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As an aesthetic movement in British literature, modernism was marked by an unanticipated departure from traditional ways of interacting with the world. Modernism was composed of a series of virtues that emphasized individualism and experimentation as a way of subverting traditional expectations in literature, and the often discouraged stress on the individual sunk only deeper into the armature of modernist thinking with the outbreak of the Great War. World War I laid the grounds for the modernist intelligentsia to shift artistic focus to the self and inner consciousness, deliberately choosing to see the decay and alienation of the individual undergirding the progressive machinery of a capitalist modern society (Rahn, "Modernism"). Structure and certainty gave way to instability and unknowability, and modernists capitalized on this cultural moment to foreground and explicate the interplay between meaninglessness and human consciousness.

Henry Major Tomlinson was one such modernist who took up the task of critiquing mankind's fear in the face of meaninglessness in his short story "The Fog." Born on June 21, 1873 in London, Henry Major Tomlinson was a journalist and writer, his written works revolving primarily around the futility of war, set either in London, on the sea, or in the tropics. His love for the sea developed as he grew up in the East End docks, where he spent much time as a child observing ships. Eventually, Tomlinson became an official correspondent for the British Army in France when World War I began (*Revolvy*). The Great War greatly affected Tomlinson,

primarily because his essays and novels turned towards anti-war themes. Tomlinson emphasized the negative effects of technology in addition to his focus on anti-war subject matter, crafting a style that marked him as poetically introspective. This poetic introspection he used in “The Fog,” published in *The English Review*, number seven in June of 1909. A venue for progressive literature, criticism, and political commentary, *The English Review* remains one of the major literary periodicals that straddled a transitional period in British history. Moreover, Ford Madox Ford’s little magazine jostled against the Edwardian literati’s nationalistic support of British imperialism. Instead, *The English Review* opted for an international stance (Peppis 10). It is this tension between traditional and modern ways of interacting with the world that perhaps justified the inclusion of Tomlinson’s “The Fog” in *The English Review*. In this paper I explore “The Fog” in order to argue that this work of short fiction has a heretofore unacknowledged impact on the ways in which we understand mankind’s internalized fear in the face of meaninglessness. More pointedly, it may be argued that “The Fog” is an allegory about mankind’s fear in the face of meaninglessness. To substantiate this claim, I draw on Tomlinson’s usage of similes and metaphors to illustrate the interplay between meaninglessness and fear. Additionally, I turn to research founded in digital textual analysis to provide further support for my claim.

Firstly, Tomlinson turns to the sea as a concrete image denoting a kind of reliable, fixated knowledge and direction for the members of the crew. At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the conditions of the sea in the following way: “The pallid blue overhead was hung with flimsy white tapestries, suspended in set loops and folds, too thin to veil the sun, whose track over the sea, down which we were bowling at eleven knots, was incandescent silver (Tomlinson 508).” Tomlinson lays the grounds for meaninglessness by representing it through what are initially flimsy clouds. Described as being suspended in “set loops,” these white

tapestries present little to no threat to the crew, whose course is made clear through the reflection of the sun upon the surface of the water. Tomlinson even describes the clouds as “too thin to veil the sun.” In other words, what Tomlinson works through in this specific passage is a re-imagination of mankind’s approach to meaninglessness, at least before the turn of the century. As nothing more than flimsy clouds, they lack the capacity to overshadow the clear, empirical moment for the crew members as they continue in a sure course. By establishing the white tapestries as seemingly incapable of hindering progress, Tomlinson lays the grounds for problematizing the ship’s journey later on, thus establishing the crew’s inability to comprehend the magnitude of the threat of destabilization which the flimsy clouds signify. To further buttress this claim, I turn to the Oxford English Dictionary, which provides a working definition for the word *track*. The entry is as follows: “A line of travel, passage, or motion; the actual course or route followed (which need not be any beaten or visible path, or leave any traces, as the path of a ship, a bird in the air, a comet) (*OED*).” This is significant to reading the sea as a sure and reliable entity for the crew to turn to as a source of progress and direction. As a line of motion, the incandescent track of the sunlight on the ocean represents the world of progress as a whole, particularly in the capitalist modern society in Great Britain. Despite the fact that there are hints of uncertainty, as well as the potential for this knowledge base to collapse, the crew largely ignores the transience of the flimsy clouds.

Drawing from *Voyant*, a prominent online program that provides for detailed digital textual analysis through approximately twenty-seven different tools, the word *sea* <fig. 1> follows an interesting trend in Tomlinson’s short story, which further sustains the claim that he uses it as a metaphor for stability and progress, in order to then deconstruct this stability through the fog. According to the trends tool, which involves a line graph depicting the frequency of one

or more words occurring in a body of text, the word *sea* goes from 0.0017 relative frequency to 0.0000 relative frequency in the short span of just three document segments (*Voyant*). This rapid decline, another of the many analyzable qualities of this text, represents the quick descent into uncertainty with which the crew members wrestle as the thick fog sets in around them.

Tomlinson, in setting up the sea as a kind of outward representation of an internalized familiarity and comfort with progress and knowledge, decreases the frequency of the word's occurrence in the text as the crew realize the futility of their situation. To further drive home the notion of the sea as a signification for direction and progression, the narrator, in speaking of the clear and bright day, says, "Our wash astern ran in two straight white lines out of sight. The day had been made for us (Tomlinson 508)." These straight lines operate in such a way as to deceive the crew members into believing that the day had been made for them, an idea which Tomlinson quickly destabilizes throughout the rest of the story as the "Strange sunset. . .gave [the crew] the first warning (508)." In other words, the sea, a visual representation of mankind's optimism and trust in concrete knowledge, fades into the abstract and unstable. In this way Tomlinson not only subverts readerly expectations, one of the hallmarks of British modernism, but he also exemplifies modernism's emphasis on the futility of meaning-making, choosing to examine meaninglessness as opposed to the trite and potentially affected traditions of Victorian and Edwardian literature. In Victorianism there is a notion of what might be called the infinite possibility of progress, but Tomlinson says that this comes at the cost of the individual and his or her decay undergirding a modern society. What emerges out of the confrontation between these two diametrically opposed ideologies is a tectonic unease regarding knowledge and immovability, Tomlinson playing to this in "The Fog."

Secondly, Tomlinson deploys descriptive language, as well as metaphors, to characterize the onset of the fog as a broader representation of meaninglessness to foreground the interplay between mankind and this unknowability. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *fog* has several definitions that are of interest in understanding the role that the fog plays in Tomlinson's work of short fiction. The first definition states, "Senses relating to mist, smoke, or haze," and the second definition is, "An abnormal state of darkness (*OED*)." These definitions provide an interesting backdrop against the following passage: "We had run full tilt into a fog bank apparently packed with ships, and were saving ourselves and them by guesswork while stopping the way on our boat. . . Our hull was shoving into a murk which was as opaque as cheese (Tomlinson 509)." This passage has a twofold significance in light of the previously quoted definitions of the word *fog*. Firstly, Tomlinson's word choice is particularly acute in setting up a critique of man's inability to navigate meaninglessness. Specifically, he deploys the word *guesswork* as a way of illustrating the dislocating effect of the fog on the minds of the crew members, their reliance upon the sure tracks of light over the sea stripped away from them. In this way, their senses become, precisely, a mirroring of the fog, vulnerable now to the mental haziness that ensues when one is presented with the notion that life could be void of meaning.

This haziness and abnormal darkness Tomlinson again substantiates through an odd simile. The hull of the ship was pressing into what is described as a murk which is as "opaque as cheese." The abnormally dark conditions of the fog are signified by the means of this simile, therefore establishing a departure from structures and meaning, as well as thrusting the crew into a situation that continues to only grow darker and darker. Tomlinson writes, "The rampart of the fog built itself up, covered the moon, and finally robbed us of the overhead stars. Imprisoned by the thick walls we lay till morning. . . (509)." As the word *sea* makes its decline in document

segments two and three, the word *fog* <fig. 1> increases in frequency within those same segments, thus exemplifying the notion that Tomlinson is driving at an allegorical representation of mankind's confrontation with a unstable world devoid of meaning (*Voyant*). According to *Voyant*, the frequency in occurrences of *fog* only increase throughout the story, peaking in document segment five, and then steadily declining after that. Furthermore, there is yet another important element to the story that I turn to in order to support my thesis claim, which is that of the ship becoming a prison for the members of the crew.

One of the crucial insights that *Voyant* offers through digital textual analysis is a plotting of word frequencies on a trends graph, and this graph provides further insight into the ways in which Tomlinson sets up an allegory of man's acute emotional crisis at the prospect of society's fallibility and the unknowable. More pointedly, the output of the trends tool shows a characteristic of the text that is instructive in laying the groundwork to navigate and support the story's central theme. What results is a paradoxically concrete and abstract representation of this emotional crisis in the characterization of the ship as a prison <fig. 2>. As Tomlinson turns to similes and metaphors which transform the ship into a prison, this metaphor grounded in the physical world informs a readerly understanding of this image as a vehicle for further supporting the abstraction and destabilization of a world well-known to the crew. Tomlinson writes, "We were interned. Overdue already; within eight miles of a station from which we could be home in thirty minutes; and next week might find us still fretting in our prison (510)." With the presence of the fog obscuring and covering over any semblance of recognition or comfort, Tomlinson grounds the fear of the crew and their inability to address a kind of anxiety that the world really has no meaning by deploying descriptive language that places the characters in a sort of interment, or prison.

While the most frequent usage of *fog* occurs in document segment five on the Trends graph, while the highest frequency of *prison/prisoners* occurs in document segments six and seven (*Voyant*). Heretofore unnoticed, this trend sheds light on how Tomlinson deploys fog imagery as a kind of rhetoric whereby the meaninglessness of existence is characterized, and how the crew members begin to feel like prisoners in an uncertain world soon after the fog sets in. In other words, they experience the feeling of being trapped, realizing that the only thing that they can place value in is themselves, as opposed to the world at large. Tomlinson qualifies this in the following passage: “We only were substantial and definite (511).” Not only does this play to one of the quintessential axioms of modernism, which is an emphasis on the self and interiority, but it also acknowledges the ineffectuality of placing trust in truth and progress beyond the self. Again, this notion is substantiated when the narrator of Tomlinson’s story says, “We were the centre of a dead world, and our own place a quiet and narrow tomb (510).” That Tomlinson is forming a pre-war critique of mankind’s inability to properly confront the darker facets of human nature and progress is made more plausible in his description of their situation. The narrator, along with the rest of the crew, feel that they are in a narrow tomb, a prison, occupying the center of a world whose radii is ultimately dead and void of structure.

In other words, set in the middle of a “Vague, still world without floor, ceiling, or walls (Tomlinson 511),” they become entities which, upon the destabilization of the world they once knew, embody a paradigm shift in mankind’s understanding at the turn of the century. Finally, Tomlinson rounds off his critique of the interplay between meaninglessness and fear as the narrator feels relief at finally having his feet on solid ground again. Almost in a sardonic tone, especially given all that Tomlinson sets up before it, the following passage completes a trenchant critique of a world incapable of awakening a faculty to embrace the reality undergirding

meaning-making: “It was something to have the steady paving-stones under one’s feet again. . .It was substance at last, and security (Tomlinson 511).”

Given this instructive data and how, coupled with the text, it forms a new perspective on the literary work’s effect, the argument can be made that Tomlinson’s work of short fiction is centralized on consciousness and interiority. By focusing on this topic, he foregrounds a critique of mankind’s fear when comfortable walls of knowledge break away to reveal vaporous walls of uncertainty and meaninglessness. This is significant because Tomlinson’s story can be situated as a pre-war critique of meaning-making as the result of a kind of anxiety that the world really has no meaning; in other words, the data colors “The Fog” as a quintessentially modernist work of short fiction.

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Figures

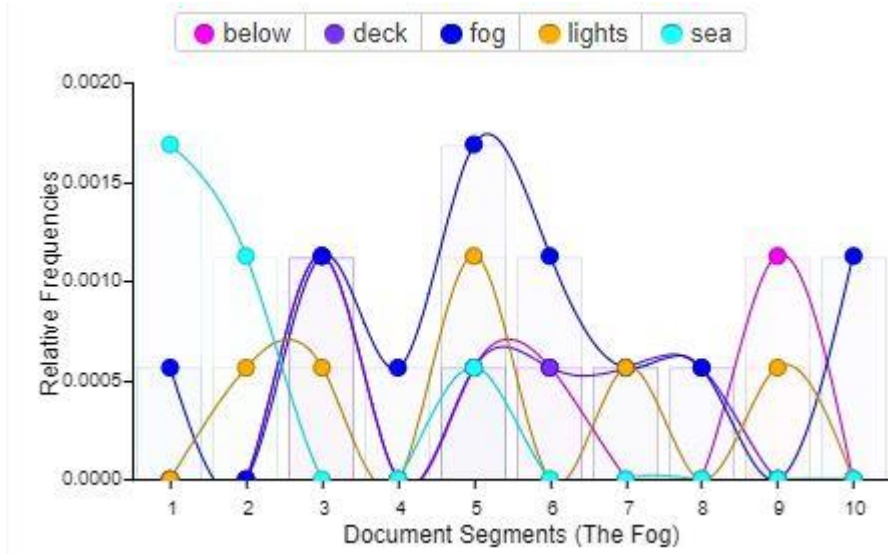


Fig. 1.

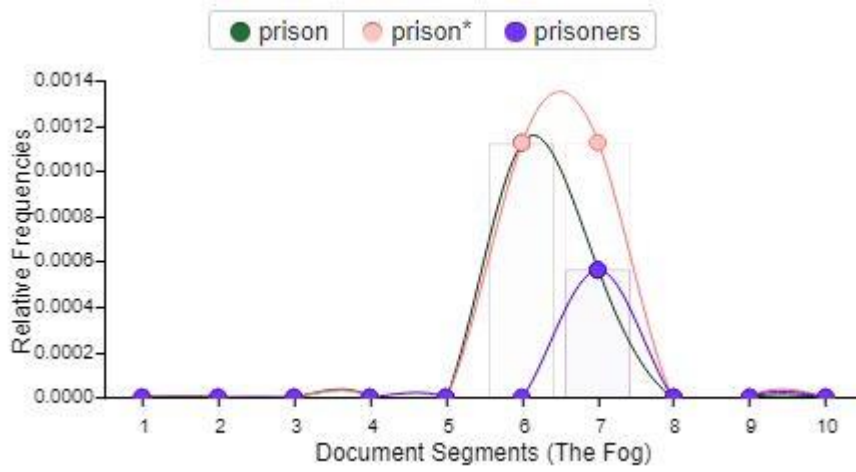


Fig. 2.

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