

BA thesis

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Multimodality in a contemporary postmodern experimental novel: Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

In this thesis I will focus on multimodality, irony, and humor in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) hereafter called *The Curious Incident*. The novel is experimental in that it plays with language, typography, and an image-textual narrative and can be described as experimental and postmodern.

I will discuss how this novel explores the different visual affordances in multimodal fiction, and thus enables the reader to experience the content in an embodied manner. I will argue that in this novel its resources of visual and textual presentation enable the reader to explore and experience a new, complex, humorous, and diverse perspective. As critics Gibbons (2011), Igl (2022), and Musetta (2014) have focused on the postmodern experimental aspects of the novel, as well as the semiotic, neurodivergent and visual text of the novel, I will focus on how the author also conveys playfulness, humor, and irony through multimodality. The chief characteristics of postmodern experimental books usually include a non-linear plot structure, using pictures or texts for the reader to focus on the ideas through the point of view of the protagonist, and for the reader to construct meaning by intertextual references and a varied design layout.

The "dog" is a re-occurring theme throughout the novel, in drawings and metaphors, as a feature of comedy and tragedy. I also consider the protagonist's fascination for the detective story *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to be a dog reference. The author also plays with the detective genre. The dead dog is the focus point of the dramatic opening chapter from which the novel has its name and, eventually, as a part of the "healing" process in the last chapter of the book where a golden retriever foreshadows an optimistic ending. The dog-theme expands the embodiment of the story.

Far from being a comic book, *The Curious Incident* amuses the readers through the images and graphs, the typographical fonts, mathematical equations, and footnotes. Haddon's *The Curious Incident* is affluent with images and text that provide the reader with a coherent narrative, and of the unusual perspective on life in general as seen from his whimsical fictional protagonist. It is also amusing that the scientific explanations by the protagonist are playful hints to academic seriousness and presentation. The scientific statements and expositions are hard to follow, let alone understand for the "normal" reader and therefore highly humorous as presented by the neurodivergent protagonist who struggles with areas in life which are obvious to most people. Consequently, the reader is enabled to obtain an embodied perspective on the world according to Christopher Boone.

Natalia Igl (2022) writes:

Around the beginning of our millennium, for example, so-called 'multimodal novels' put special emphasis on literature's 'bookish' nature by using visual forms, and handwritten notations or even inserted loose materials as crucial parts of the narration. In doing so, they direct the reader's attention to literature's material nature, embodied in the book as printed artefact, and to the material and multisensory qualities of the act of reading itself. (Podcast excerpt)

Alison Gibbons (2011) mentions in her article under the heading of "Concrete/Typographical Fictions" *The Curious Incident with the Dog in the Night-time* as a transitional leap from childhood in cross-over fiction."

The narrator's language is naive, but it is not a children's book. However, the novel is the winner of the Guardian Children's fiction Prize and Booktrust Teenage Prize, as well as Whitbread Book of the Year. It is not obvious that children or adolescents of the same age as the narrator would see or experience the multimodal affordances or empathize or identify with the protagonist. However, this cannot be ascertained.

Chapter 1: Playfulness and embodiment in multimodality

Haddon's fictional protagonist is Christopher Boone. The book is written as a first-person narrative and is of an epistolary format. He is neurodivergent but is well-functioning. There are, however, limitations that affect his communicable skills. Although the words "autism" and "Asperger's Syndrome" never occur in the novel, Christopher has been described in these terms by readers, reviewers, and critics. Christopher's narrative reflects and reveals his own peculiarities, and particularly the challenges and insights that result from having a mind that clearly works in a way that cannot be straightforwardly described as "normal." (Semino, p. 279)

The dramatic discovery of the dead dog in the garden prompts Christopher to start writing a book to record the events. It is also a task of writing a story given by his trusted teacher at school, Siobhan. He has no regard for a potential reading audience; he writes because he will prove to himself that he is able to. Christopher drafts his book as he wants it to be; with the inserts and digressions he finds appropriate. Christopher is attending a school for children with special needs. He is exceptionally good at mathematics, sciences, and cares for the climate. His goal is to sit for his A-levels at the end of the school year, which is exceptionally young for his age of fifteen years. His knowledge of the maths is advanced, although Haddon does not expressly portray him as a "Savant" like Dustin Hoffman portraying Raymond in the film *The Rainman*.

The novel starts on a tragic note; Christopher finds the neighbor's dog murdered in the garden. He is completely distraught. A tragedy, and the event that has named the novel. The reader follows the protagonist to the police station where the comedy starts as Christopher is interviewed by an officer. He is asked if he had really intended to attack and hit the officer, and he answers "Yes," because he is adamantly telling the truth.... He also observes a peculiar characteristic of the officer; "He also had a very hairy nose. It looked as if there were two very small (sic) mice hiding in his nostrils." (p 22)

Christopher will not be deterred from his detective story project or any other project he is obsessed with like his maths A-level. He is determined to investigate the circumstances around the neighbor's dog Wellington's murder and write (sic) a book in the style of a Sherlock Holmes mystery, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hounds of the Baskervilles*, his favorite book. His teacher Siobhan tells him that people in general do not consider killing a dog as murder, but the killing

of people is. Christopher does not agree, he claims, “dogs have feelings too.” He admires the detective book because of its logic. It is like a puzzle, and puzzles can be solved, despite the Red Herrings included in the story to mislead readers from solving the mystery too soon. He will record the events in an epistolary manner, numbering the entries or chapters in his book with prime numbers, which is his specialty in maths.

He compares *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as an example of logical and structural storytelling with other works of fiction that he does not like. As with metaphors and similes, there is the question of truth and lies. Truth is paramount to Christopher. He is aware of incomprehensible metaphors and imaginative fiction, but they have no place in his imaginary world.

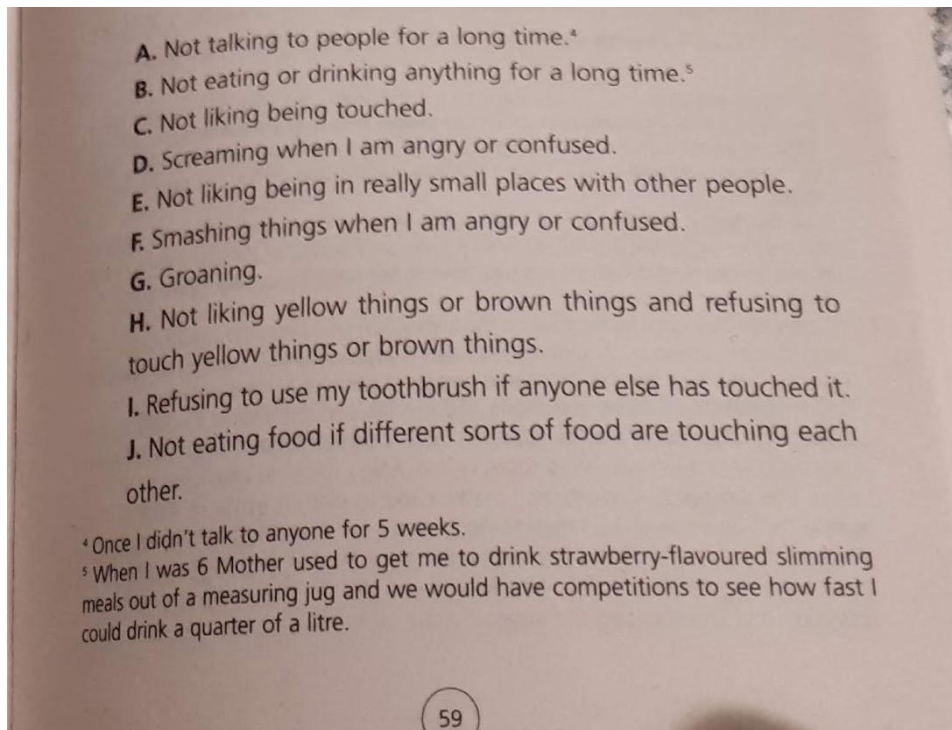
Christopher likes puzzles, logical thinking, and proceeds on his mission. He shows the draft of the book to his trusted teacher Siobhan: “Siobhan said that when you are writing a book you have to include some descriptions of things. I said that I could take photographs and put them in the book. But she said the idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could make a picture in their own head.” (Haddon, p.85)

Christopher’s approach to fictional texts is different than other readers. Fictional text is a lie, something someone has made up. It is not real. The text must be concrete, relatable, and logical. Christopher’s life is riddled with his obsessions with the truth, of feeling safe. What he cannot tackle is lies and he hates changes of any kind. The truth is paramount. Fiction is made up.

Musetta (p 100) alleges that Haddon’s exceptional skill as a writer enables readers to enter the intricate mind of his character by means of a text of highly multimodal nature, deploying typographical experiments, appendices, lists, maps, graphs, drawings, pictures, photos, diagrams, mathematical equations and the facsimile representation of handwriting, posters, and signs.

Haddon’s protagonist and first-person narrator manage to present himself through a description of his strengths and shortcomings, his obsessions with what he fears and what he likes and with what he can and cannot do.

Christopher admits to having behavioral problems and lists them like this:



Haddon, page 59.

The list is in bold font alphabetical order, with footnotes. The list is continued on the next page to letter **R**, with another half page of footnotes. This integral shift of textual narrative is a contributable addition to the story's richness and becomes utterly comical. His footnotes to his list are delightful. Had his behavioral challenges been described without the multimodal shifts, the protagonist's character would not be perceived in the same playful manner by the reader. The advantage of a "diarist" entry in which he abandons himself to his very personal logic expression results in closeness to the reader, and an embodiment of the narrator.

The footnotes in Haddon's novel can also convey further insight into the way the graphic surface provides meaning. Footnotes are believed to add minor or extra information, without which the main text can still be understood. They are characteristically shorter and typographically smaller than the main text on the page. In scientific and academic works footnotes are identified as typical of scholarly texts. This is not the case with the footnotes in this novel. Haddon's use of footnotes is unconventional and intended to amuse and for the reader to see Christopher's perspective.

On page 60 of the novel, footnotes take up half the page, and they are not only used to provide examples for the “behavioral problems” Christopher lists as having, but also to explain the reasons why he behaves the way he does. However, they are a joy to read. His concern for truth is apparent in the sixth footnote, where he explains why he says, “things that other people think are rude” (Haddon p 60) Musetta claims that “in the footnote he states that he is told to always tell the truth but then he is not supposed to tell old people that they are old, or that they smell funny. Readers see his “behavioral problem” in a different light, understanding his inability to conceive what it means to be rude in the same way other people do.” (Musetta, p 100)

The list of problems in this chapter belongs to the sphere of the visible, while the footnotes function as a vehicle into his reasoning, into what he chooses to share only with his book-project and not with the people around him. In this way, footnotes in the novel work together with the main text in conveying meaning and amusement. “They are not simply supplementary as in scholarly texts, nor do they overrule the main text.” (Mussetta p 104) His footnotes add humor and disbelief and are an important affordance to the reader.

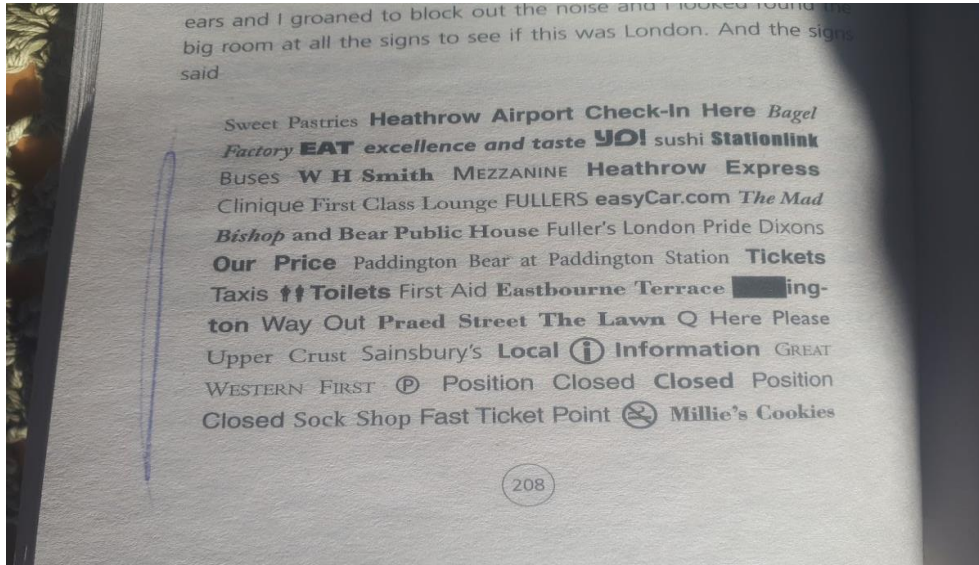
Christopher is well acquainted with computers:

And when I am in new place because I see everything, it is like when a computer is doing too many things at the same time and the central processor unit is blocked up and there isn't any space left to think about other things. ... When I am in a new place and there are lots of people there it is like a computer crashing and I have to close my eyes and put my hands over my ears and groan, which is like pressing **CTRL + ALT + DEL** and shutting down programs, turning the computer off, and rebooting. (sic) (Haddon, p. 177-78)

A computer crash is familiar to most readers, at least it was at the time when this book was written and published in 2003. However, the bewilderment in the moment this happens is frustrating. A basic reset is required. One is never sure whether the machine will cooperate after performing the reset, especially when one's computer skills are lacking. Christopher is familiar with computers and knows how to reset the machine. With his own mind it is not so

straightforward. Therefore, he has produced a highly graphical comparison of his mind and a computer crash.:

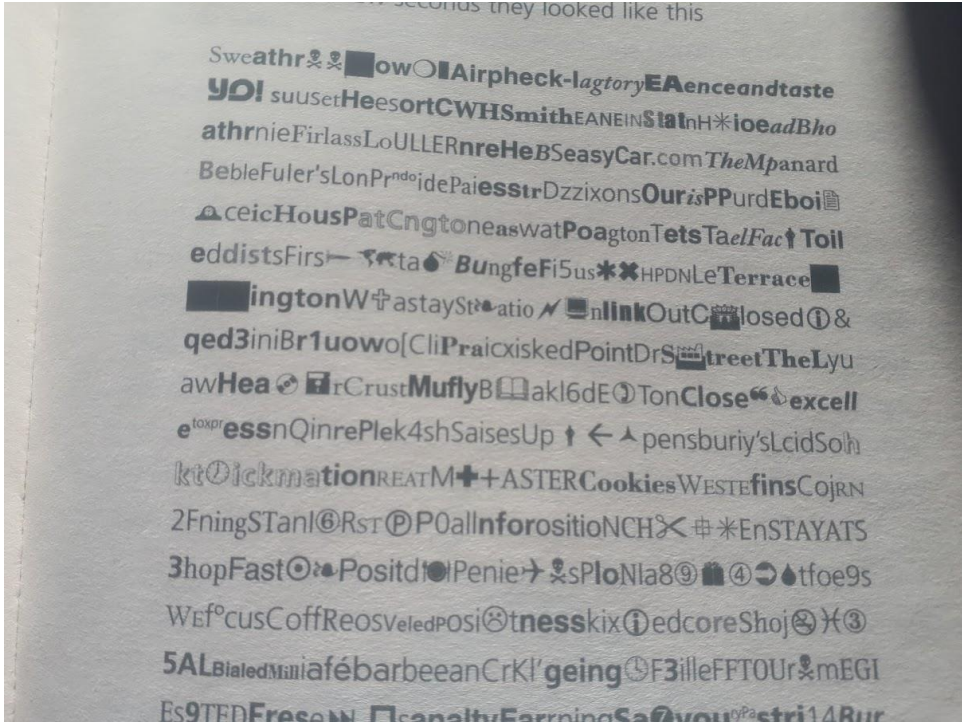
Christopher's mind when he is functional:



Haddon p 208

Christopher has reached London. At the train station he sees several advertisements as pictured above. They are all about food, drink, travel, and shopping typical at railway stations and airports. Signs for tickets, toilets, bus departures and hire-car firms. His mind registers them as they are posted, and he can recreate them photographically in his head, complete with font-types and bold types, right down to the non-smoking sign and Millie's Cookies.

Christopher's mind when his mind suffers a backlash:



Haddon p 209

The need for a basic reset to restore the former clarity of vision takes time and groaning. The two images above are imaginative and humorous examples of the author's presentation of a short-circuited mind. They are also funny because they have signs skulls with crossed bones that one will find in comic strip speaking bubbles when people are swearing. Sweet Pastries and **Heathrow Airport** have mixed into an incomprehensible muddle of letters and signs. The same has happened to the other advertisements that were clear and concise earlier. There are no **CTRL + ALT + DEL** keys to reset one's brain, therefore, Christopher must tackle the problem in his own way, and it takes time and effort to re-establish his clear mind. The cacophony of signs and letters are so intricate that they resemble the "white noise" Christopher needs to block out the world. Scientifically white noise refers to a noise that contains all frequencies across the spectrum of audible sound in equal measure. Anecdotally, people often liken white noise to the static that comes from an untuned radio or television. Using the expression "White noise," Haddon could also be suspected to hint to Don DeLillo's (1985) novel with that title, a groundbreaking novel of the postmodern genre. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents characters who are bombarded with a "white noise" of television, product brand names, and clichés.

Haddon's use of these images to convey the difficulties Christopher suffers when the wiring of his brain short-circuits enables the reader to experience the drama and the seriousness of his suffering, the comical and tragic description of the situation. A textual description of a breakdown would not procure the same emotions in the reader as these examples of a photographic mind, also equipped with a soundtrack, crashing like a computer.

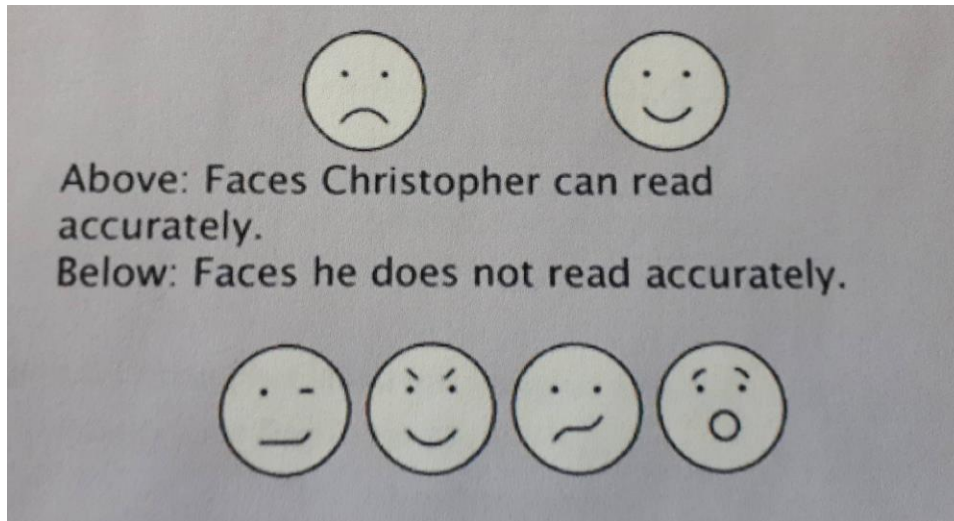
In his novel Haddon uses visual effects of modern technology, but most prominently various font sizes, for example bold types and bold typed italics as in Christopher's mother's letters. The display of spelling mistakes is amusing.

Haddon recurrently reminds readers of the visual nature of printed words by his use of bold type and different fonts and his nonconventional use of the space available on the page while shifting from text to image to text again, resorting to a combination of the verbal and the non-verbal to unfold his narrative. The exploitation of letter writing and chapter labeling as well as the introduction of footnotes, pictorial devices, and scientific and academic discourses in *The Curious Incident* are some of those semiotic resources which visually contribute to the narrative and to character development in unique and vital ways. (Mussetta p. 100)

The affordances of the graphical features in Christopher's story, such as listings, drawings, graphs, various font sizes, add color, humor, amazement, and empathy. Christopher's lack of social communicative skills is supplemented by his rational reasoning using multimodal devices when textually describing a problem is difficult.

His trusted teacher Siobhan furnished him with a note of "Smiley" drawings to keep in his pocket. They are happy and sad faces, and others to extend Christopher's understanding of people's reactions. He can understand 'happy' and 'sad,' but the other drawings just confuse and frustrate him, therefore, he discards them in understanding with Siobhan.

These are the "Smileys" Siobhan gave to him to interpret people's emotions:



Christopher struggles in interactions that depend on emotion or personality. Rather than sensing that someone is sad because of the tone of their voice or their facial expressions, he often only perceives this emotion when the person starts crying and he can see physical evidence of their sadness. Christopher best understands situations that he can explain logically rather than emotionally. A wink of an eye, a person in a bad mood or annoyed, an inquisitive person or a dissatisfied one-, or a person showing surprise is a curious and humorous feature to the reader. Not so to Christopher. However, with his photographic memory he can reproduce them correctly.

By using images in the novel, Haddon does not only show an image, but also an image-text; the images are imbued with meaning, and they are read and written as text by Christopher. He relates to them with his own logic. Although explained to him by his teacher Siobhan, he admits he cannot interpret the illustrations as representative of certain human emotions. Facial expressions are a mystery to him. The above drawings failed to bring him nearer to the human register of feelings. "(.....) And Siobhan apologized. And now if I don't know what someone is saying I ask them what they mean, or I walk away." (Haddon, p. 3)

In the most striking examples of image-text, however, Christopher lets the thing represent itself. For example, Christopher sees a sticker on a guitar case and does not or cannot offer any print-based description of it, only "And then there was a sticker on her guitar case, and it said"

(Haddon p 184) then the image-text. The sticker is printed as a sticker, image as text as the thing itself:



It is amusing to see/read the re-occurring dog theme, in both images, metaphor and text.

When he sees a postmark on one of his mother's letters, he admits that the image "was quite difficult to read, but it said" and then gives us the image as language before interpreting it to mean "that the letter was posted on 16 October 1997," (Haddon p 98).

And then I looked at the front of the envelope and I saw that there was a postmark and there was a date on the postmark and it was quite difficult to read, but it said



Which meant that the letter was posted on 16 October 1997, which was 18 months after Mother had died.

Haddon p. 123

The digressions and swift change of modes from reading his mother's letter to the scientific school project counting and predicting the population of frogs in a pond is priceless. At school they are also thought to beware of climate and environmental challenges. Christopher presents an equation that ends with a quite bewilderingly entertaining result, graphs and mathematical

equations included. Haddon ironically depicts the diverse political perception of the many reports that comes from the United Nation's Climate Panel. Inserting this deflection Haddon adds multimodal playfulness with another aspect of modern daily life, politics, and the threat of climate change.

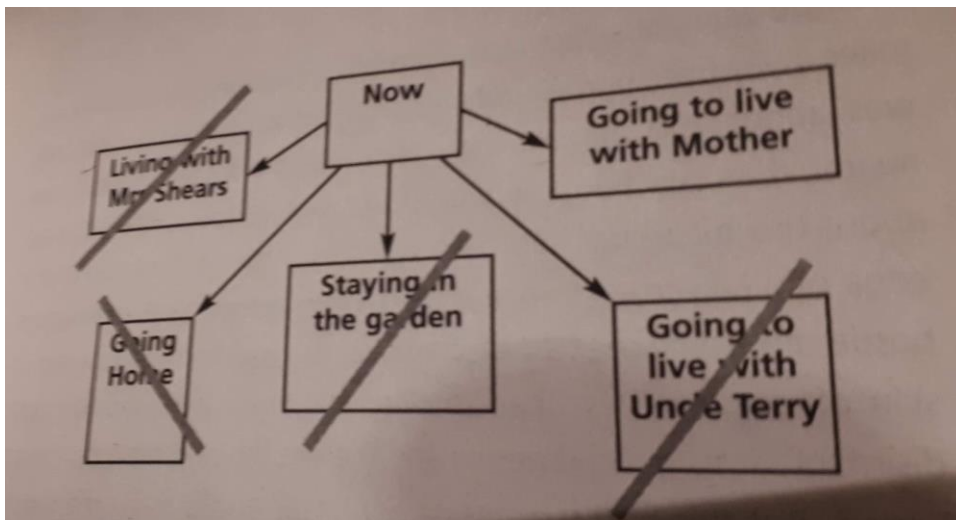
Christopher wavers to display his mother's letters, but when he does, he displays them in full. They display certain graphic features which make them stand out from the rest of the text: they appear entirely in bold and italics, and they are plagued with spelling mistakes. All these textual characteristics "thus function self-reflexively because they disrupt the graphic surface of the page—and disrupt the automatic process of reading—since the reader's attention is called to the book as an artifact." (Mussetta p 101)

Why Haddon has presented the letters in this way is because he clearly introduces a new voice, and this voice will strike the reader as "closer to life" with its style and shortcomings in spelling. Just as Christopher's literary style portrays his age, background, strengths and limitations, his mother's letters reveal something of her background and personality. Christopher's language is naïve throughout the text in the novel. Linguistically, he is not at an adolescent's level his age with no impairment.

In the novel, Christopher's mother's letters contribute to characterizing her as careless, impulsive, and perhaps scatterbrained, and certainly not very well-educated. On the other hand, it is Christopher—as the meticulous narrator he is—who has included the letters strictly as they were written. The letters become a useful device which helps build the character of Christopher and his mother.

At the beginning of the novel Christopher informs us that his mother died two years ago of a heart attack. Christopher does not seem traumatized by his mother's death but accepts it as a rational fact. First, she went to hospital, and he made her a "get well" card. He was not allowed to visit, and later his father told him that she had died. He accepts his mother's demise without the distress and sorrow one might expect of a "normal" adolescent. He just accepts that she no longer exists.

On the traumatic discovery that his father has lied to him Christopher goes into a serious computer crash mode. His father has lied about his mother's death, and he has lied that he is indeed the murderer of Wellington. Christopher is afraid his father might kill him too, like he had killed Wellington, and lied about his mother being dead while she was still alive. He decides he must leave his father and the safety of his home in Swindon, which is not safe anymore. He does not discuss his options in textual description but uses a graphic schema to assess the situation:



Haddon p 163

From his perspective Christopher has calculated and concluded what his options are. He cannot go to live with Uncle Terry. He does not like Uncle Terry much "because he smoked cigarettes and stroked my hair." (Haddon p 161) Staying in the garden will be too cold and there will be nothing or little to eat. Staying home is also out of the question since he cannot trust his father anymore. Mrs. Shears is not an option because she thinks he has killed her dog. There is only one possibility that can be utilized. He must go to find his mother. His mother lives in London, and it will be a challenging odyssey to find her.

This journey supplies tragic but also comical qualities to the description of his endeavor, including the girl's guitar case with the howling dog on it. It is a safari that enables humorous and compassionate embodied perspective of the novel.

Chapter 2. Multimodality and humor in metaphors.

In this chapter I will argue that Haddon uses his authorial eloquence to play with language, metaphors, and similes in a multimodal manner. His choice of metaphors and similes are integrated in Christopher's naïve language, but they are hardly chosen at random. A playful interaction with literature analyses. Christopher reasons; "The (Greek, my insert) word metaphor means carrying something from one place to another using a word for something that it isn't. This means that the word metaphor is a metaphor" (Haddon p 19-20)

Christopher has collected examples of metaphors, and he presents them below:

I laughed my *socks* off

He was the *apple* of her eye

They had a *skeleton* in the cupboard

We had a real *pig* of a day

The dog was *stone* dead" (Haddon, in bold p. 19, my italics)

There is no logical connection between *laughter* and *socks*, *skeleton* and *cupboard*, and *pig* and *day*, *dog*, and *stone*. The idioms are well integrated in everyday speech. 'To work/laugh/run one's socks off' is to do something with a lot of energy and effort. Christopher could be described as being the apple of his mother's eye. He knows that it means to like someone very much. Her letters to him prove that she feels guilty for abandoning him. A skeleton in the cupboard is certainly the situation for this family, as the story progresses in the novel. A real pig of a day means a day that was utterly terrible. Then, the dog was stone dead indeed.

For example, hearing the word dog automatically simulates the sensorimotor, affect, and/or mental state associated with experiences of dogs, what they look like, how they move, feel, and act. In this setting, the sentence his father uttered; "leave the bloody dog alone" would have made more sense to Christopher. Also the latter, the dog being dead as a stone will be more of a simile. Christopher likes dogs; "You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods: Happy, sad, cross and concentrating. Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because

they cannot talk.” (Haddon p 6) There is no stone that can be alive. But death is absence of life therefore a dead dog can be compared to a stone. It is more of a simile.

Lakoff & Johnson (2003) define metaphors as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”. They also explain that “every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions”. (p. 5)

His father comments to his assistant Rhodri who has come to see them: “Best to let sleeping dogs lie, I reckon,” (Haddon, p. 84) The “metaphor” uttered by his father is yet another example of supplement of multimodal inserts in the novel. It is humorous to the reader, unintentional as it may be, as it is a striking contrast to Christopher’s simple narrative. Christopher cannot decipher puns, or English standard proverbs or swearing phrases. They show up throughout the novel when grown-ups are quoted speaking. Exclamations like: Jesus! Or Christ! Have no logical or rational meaning for Christopher because he cannot understand the contextual reason for them.

These metaphors are compatible with the above mentioned “Smileys” to Christopher. They are no less logically comprehensible than the facial expressions Siobhan provided him with. He would have to ask the meaning of these metaphors. He knows what metaphors are but considers them to be lies. He prefers to use similes in his writing. Simile example given by Christopher: “I went upstairs and sat in my room and watched the water falling in the street. It was falling so hard that it looked like white sparks.” A simile is comparing something that is closely resembles something else. Throughout the novel, we learn that Christopher has trouble understanding anything that is not literal. He considers metaphors to be lies, because he does not understand them. He also has trouble reading signs because they are not literal enough. It is important to note that Christopher thinks that metaphors are lies, but he does not think similes are lies unless they are bad ones.

Conclusion

In this postmodern experimental novel, the language and the visual create new and complicated meanings in a playful way. The notable literary devices of postmodern literature are paradox, unreliable narrators, unrealistic narratives, parody, and dark humor. The novel's

unique multimodality presents the ease with which Haddon and his fictional protagonist switches from one mode to the other. As meaning-making modes, they make the narrative unfold layers of fictional creativity and shape the character and his peculiar frame of mind. It gives the reader the opportunity to enjoy the hilarious moments and cheer the protagonist's struggle to reach his goals. Haddon's protagonist does not believe in fiction. Yet, his creator has succeeded in bringing to life a fictional narrator.

The images and scientific explanations are a humorous and an ironic sidekick to academia, politics, and a computerized technological world. Therefore, the embodiment of the fictional character of Christopher provides such richness in the reading process. The inventiveness and compassion with which Haddon has brought his character to life using multimodal affordances is an example of postmodern novels successful potential. The multimodal resources in this novel such as diagrams, notes, and numbers, graphs, footnotes, and visual resources are interwoven with the verbal text.

To "re-read" the novel I listened to an audio version of it, and the simple language and the absence of the photos, images, the various typographical variations was almost sleep-inducing. The narrator's childlike, simple language and the repetitive use of the most frequently used words like "and," "I," and "because" did not in any way evoke the same associative sensations as when reading the book. Reading the book with its whimsical yet explanatory digressions give the reader a unique experience and appreciation of multimodality.

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