last year? The year before? Near there. Some of the Youth Theatre are belly down on the grass, listening to Talking Heads. Gus and Tam and Susan are playing with fire. [...] It was good. At first she closed her eyes, but the fourth time, she just watched what her breath could produce. It was like her soul coming out."

- Chinese-box structure: memories within memories; stories within dreams; flashbacks but also flashforwards (prolepsis)
- p.130: "Another year will pass before Colin has his pain, a pain which will surprise them both. He will wake in the chill, misty morning left by a clear, clear night with Mr Webster kneeling on his arms" (same words p. 232)
- p. 30: Anticipation of Margaret and Colin's splitting up: "I can't do this any longer. It isn't working. I've never felt more uncomfortable or unhappy in my life. Never" (same words p. 217)

- Structure meaning: in our world objectivity is impossible; reality can be assessed and judged only through personal subjective experience; meaning can only be relative and subjective – Margaret's fragmentary past finds shape only within her mind (Existentialist theme)
- Interlinked vignettes and episodes loosely centred upon themes of questing for an elusive meaning of life and events
- Disorienting the reader in their confused order

- Eventually, we manage to piece together some bits of information
  - She is around 23
  - She's raised since three by her father
  - She's lived her life in a cocoon of protective as well as oppressive love for her dead father
  - She doesn't remember her mother except in dreams
  - She is a project leader in peripheral Glasgow for a Community Link Centre, in particular running the Young People's Theatre and the Women's Group

- Alternating “she” and “I”, but mostly: use of f.i.s.
- p. 9: “Margaret is making a new start and intends to feel different and formal when she and England’s capital meet. Also she knows it isn’t good to let yourself go when you don’t have a job; she’s seen what can happen when people do that”



# Typographical eccentricities

- As in Galloway, typographical features translating characters' emotions, words, tone – the language of the body
- p. 231: fragmented speech of criminal nailing Colin
- P. 191: words written down by James to communicate with Margaret (capital letters emphasising emotion)

# Themes, motifs ad symbols

- Contrast between the visible and the invisible: world of immediacy vs higher aspirations (symbolised by the celestial world and the moon indicated by her Dad)
- Religious symbolism “vernacularised” (e.g. Colin’s crucifixion)
- Proust-like recollections – associative memory based on sensuous experience

➤ p. 23

“As tall, green barley smears across the windows of her train, Mr Lawrence walks across one of Margaret’s dreams. She can feel his breath like dust ... Then her mind draws up the smell of hot, small gravel and the feel of it, ground by her feet. She smells the fall of sunlight across skin and gravel dust. She sees the square, grilled windows and the tired, oblong walls of what everyone once decided to christen the Fun Factory. This is a memory from the summer”

# Dance motif

- Literal: Ceilidh as first and central narrative moment (almost a *peripeteia*)
  - Colin meets his torturer
  - Margaret falls out with her misogynistic employer
  - Mrs Lawrence dies and her husband accuses Margaret
- Symbolic: dance of narrative and life
  - Narrative moving on and back like in a dance
  - After visiting Kilmartin Margaret and Colin join a shared dance of life, recuperating its meaning
  - Title: "Looking" – present participle implying an unfulfilled, ongoing act

# Violence: social and individual

- Colin's crucifixion on the part of loan shark dealers : grotesque extension of Kennedy's hurt-motif
- "Scottish method of education" and violence on children
  - "She can shut her eyes and watch a huge, square-headed man gradually take off his jacket to belt a boy" (p. 17)
- Subjection and brutality presented as marginalising forces (e.g. episode of the two waitresses)
- Violent sex: "She felt she had done something wrong. This didn't happen to other people, other men made love to other women and didn't bleed." (p. 119)

# Gender concerns

- Margaret's point of view
- Negatively connoted males (except for Graham)
- Colin / surrogate father: "I wish I'd met him. Really. I know he meant a lot to you. [...] The reason I thought we could come here today, I have to take his place. [...] I'm taking away your daughter now and I hope that we're both very happy" (pp. 150-151)
- His ring symbolising entrapment: "Soon a tiny callous formed above it, where it rubbed. Sometimes she would just sit and look at it, not especially thinking of anything" (p. 205)

➤ Change after Colin suffers violence and is physically damaged (Rochester-motif).

p. 242: “[...] Colin looked different now. There was something about him, under the paleness and the scars. A piece had been added or removed and he seemed somehow much closer to her than he had been. She could feel him close, all over the house – in rooms he hadn’t visited since he arrived. Or maybe she was closer to him, she wasn’t sure who’d moved”.

- Misogynist boss accusing her of sexual harassment and false flirtation
- Societal pressure: "She was a single person when people were always expected in pairs, like eyebrows or like gloves. That was how it seemed to her. She was single woman when a woman should never be single, but looking for a man, or for the right man, or marrying a man, or living with a man, or thinking about living with or marrying a man, or leading several men a merry dance, or seducing a man, or deserting a man, or trying to understand, reform, divorce, encourage, murder, castrate or like a man." (p. 54)



# Father-daughter relationship

- Foregrounded by the absent mother figure
- An apparent idyll marred by complications
  - The magic of the moon vs his obscure words
  - The “invisible” he alludes to diminishes human affairs and never concretises in her daily life
  - Sense of overwhelming forces over human life, leading only to sadness and sense of failure
  - Magic ruined by reality: “Her father’s kisses became ugly all the time, once his teeth were gone” (p. 52)

- Imperative influence on her life, a sort of fading God whose rituals must be observed  
p. 86: "Every year, in November, her father died. In March, her daddy had his birthday; June was hers; Hallowe'en and Bonfire Night and then he would die"
- Her identity is so entwined with his that she feels as if she could not grow and exist independently  
p. 6: "Her father and her pleasure have always been close. As if one could not be there without the other".

- Father - adult world: confusing to Margaret, inscrutable sometimes, lacking logic (e.g. why did Lawrence dismiss her?): "He always did such nice things for her, but still kept that place inside him that stayed beyond her reach." (p. 104)
- Father – philosophy of sadness:
  - constant dialectic of attachment and separation/death (cf. also with Colin)
  - Sense of guilt he elicits in her:

"If you leave me, I don't know what I'll do. I can't bear it." (p. 66).

"But you don't understand. You and me, we're the same thing. We're family. We're more than family, we're the same Two parts of one thing, do you see?" (p. 154: one of her revealing dreams)

- Father – the ghost of the past: a burden rather than a source for understanding the present
  - Personal/national experience: amnesia about the past/history/tradition
- (p. 85) “As Margaret grew, her character seemed to shrink and by the time she was Gus’s age she had almost forgotten what she was like”
- (p. 172) Graham: “When folk sing the songs, they don’t always think what they’re saying. That’s the Scottish Problem, we’re aye fucking singing, but what do we ever hear?”

➤ Traumatic schooldays experience  
(p. 17) "Margaret can't quite describe her school; if she tries, things seem to get away from her. She can't be sure if what she remembers is totally true or not. [...] she seems to have always been marching or singing, as if she were in preparation for some kind of war."

## **"PEOPLE CAN TALK"**

- Some of Margaret's charges help her to escape from her sad and frozen love for her father
- Empathy among social outcasts: Margaret and the disabled child James
- "Margaret continues to play with James, because they are both happy playing games, knowing they are both capable of deeper and greater things, but knowing they can't be bothered with them now" (p. 106)
- Extreme correlative of the lack of communication between individuals

- Oral language shown as insufficient, source of misunderstandings or too obscure (like her father's words)
- They communicate through paper colloquies
- Typographical experimentation:  
'PEOPLE CAN TALK TO "Yes. You meet people you can talk to and be yourself with. Not often, but you do. Are you yourself now?" YES NO PILLS NO JAGS ALL MEEEE' (p. 191)

# Epiphanies

- Wordless event: in a workshop she learns how to breathe fire; a moment of transcendence beyond the verbal and its emotional limitations  
"At first she closed her eyes, but the fourth time, she just watched what her breath could produce. It was like her soul coming out." (p. 95)
- Visit in the ancient landscape around Kilmartin: burial mounds, stones, and relics of the past become the setting for rediscovery of self, love and the possible dance (synthesis of past/present, rural/urban, Scotland/England)
- Train journey/ circular pattern: occasion to recover the elusive meaning of existence



# Pattern of loss and failure vs final hope

- Failure to find a coherent sense in her past (her father's words, her school education, etc.) – personal / national failure (mainly in the 80s and 90s till the Devolution)
- Possibility of understanding in the end  
(p. 237) "Margaret stares out at trees of an alien green and reminds herself that her ticket is a return. There are trains up and down from Scotland every day and she does have that return. An open return"

- Getting rid of or coming to terms with the past – revisioning her relationship with her ex-friends (Lesley) and her father

(p. 239) "Margaret hung up the phone. Then she picked it up and threw it against the wall. Then she picked up the alarm clock and threw that, too. The telephone survived, but the alarm didn't. Its glass had shattered. The alarm clock her father had bought her, she couldn't think how long before: its glass was shattered and the hinge on the case was bent"