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## Modernism in Postwar Times: Life Through the Short Story

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English 376  
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### Modernism in Postwar Times: Life Through the Short Story

“The Mole” by Gerald Bullett, is a literary text that comments on postwar life and events that are ahead of its time. It was published in the British periodical, *The London Mercury*, in May of 1923 and was written post WWI in a time when literature was still reflecting the effects of the war. During the short story “The Mole,” there are many connections surrounding the Gubbins’ and war. In *Voyant*, where the mole is mentioned, Mrs. Gubbins is also mentioned. This reveals that Mr. and Mrs. Gubbins’ marriage is a war and her mole is a constant reminder of that war. The marriage was created by the mistakes of Mr. and Mrs. Gubbins, getting pregnant out of wedlock and being forced to marry. (Man is forced into war by his mistakes.) Mrs. Gubbins completely blames him for it. In war, there is always one side who blames everyone else. The mole is used in the story to remind Mr. Gubbins of his mistake that he made (A torturous reminder of war and man’s mistakes. Also perceived through the eyes, it is all about what is being seen). The hairs on the end of the mole are as the war reaching out to try and spread. Mrs. Gubbins has lost her youth and good looks after many years (The war gets ugly after years of fighting). This is also a take on “survivor’s guilt.” Mr. Gubbins feels guilty every day for what happened when he was younger and Mrs. Gubbins will not let him forget it. Survivors of war feel guilt every day for surviving the war, and seeing the families of the fallen is a reminder of that guilt. Therefore, I argue that Mr. and Mrs. Gubbins’ marriage is an analogy for war and the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which had not yet been discovered.

Taken in context, this short story fits within the time frame of short stories published post WWI that comment on the war in some form or another. As previously stated, "The Mole" was published in *The London Mercury*. The political orientation of *The London Mercury* appears to be conservative in two senses of the word. It appears to be both conservative in its political views, as well as being conservative when it comes to stating its political opinion. *The London Mercury* is "an adherent of traditional values" and considered a reactionary in the sense that it was letting some Modernist texts to be published in its periodical as long as it was not overtly political (Conservative, OED). It is not interested in politics and avoids all political controversy that, "save only such---the teachings of English, the fostering of arts, the preservation of ancient monuments are examples--as impinge directly upon the main sphere of its interests" (Squire 2). It will only "publish reasoned criticisms of political (as of other) books--" (Squire 2). Another fine example also demonstrates this periodical's view when it comes to the aesthetic of what is being published. "We do not propose to maintain (to give concrete examples) that literature *should* be didactic or that it *should* be a-moral" (Squire 2). *The London Mercury* is more interested in providing material for those, "who are intelligently interested in literature, in the drama, in the arts, and in music" (Squire 2).

Even while refraining from politics, it was still obvious that war was present in the periodical, especially with World War I just ending the year before the publication of *The London Mercury*. Near the end of the periodical, there were books and articles written on the history of the war as well as its aftermath. There was also a section on "History and Biography" as well as a section on "Politics and Economics" within which these types of literature were contained. One of the articles in the "Politics and Economics" section specifies on "How the

War Came.” In this article, the periodical does not state its own opinion, but merely describes what is said in the book by Earl Loreburn, who discusses which country started the war.

Loreburn “does not deny the guilt of Germany” but the periodical does not want to get too political by stating, “these are not matters for discussion in these columns” (Loreburn 98). The periodical also mentioned that it is only history now and that they are not trying to cause “disagreement” thus, maintaining some political neutrality.

*The London Mercury* was a very fascinating publisher for its time because of its unique views. It promoted the edification and elevation of the mind. Its conservative views are manifested in its statement, “We do not propose to maintain (to give concrete examples) that literature *should* be didactic or that it *should* be a-moral” (Squire 2). It did not want to steer its periodical services in a political direction. *The London Mercury* only intended to “publish reasoned criticisms of political (as of other) books--” and was more interested in providing material for those, “who are intelligently interested in literature, in the drama, in the arts, and in music” (Squire 2). “The Mole” is a great example of reasonable fiction that is both entertaining and teaches some type of moral. It also manifests some modernist ideas (such as Mr. and Mrs. Gubbins having sexual relations outside of wedlock, resulting in her getting pregnant). There is oftentimes a heightened sexual undertone during wartime. By publishing this story, *The London Mercury* was acknowledging society’s acceptance of the “break with classical and tradition forms or methods of expression” (Modernism, OED). This story was originally based on some of the author’s experiences in WWI, presenting truths for those who are “intelligently interested in literature” (Squire 2).

The reason that "The Mole" is interesting is because it deals with a complex moral situation, probably similar to what some people dealt with and were dealing with at the time. This is interesting because, although the story is fiction, it is based on experiences that the author had while serving in the military during WWI. As we know, there are a lot of moral situations that soldiers have to deal with during their time in war; these situations can be perplexing and oftentimes there is no definite right answer. This short story presents the reader with a few of these complex moral situations, being that either way the main character is in mental and physical agony. Mr. Gubbins (the main character) was in a situation where his soul was being tortured every day, for years. He probably would have been better off dead, but in getting himself there or by ridding himself of his problem, he risked torture in the life to come. PTSD was not diagnosed at the time, but this may have been one way for an author to describe his own and his fellow soldiers' feelings about the war and what it did to them. This story also incorporates the stream of consciousness and provides a continuous flow for the reader, stimulating imagination, importance, and reality.

*The London Mercury* seemed like a well thought out, thoroughly planned periodical with the goal to enlighten its readers of the highbrow spectrum. Its emphasis being to provide enlightening material to those "who are intelligently interested in literature" (Squire 2). This periodical seems to contain pleasing content that is of the highbrow spectrum and its subscribers are duly of that same spectrum. Which is why "The Mole" was included in this periodical, because it is a story that requires thought as to its meaning and can be interpreted in many ways.

The short story form allows Gerald Bullett to achieve various effects within the work because short stories commonly contain the best of an author's talent. This is because they have to fit an entire moral within the constraints of the short story genre. Gerald Bullett uses these constraints to his advantage to create a story that can be read in twenty to thirty minutes and probes the mind into contemplating the meaning of the text. Because most short stories are connected to an experience of the author, and because most people were in postwar thought, they most likely thought about ways in which this short story related to the author's experience with war and what the further implications of that connection were.

When I began to analyze the story itself through Voyant, the tool that I thought was most useful was the "Links" tool under "Visualization Tools." One of the reasons that I chose this tool, was because it helped me to see the main words that were used the most and how those words correlated with other highly used words by connecting them with lines. The "Links" tool almost looks like a poorly constructed spider web at first; however, this tool allows the user to move the main words and sub words around in order to make a more coherent connection of the words. While words are being moved around, different connections are being made between the words. Another reason that I liked this tool, is because the line between the words gave the user a straight, visual connection between the words being used.

Another tool that was similar to the "Links" tool, was the "Mandala" tool because it was very similar in how it made connections between words using lines. Unfortunately, the "Mandala" tool did not allow the user to move words around and, in the case of my short story, it did not show the different connections between multiple words. It only showed the connection of multiple words to one central word.

Additionally, as I also used the “Links” tool to do a close reading of the text, I realized that in the spider web of words, the title and theme of the story, “The Mole” does not appear because it is not mentioned with enough frequency or with any link to other words in the story. Therefore, during my reading of the text I realized that there are many words that described and alluded to the “mole” without actually mentioning it. I think that this type of analysis is useful when the reader is trying to understand all that they can about a certain word and the connections that it has to the entire story. However, I think that this type of analysis can also limit the reader’s scope to just things related to that word when there are many other words that could help the reader interpret the meaning of the story.

Furthermore, I think that my findings have added to my reading of the text by shifting the focus from the eyes to the mole. The whole story is about the mole on Mrs. Gubbins’s chin. However, I did not realize how few times the word “mole” is actually used in the story. Upon searching “mole” through the “Reader” tool, it only appeared four times in the entire story, which is not much compared to “Gubbins,” “eyes,” and “woman,” which are used 24, 17, and 10 times. The eyes are usually the window to the soul, yet this story is able to shift that view into the view that the mole is the window to Mrs. Gubbins’s soul.

Similarly, according to the “Links” tool, this story seems also to be organized around the words, “Gubbins,” “eyes,” and “woman.” By using the “Trends” tool, I was able to find that the name “Gubbins” is actually used the most with the most constant frequency throughout the story. Then “woman” is mentioned less times but also with a constant frequency throughout the story. Whereas, the eyes are mentioned mostly at the beginning and not much toward the end.

On the whole, this new perspective has helped me to realize that when writing a story about any subject, the actual subject itself, such as the “mole,” does not need to be mentioned all that much for the reader to be in constant thought of it. As the reader, I now realize that Mrs. Gubbins’s mole was on my mind throughout the entire story even though I didn’t physically see the word “mole” all that much. There were many words alluding to the mole which helped to keep my mind on it throughout the entire story. Based on my findings, I believe that this short story proves that any short story can be written about, and keep the mind of the reader focused on a certain subject without using the direct word of the subject a whole lot throughout the story.

Following, it is also known that the author of “The Mole,” Gerald Bullett, served during WWI in the British Royal Flying Corps (Erich). Many of the political issues that influenced Bullett also stemmed from both of world wars. Toward the beginning of the story, two burned bodies mentioned as “two charred corpses” had been removed from the house that had burned down (Bullett). This is all in relation to experiences that Bullett had while serving in WWI. Bullett wrote about these experiences in his fiction, which was “pervaded by feeling for his maternal midland roots, and memories of his Edwardian childhood in Muswell Hill among the ‘middle middle-class’” (Ehrlich). I think that there is an important message that Bullett is trying to tell the reader about reading and understanding people and their emotions through their bodily features. During WWI, many people did not speak the same language. Therefore, in order to make an effort to read those people, it required one to look to physical features—rather than language—to interpret a person’s feelings.



Overall, through this analysis I drew that “The Mole” is proof that the authors of the short stories of this time period were painting a picture of the effects of the war long before anything such as PTSD was discovered and addressed. PTSD was not being addressed in society at the time of this short story because nobody knew what it was. There was a need to express the feelings possessed by those who served in the war and the effects of the constant reminders around them. Writing such stories may have proved as an outlet for some authors to cope with everything that they were feeling as well as to express and represent the feelings of those who served alongside them in the war. Although connection between “The Mole” and postwar life may not have been understood then, they are understood today.

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