

Ambiguity in the Conscious Memories: The Role Memory plays in the Foreshadowing and
Terror present in the Novel *Foe* by Iain Reid

“Memories. More of them. Memories I’d forgotten, or ones I
thought I’d forgotten, ones I didn’t even know I had stored away,
they had returned.”

– Iain Reid, *Foe*

Ambiguous, familiar, but unrecognizable feelings are often brought forth by the long-forgotten memories that suddenly recover themselves. Their familiarity and sudden appearances mask the underlying terror and ambiguity that trails behind their return, leaving one unconscious and oblivious to the presence of the anonymous, unsettling, and eerie mood. However, as author Nicolae Babuts acknowledges in *Memory, Metaphors, and Meaning*, despite the ambiguity, “the role of memory in creative writing and interpretation is fundamental” (290). Like Babuts, Canadian author Iain Reid also recognizes the significant role the ambiguity and terror present in one’s conscious and unconscious memories have on creative writing. Through his 2018 psychological thriller novel, *Foe*, Reid acknowledges and uses the ambiguity and suspense present in memories to foreshadow, evoke, and reveal the palpable mood of terror from the readers and ultimately unite the character’s narrative into one whole.

To create the suspenseful foreshadowing illustrated throughout the novel, Reid utilizes unconscious but still familiar memories displayed by the protagonist, Junior, to contribute to the narrative’s ambiguity and its foreshadowing. According to Byung-Chull Bae and R. Michael Young, foreshadowing in stories “implicitly alludes to a future event in a manner that makes it difficult for the reader [to] recognize its meaning until the event actually happens” (1). Reid creates the foreshadowing by subtly implying and reiterating through Junior’s ambiguous and

conflicting memories that an issue is present, but it is unknown. The influence that Junior's familiar but forgotten memories have on creating the ambiguity is evident in his inability to remember anything beyond Hen. For example, when Junior is speaking to Terrence about his memories, he expresses that when he "tried to think of... a memory of when [he] was a younger, sixteen [year old] ... [he] couldn't do it," but he is well "aware of it" (Reid 122). Junior's awareness and familiarity but uncertainty about the events evoke suspense and terror from the readers because his actions and feelings are abnormal. Therefore, the situation arouses suspicions and hesitations from the audience that ultimately contributes to the foreshadowing of what is yet to come next.

Furthermore, Reid uses the ambiguity and flexibility present in memory to foreshadow and reinforce the sense of terror throughout the narrative. Like Babuts suggests in *Memory, Metaphors, and Meaning*, "memory, both involuntary and voluntary, preserves dynamic textual patterns that allow interpreters to focus on meaning" (290). Reid presents the ambiguity and sense of terror through Junior's continual reiteration of the lines "I'm not sure" (Reid 22) or "I can't remember" (185) but "I am aware of it" (122) to emphasize the strange nature that is present in Junior's character. Like Babuts suggests, Reid relies on the reader's intuition and interpretation of the anonymity that lies beneath Junior's words to create and reinforce the suspenseful foreshadowing. The foreshadowing builds on the sense of terror prevalent throughout the story, as Reid forces the readers to question Junior and challenges their initial views on him and his identity. Junior's feelings of familiarity but confusion contribute to the foreshadowing and sense of anonymity because they subtly imply and hint to the readers that Junior's memories may not be of his own and that there is more to his character than depicted. Reid continually uses the uncertainty in the memories to build on the foreshadowing that

“provid[es] the reader with (possibly implicit) anticipation” (Bae and Young 2), ultimately contributing to the overall sense of terror that is prevalent throughout the narrative.

However, Reid not only creates the sense of terror through the ambiguity of Junior’s memory but also through the reiteration and repetition of Junior’s only conscious memories, specifically his memories with Hen. According to Debra Schostak when repetition is present in narratives, the “readerly response is to experience the uncanny; that is, one is unsettled because repetition suggests that events fall into some pattern rather than being chaotic and contingent” (52). Like Schostak has stated, Reid uses the unconscious and innocent repetition of Junior’s only conscious memory to further build on the ambiguity and terror present in Junior’s character and narrative. For example, Junior states, “My whole life, I could not remember anyone’s name. Nothing had made a formative impact on me” (Reid 31). However, when talking to Terrence about his past, he continually talks about Hen, claiming that he even “know[s] the cadence, the rhythm” (Reid 90) of how she blows her nose. Reid forms and contributes to the unsettling and ambiguous setting and mood by repeating Junior’s conscious but limited memories of Hen because he evokes feelings of curiosity and discomfort from the readers about Junior’s true intentions and identity.

Additionally, Junior’s innocent but perplexing repetition of memories also contributes not only to the mood of the narrative but also to the ambiguity and suspicions about his character and his intentions. American Historian Joan Scott suggests that repetition “of memory are fantasies insofar as they are constructed, distorted, or narrativized instantiations of previous experience” (64). Reid conceptualizes through reiteration the unsettling and unnatural, eerie behaviour and, to a certain extent, Junior’s obsession over Hen. Throughout the novel, it is evident that Junior’s memories all circulate Hen, and as Scott suggests, “memories are the ‘imagined repetitions’ of

previous experience[s]” (64) and fantasy. Junior’s repetitive memories of only Hen reflect his inner fantasies and desires to control and please Hen. For example, when preparing for “the Installation” (Reid 15), Junior’s main concerns, worries, memories and compliance to Terrance “is all for Hen” (Reid 148). However, throughout the novel, Hen shows signs of wanting to leave, explore, and see beyond the rural. Hen’s desire to escape is suggested when she expresses that she “wonder[s] about the city sometimes and what it would be like there” (Reid 60). However, Junior’s views are the opposite of Hens as he finds the city “busy and dirty” (Reid 61) and immediately shuts down her desire to leave. Reid uses the conflicting desires and projects them through Junior’s conscious memories and feelings of nostalgia. The repetition of memories depicts the responsibility that Junior has over Hen and his obsession and desire for her to stay. Reid evokes feelings of eeriness and terror by subtly implying through the repetition and limitations of Junior’s memories the unnatural and eeriness in his actions, words, and unconscious, faltering relationship with Hen.

Moreover, like the story computation model of Minstrel, Reid “aims to create a sense of inevitability and a sense of unity in the story by foreshadowing contrived or unexpected events” (Bae and Young 3). He further emphasizes and instills the sense of terror and anonymity evident throughout the novel by creating unity in Junior’s familiar but unconscious feelings and memories. Reid reiterates Junior’s feelings of familiarity and ambiguity towards Terrence to unite the novel’s ending to the beginning and evoke feelings of suspicion and eeriness. For example, when speaking about Terrance, Junior claims that he feels as though he has “known him for a few years now, been aware of him, but when [he] stop[s] to think about it, [he] still [does not] know much about Terrance” (Reid 90). Reid uses Junior’s unfamiliar memories but familiar feelings towards Terrance as foreshadowing to emphasize the novel’s abnormality. He

creates unity between the book's beginning and ending using Junior's lack of recollection and unconscious feelings for Terrance to subtly imply that there is more to their relationship and characters than shown.

Furthermore, Reid continues emphasizing and evoking the terror and suspicions from the readers and narrative through the repetition of Junior's struggles to remember his memories beyond Hen. For example, Reid repeatedly mentions Junior's struggles to identify, recall, or feel anything when encountering a "horned rhinoceros beetle" (70). He uses the contrasting memories and feelings that Junior has towards the beetle to add to the sense of peculiarity and terror palpable in Junior's character. The contrast but unity of the foreshadowing from the beginning to the end is evident between his initial encounter and final encounter with the horned beetle. During his first encounters with the horned beetle, Junior struggles to remember the bug's name and describes it as "impressive." However, in contrast to his initial encounter, the "real" Junior recalls the horned beetle in his final meeting and describes it as "disgusting" (Reid 70). Like Bei and Young state: "a story event is contrived or uncommon if Minstrel has no memory of it" (3). Like the Minstrel, the contrast between the initial Junior's peculiar reaction and lack of recollection for a simple concept, such as the "horned rhinoceros beetle" (Reid 70) and his final response foreshadows and implies that the story is contrived, uncommon and eerie.

Likewise, Reid uses the contrasting features between Junior's familiar but ambiguous initial memories and final memories to reveal and distinguish between the individual and their clones. The conflicted memories and vague feelings that Junior experiences throughout most of the novel contrast with the ending or "real" Junior's memories. From the beetles to their recollection and feelings over Terrance, they serve to unite the foreshadowing to the novel's ambiguous resolution. The unity is evident in Hen's similar experience with the "horned

rhinoceros beetle,” as initially Hen, in contrast to Junior, describes the beetle as “disgusting” (Reid 70). However, at the end of the novel, Hen describes the beetle as “really interesting,” and Junior describes the beetle as “disgusting” (Reid 191). Reid reuses and contrasts their initial and final reaction and memories of the beetle to distinguish between the real and the fake, ultimately leaving the novel’s ending ambiguous and mysterious. Similar to his initial use of Junior’s memories to evoke feelings of terror and suspicions from the reader, Reid uses the beetle to recreate those feelings but uses Hen’s memories instead. The repetition and contrast between Junior’s and Hen’s memories serve to unite the ambiguous ending to the repetitive foreshadowing, in the beginning, serving to reveal and continue evoking the suspenseful, eerie, terrifying mood present even after the novel ends.

Throughout the novel, *Foe*, author Iain Reid continues to manipulate the ambiguity but familiarity in the memories experienced by the protagonist, Junior, to foreshadow, emphasize, and evoke feelings of terror and suspense. Like Babuts recognized the significance of memory in narratives, Reid also acknowledges that “the role of memory in creative writing and interpretation is fundamental” (Babuts 290). Reid recognizes and manipulates the anonymity present within the character’s unconscious and conscious memories to contribute to the novel’s mood of terror and to create unity from the foreshadowing of forgotten memories to the repetition of unconscious memories. He evokes palpable feelings of suspicion, curiosity, and fear from the reader by subtly foreshadowing the abnormality and inconsistency within the characters’ memories, ultimately leaving one to question their initial thoughts and feelings throughout the story and even after the novel ends.

Works Cited

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