

THE LANGUAGE OF ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *HERE WE ARE*

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Abstract

The analysis at hand, of Graham Swift's novel Here We Are, consists of three main parts, which display a progressively increased degree of complexity. We are looking at the language of the entertainment business in post-war Brighton unpretentious summer shows. The first part focuses on linguistic terms and phrases that describe this business, i.e. the actual place and actors, so the level of interpretation is mainly the basic, denotative one. In the second part, we look at how the entertainer is described, drawing the conclusion that one of the main features assigned to him is versatility and a multifaceted personality. This versatility is further taken in the spotlight in the third part as the common denominator of the linguistic expression in the novel, and we look at the examples provided in the book and the subtle meanings that they convey. In the Conclusions, we pair this ambivalent linguistic manner of expression with the overall interpretations of the characters and situations, revealing the fact that they are mutually illustrative of each other. The approach is linguistics combined with cultural studies.

Keywords: *entertainment business, identity, post-WWII theatre culture, performance terminology*

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

The novel begins with three young people engaged in a late 1950s variety theatre performances in Brighton: Jack Robinson (the stage name for Robbins), the compere of the show, and the duet Ronnie Deane, a skilled magician, and Evie White, his lovely assistant. Evie and Ronnie become a couple in real life, only to be separated after a short-lived romantic relationship upon the death of Ronnie's mother, which makes him temporarily leave Evie and his career duties. While Ronnie is away to attend to his dying mother, Evie and Jack get together and will stay like this, married for fifty years. As Ronnie comes back from his trip, he sees the betrayal in Evie's eyes and orchestrates a good-bye show filled with his best tricks yet, culminating with a disappearance act, subsequent to which he never actually returns. The book is made up of a pendulation between moments from this young-age careers in theatre, Ronnie's childhood and Evie's elderly reminiscences.

The novel is filled with linguistic subtleties, especially of the pun and double meaning type. Our study starts with the analysis of the terms related to

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the entertainment business, relevant in their denotative sense, which makes their investigation rather descriptive, the purpose being the formation of a small corpus in this semantic area. The middle part consists in the examination of the status of the artist, and it mixes forthright characterizations that lack subtlety with more covert ones as far as their decoding, where the presence of the double meanings is witnessed. The last part is dedicated to the exclusive interrogation of double-meaning contexts, and presents the highest degree of subtlety of them all. The conclusions point out the connection between the double entendre that is used as a linguistic artifice and the doubt overarching characters, situations and outcomes in the novel, which are ambivalent, language and hermeneutic at the level of ideas being equally permeated by irresoluteness and ambiguity, and functioning as a reciprocal mirror for each other.

2. The performance business

The “wings”, where Jack seems to try to summon his courage in the first scene of the novel, refer to the lateral spaces of the stage that are hidden from the eyes of the audience (Swift, 2021: 1). The “entrance” that he is preparing is the act of coming before the people, on stage, exiting from the wings so that one makes oneself visible to the public (*ibidem*). Jack knows how to “delay his entrance”, which is a strategy to draw more attention to himself, creating momentum and suspense, and thus presence, gaining metaphorical weight as a showman (*ibidem*). The dimming of the “house lights” (*ibidem*), i.e. of the lighting that is ensured in the establishment, or, more restrictedly, in the “house” i.e. “auditorium where the audience sits” (Theatre Jargon, *Raleigh Little Theatre*, <https://raleighlittletheatre.org/get-involved/volunteers/theatre-jargon/>), is used to mark and separate the moments in the show, so that each performance should be differentiated from the others, and at the same time creates a state of anticipation among the members of the audience who are thus made to await more keenly the next number – this anticipation being referred to as a “thickening murmur” or “boil” (Swift, 2021: 1). Of course, there is a “dressing room” for the performers to change and rest (*ibidem*: 9), and terms like “stalls”, “(back) row”, “backstage”, “front-of-house” (*ibidem*: 101) are used for the partitioned space of the theatre. The performances that compose a show, or the acts, are referred to with the noun “spots”, which entails an order in which they take place (*ibidem*: 4). What Jack does, his lines or attitudes when he introduces the performers, as well as the content of the performers’ acts are called “routines” (*ibidem*), because they are repetitive to a certain degree or fully, and his routines contain “quips”, so witticisms, most of which rely on double meanings. A “billing” is “information, especially about a performance” (Billing, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/billing>), and when the couple Ronnie and Evie move up the billing, it

means that they get “star/top billing” (*ibidem*) (Swift, 2021: 166), i.e. are advertised as the best.

In the above, we notice that we have moved, with the presentation of the vocabulary related to the entertainment business, from nouns and noun phrases that describe the location, the actual space, to dynamics related to the organization of the show. Let us have a look at the content of this entertainment program, defined as a “regular seaside holiday show”, as “variety” (*ibidem*: 6). It consists, in linguistic terms, in common nouns designating people, i.e. the performers, and proper nouns that are stage names whose pomposity is intended to attract the audiences. In general, the show comprises “acrobats” (*ibidem*), “jugglers”, “plate-spinners” (*ibidem*: 7), and what Jack does himself, besides introducing every part, is “some patter”, “some gags”, and “a bit of singing, some dancing, some tapping” (*ibidem*). There appear some ing-forms of the verbs that denote the actions that compose the show. We notice that they are attributed to the main character, which may suggest that his contribution is more significant. Also, this feeling is reinforced by the numerous ways in which his routine is referred to, with the help of noun modifiers that send us to the concept of parting – “farewell routine” (*ibidem*: 7), “farewell patter” (*ibidem*: 9), the time of the day, i.e. the evening when the show ends – “goodnight routine” (*ibidem*: 8), or the organization of the show and implicitly its last part – “closing number” (*ibidem*: 9). We could say that these nouns have a “qualifying” and “attributive” nature and that in these examples they serve to express the “function” of the routine (Noun Modifiers, *Langeek*, <https://langeek.co/en/grammar/course/486/noun-modifiers>). The use of the determiner “some” points to the undefined nature of Jack’s act, which in his case is a way of suggesting his versatility rather than something unprofessional. More about this will be revealed in the analysis on status below.

The proper nouns that are used to individualize the numbers of the show and which also fulfil the purpose of making the show more attractive to its public are the “Rockabye Boys”, “Doris Lane” (Swift, 2021: 6), nicknamed “Mistress of Melody” and “Forces Fiancée” “in cheeky reference to one of the rivals”, and “Lord Archibald” doing pantomime and repartees on hot topics and “impersonations” of political figures (*ibidem*: 7). With these proper nouns, social and political realities come to the fore and are introduced as concerns and topics to start from for satire numbers in the performance. Doris Lane is a famous actress of the time, and the reality of the “Forces sweetheart” i.e. showbusiness entertainers, especially women, that “became a favourite of soldiers in the British Armed Forces” (Forces sweetheart, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forces_sweetheart) is inferred, as well as that of the star female protagonist cast in the film called *Forces’ Sweetheart* (which depicts precisely this cultural reality, of army men falling for a female artist) (*Forces’ Sweetheart* (film), *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forces%27>

Sweetheart(film)), Hy Hazell, who may be the rival the narrator is hinting at. The outrunning of this rival by the *persona* in the show is suggested by the status contained in the nickname: if the main character (i.e. the rival) from the movie was only a sweetheart, the woman in the show in the novel is a fiancée, suggesting a more permanent and serious liking or preference manifested by the audiences. The pantomimer named Archibald talks to his teddy-bear doing impressions of politicians, imagining dialogues between “Macmillan and Eisenhower” (Swift, 2021: 7), i.e. the British Prime Minister and the American President of the time, dialogues that imply their “wartime friendship” (Post-war Britain (1945-1979), n.a., *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-war_Britain_\(1945%E2%80%931979\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-war_Britain_(1945%E2%80%931979))).

3. Status

Jack describes himself as being “nobody” (Swift, 2021: 2), which can have negative connotations, as in being no one of importance, or not a person of substance, but also positive, as the more somebody can detach from who they are, of their individuality, the better they can embody various stage personalities, becoming all these *personae*. Being on stage is associated with an act of courage, a boldness that seems to contain an element of madness to it, and with something risky, as what someone stepping on it does is “Cross the line, step over the edge.” (*ibidem*: 4)

Jack is a “veteran” (*ibidem*: 1), an “old stager” (*ibidem*: 3), someone who has been in shows for years, in his case twelve. In his quality of compere, a British English term, he “introduces the various acts in a [...] stage show” (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 2003: 259). Hence, he is the person who ensures the smooth passage between all the parts of the performance, needing to inspire and ensure a certain cohesion among disparate sections and acts which may be quite different from one another, which therefore requires him to possess a certain type of versatility.

There is a connection established intentionally between his outfit and his personality. The in-betweenness of his personality, of someone older than his age and more experienced and someone young, as he is only twenty-eight after all, as well as the mixture of innocence or conviviality, on the one hand, and trickery and shrewdness, on the other, are suggested chromatically and stylistically in his outfit. His clothes are “black-and-white”, the “outdated rig of showmen, conmen, masqueraders everywhere”, and he preserves, despite his young age and latest fashion that imposes leather and guitars as mandatory accessories in an entertainer’s appearance, the “cane”, “boater” and “tap shoes” which, together with his handsomeness, grin and mobile “lock of hair” make him an elegant dandy, with an air of dated distinction mixed with modern unseriousness. What is modern in the context of the novel is the end of the fifties, the time when the action unfolds, a post-war age in which people were

yet uncured of the war trauma and looking for entertainment in an attempt to leave the horror that they had gone through behind. Elizabeth II's Coronation in 1953 had "renewed" the "sense of national pride", which, along with the social phenomenon of ending conscriptions boosted morale (Post-war Britain (1945-1979), n.a., *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-war_Britain_\(1945%E2%80%931979\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-war_Britain_(1945%E2%80%931979))). The elements of dishonesty and deceptiveness are suggested as part of this job and career through the nouns "conmen" and "masqueraders", on the one hand, but these amalgamate with a side of his personality that suggests confidence, on the other, a trustworthy individual and a soothing presence, as he, in his role of a compere, provides a protective fatherly figure for both the performers, who are all taken "under his wing", and the audience members, for whom he is "Your pal for the night, your host with the most." (Swift, 2021: 7). This multifaceted personality makes it obvious that the show "was all held together" by him, him being "the oil in the wheels", the glue or binder (*ibidem*). The oil metaphor is preceded by the modifier "just" as if in an intention to minimize his role out of modesty, as this characterization of himself belongs to Jack. However, we have a corrective narrative auctorial voice in the same paragraph, which states that "The impression was that it was his show.", which immediately changes his status from a subordinate to an vital one (*ibidem*). Therefore, the reunion of opposites is achieved when it comes to his power status as well, never derailing from the ambivalence that constitutes the main vein of the status description in Jack's case. The modesty with which he is endowed only makes his prominence more potent. His own reflections on himself, starting with the one in which he deems himself to be nobody, reaching his late-life nostalgic image of self as only "an old song-and-dance man" show a humbleness that only achieves the opposite effect, of propelling his figure as quintessential for the performance world; the adjective "old" is meant to inspire the concept of being unthreatening and weak (*ibidem*: 10).

However, even this last self-characterization is ambivalent. In its first-level interpretation, it only describes Jack's activities in the show, but at a subtler level, the phrase song and dance means, in British English, "an unnecessary or useless show of confusion, anger, excitement etc.", or "fuss", and, in American English, "a complicated or misleading explanation" (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 2003: 1290). The Britannica Dictionary provides a comprehensive explanation that starts with the first meaning of a performance combining these two artistic manifestations, mentions the US informal and "disapproving" sense mentioned above, and adds the British informal phrase "make a song and dance about (something)", similar to the Longman entry that we have presented (Song and dance, *The Britannica Dictionary*, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/song-and-dance>). The deceit element included or not, what he needed to do involves, in the more expanded interpretations, an ingredient of exaggeration.

Manipulation is not eliminated, but clearly blending as an ingredient in Jack's stage behavior. Manipulative behavior involves deceit by definition. However, in our context, it is viewed as a talent, positively-connoted and somehow part of the job: with Jack's jokes and comedy, "The note of clownish companionship was struck. They were in his palm again. It was a skill." (Swift, 2021: 9) Manipulative, in a way, is the writing at hand as well, inasmuch as it resorts to plural meanings to signal possibilities and to sometimes point out relevant truths under the impression that what is being discussed is something benign and merely the concrete reality at hand, the immediate context, while in fact making way for broader and more profound explanations. As early as the first few pages, the narrative is "dropping clues about what's ahead for these summer friends" (Charles, 2020). Since this becomes obvious from the very beginning of the book, we are going to look at this mechanism in detail in the following section.

4. Puns and double entendre

A person who "was truly nobody, truly nowhere" is Jack's father (Swift, 2021: 3). One page after he has described himself as nobody and nowhere in metaphorical terms, Jack implies that his father is like that, but this time in the first, literal senses of the terms. Or is it in this first sense? This basic meaning refers to the father's physical absence from his life, as his mother has remarried a garage owner (Carter). We do not know yet whether Jack employs the two terms – negative pronoun and place adverbial – metaphorically, with any other pejorative connotation, perhaps as a reproach for his father's symbolical absence from the life of the family as well. We may suspect it at this point due to the narrator's predilection for ambiguous and double meanings, which we notice as early as the third page. To provide an extra example in this respect, another term that can function as a synonym for break, intermission, interval in theatre – i.e. "in between" – is also translated to another context, to mean a period of time between his mother's two relationships (with his father and then with Carter), during which she went on stage herself. The translation of the term from its potential meaning of recess in the context of theater life to an amount of time in someone's existence meant to suggest a break from relationships already suggests the treatment of life as a theatre performance and vice versa. Jack seems dissatisfied with his mother's decision to perform, as he calls it a "cruel bastard business", seeing it as somewhat degrading (*ibidem*). He seems to judge his mother for having made this decision, as he asks "And who did she have to push her?", seemingly implying that she was not forced to do it. However, the question is ambiguous, as he could also refer to something positive instead of manifesting anger; since he has described already that a shove in his back used to be his mother's form of encouragement to him right before he would go on stage, he could also be in fact simply wondering, with

this interrogation, who was there for her when she needed reassurance (*ibidem*). Therefore, the pushing could be either positively or negatively connoted, and the decision an either bold or reckless act.

In one of his quips on stage (which, as we have already mentioned, are often based on double meanings or puns), Jack introduces a joke “about the garage owner’s wife”, which means that he mixes his life experience with what he does on stage, sometimes using it as a source of inspiration. Here, the message seems to be that illusion and reality become indistinguishable from each other to stage people like him. As far as puns, he uses the name of Brighton – the place where the show is put on – for one that capitalizes on the similar pronunciation between the proper noun and the verb “to brighten” as in “brighten up” i.e. become joyful or happy: ““You’re in Brighton, folks, so bloody well brighten up!”” (*ibidem*: 4).

While commenting on Ronnie and Evie’s status, Jack plays upon the two meanings of the adjective “engaged”, i.e. being in a serious long-term relationship that involves a promise and prospect of marriage, and having a contract to do their number in the theatre for the respective season: “they were engaged to do the summer season, they didn’t have to get engaged to each other too” (*ibidem*: 5). Some pages later, Jack uses a third meaning of “engaged” while talking about his own situation when he skipped the double dates with the couple (on which he used to bring a different girl each time), saying about himself that these absences meant that he was “otherwise engaged” – suggesting intimate relations with these occasional partners, i.e. occupying or spending his time romantically with them (*ibidem*: 14).

When the couple breaks the engagement, they cannot, nevertheless, break the stage engagement, which Jack comments upon again, using the phrase “the show must go on” (*ibidem*: 5), the same that he used a little bit earlier to refer to the way his own mother has changed husbands. The saying refers to the ambition not to interrupt a performance at all costs, literally, as well as to the way in which one should surpass all hardships in life and not give up living, and is obviously based on the already-obsessive metaphor of life being a theatrical performance.

When the couple become the favorites of audiences and their number moves to the final spot, Jack feels that his closing act “became, in more ways than one, a little trickier” (*ibidem*: 8). The narrator warns us that the term “trickier” plays upon a double meaning of the implied root adjective “tricky”, which can be understood in the literal sense, i.e. full of tricks or jokes, and metaphorically, as something posing a higher degree of difficulty.

Plays-upon-words are heavily relied on throughout the novel, but especially in the beginning, where they abound in relation with Ronnie and Jack’s jobs. When they joined the army, and they had to write down their occupations to be enrolled, they stated “magician” and, respectively,

“comedian”, which was perceived as a way of challenging the authorities although they had no such intention, an idea phrased like this: “In neither case were they dishonest or – even in Jack’s – joking.”, as Jack could be joking in his quality of a professional joker, as it were (*ibidem*: 11) By 1958, while Jack had pointed to Ronnie that a useful tactic to manipulate the public into liking him more would be to take a female partner, which could enchant the people watching them, Ronnie understood the value of his friend’s point of view: “He was a magician, but he’d learnt some of the unenchanted truths of the entertainment business.” (*ibidem*: 13). This phrasing is based on the common trait of [+enchantment] had in common by: the art of a magician; an appealing woman and/or a woman who casts spells (i.e. sorceress, enchantress, witch); entertainment as a practice overall. Also, in all cases, the [+enchantment] trait entails the [+illusion]/[+deceit] traits. Strating from the root adjective “enchancing” in the same word family bearing the same meaning traits, something “unenchanting” – the opposite adjective built using the negative prefix “un-” – shows not only the absence of the positive traits above, but also the presence of the opposite attitudes and emotions, i.e. displeasure and rejection. Hence, a magician who thrives on the optimistic and awe-indulging moods induced by the effects of his art is confronted with a harsh reality where he is lost in unfamiliar territory that opposes his nature and where Jack comes to rescue.

The account of Ronnie’s childhood occasions a series of double entendres related to the potential early signs that he would choose the career of a magician, of the relevant details that stuck to him and marked his way of perceiving the world in such a manner as to push him towards his future occupation. In order to protect him on the brink of war, his mother, Agnes Deane, sent six-year-old Ronnie away on a train in 1939, to Evergrene, Oxfordshire, to live with Eric and Penelope Lawrence, to whom he becomes attached. In this way, he notices that people “might keep changing into a variety of roles”, as his avid observation of the couple who hosts him yield as a conclusion, Eric being an accountant, a warden (watching the sky for any danger of bombings), doing a magic show and business (*ibidem*: 37). The concept of roles refers here to social roles, as those implied by the existence in the world of every individual, but it is a term employed in order to function as an early sign for the stage roles that adult Ronnie will get to play as an entertainer later in life. Hence, the word is a harbinger, in its initial meaning, for the career that will involve roles in the other meaning, i.e. acting on stage. This analogy goes hand in hand with life being like a stage performance, which the narrator obsessively suggests on various occasions. When Ronnie is introduced to friends of the Lawrences, they deem him “charming”, an adjective that gets repeated and made to form a sentence on its own in order to draw our attention to it, because it is again used with one meaning, i.e. likable, cute, but made to

suggest another, i.e. filled with magic or magical (*ibidem*: 41). This technique is employed a couple of instances more in the same context, in the comment that Ronnie is “displayed”, “being made an exhibit of himself”, and the child wonders whether what the guests – who have prepared in wearing their best outfits and strive to be nice – are doing is what “putting on a show” meant (*ibidem*: 42). Ronnie being an exhibit does not necessarily have negative connotations, as he has sensed as a child how fond the Lawrences are of him, and how Penelope wished she had been his real mother, so what they are doing in showing him to their friends happens out of pride and love. However, from the way in which the phrase is formulated, we realize that an element of illusion or unreality is present, as what is introduced is solely a version or side of himself. We notice the association of being shown as an exhibit to what an entertainer does on stage, and therefore that his choice of words hints at his future status. The other phrase, related to how people put on a show is, of course, again, a play upon words and meanings, as we can understand it literally, describing what Ronnie will do as a magician, and metaphorically, meaning doing something with ostentation, which is what the Lawrences’ guests do. In the case of this expression, the metaphorical meaning suggests the future literal one, as it is the case with the term “roles”, while with the other terms – “charming”, “displayed”, “exhibit” – the move is from the concrete or literal to the figurative.

There is an insistence on the overall uncanny peacefulness of Oxfordshire in comparison with the presupposed terrible war zone of the capital, London. Child Ronnie is in a state of disbelief as to the reality of this war and the horrible bombings he has heard are happening at the very same time in another part of the same country. Also, his disbelief is of another nature as well, that of who his real family is, as the Lawrences appear to be more real as parents than his biological ones, who have never acted and functioned as a family for him. The amazement of having these new parents determine him to feel magically lucky, and think of Eric Lawrence as if he were a magician, figuratively, although he was one in real life, going by the name Lorenzo. Penelope’s repeated exclamation “Here we are!”, pointing to the bliss of them being together in that peaceful countryside will come to be remembered by Ronnie as a quintessential expression of this magic and happiness (*ibidem*: 49). These aspects highlight even more the suspension of disbelief when it comes to something that is an illusion, undermining at the same time what one knows to be real, consequently contributing to the construction of the concept of interchangeability between life and acting on a stage. Disbelief is Ronnie’s reaction when the Lawrences inform him about his father’s death at sea, which is why they wonder whether he has understood the situation, if “any of it sunk in”, “Which was an unfortunate way even of framing the question.” (*ibidem*: 45). There is, again, a double meaning that is played upon – the literal sense of

something, an object, sinking in water, becoming submerged, and the figurative way of referring to whether a piece of information has been properly and thoroughly taken in, comprehended. The idea of submersion is insisted upon, reoccurring obsessively as a semantic feature of the modifiers present in the phrases that describe the thoughts and emotions related to the reception of this news. Thus, we encounter phrases like “swamping confusion” and “drowning gratitude” (Ronnie’s, for being safe with his adoptive parents) (*ibidem*: 47).

The perpetual and recurring ambivalence resorted to in the examples above plays the role of enhancing the potentiality of illusion, of second guessing of things, of a reminder that everything is questionable, that reality may be an illusion and illusion may be more real than what is conventionally real. We realize that this is the underlying theme in the whole novel, and that double meanings only point to it in a concrete manner, showing that what seems to be in a certain way might as well be in another.

The use of double meaning can occur simply for the pleasure of witticism, at a more limited contextual level of a sentence, making sense in the immediate linguistic context, without functioning as an anchor to some other, more complex connotation. An example is the interpretations of the term “ring”, as sonority and, respectively, the concrete adornment object or piece of jewelry: “‘Pablo and Eve’. Yes, it had a ring to it. And now she was wearing a ring.” (*ibidem*: 75) The situation refers to the couple that Ronnie Pablo and Evie form, both on stage and in real life. A more complex meaning is contained in Ronnie’s exclamation to the audiences after a number with Evie, as she emerges safely from a box in which she was supposedly sectioned in half: “Meet Evie. Meet Eve. My other half. Halves.” (*ibidem*: 89) Here, we have, first, the double meaning of “half”, as “bisection of”, concretely, and wife/spouse, figuratively. The term “halves” makes sense in the plural because the woman is Ronnie’s partner both romantically, in real life, as Evie, and on stage, as the female assistant Eve, so there are two personas in one. To this double entendre, we may add the one resulting from the immediate context of the trick that the two have performed, which involves the woman’s alleged sectioning, and who ultimately comes out of the experiment in both the alleged halves of her, reunited. Hence, the term “halves” is an umbrella one for both interpretations. The following fragment highlights the issue of Ronnie not hurting Evie during a performance trick on stage, and at the same time the soon-to-be-damaged relationship that they have in real life, overlapping the two planes through the concrete and figurative use of the term “hurt”: “‘[...] You don’t have to worry at all. I’m never going to hurt you.’ Nor did he. It was never that way round.” (*ibidem*: 92) The reference to potential physical, tangible hurt sends to the emotional, intangible hurt. Also, the implication is that Evie is the one who will hurt him and damage their relationship. When she is inside the box, Ronnie never asks “Evie – are you still there?”, but “being there” is again taken

metaphorically as well as literally through the subsequent comment of the narrative voice (which is Evie's) hinting at her betrayal "But perhaps he should have asked nonetheless." (*ibidem*: 93) This "being there" will later in Evie's life function as a clue related to her hopes that he has found a way to be present around her in an invisible, almost paranormal manner, due to him having been such a great magician, as Evie the narrator obsessively feels his presence like an invisible thread, like the energy of the rope he has used between them in his final disappearance act on stage.

A lot of years after, when Evie, aged seventy-five, is faced with the death of her fifty-year- partner Jack, she gives us the most prominent voice in the novel – "mostly we are with Evie in 2009" (Baker, 2020). Just as her narrative seems the most poignant and direct, Ronnie has been the actual main character, despite the flamboyant praiseful characterization offered to Jack in the first pages: "it is neither charismatic Jack nor steely Eve whose back story sits at the heart of this novel" (Hughes, 2020). Swift is here a bit deceitful with us, resorting to ambivalence himself, in the sense of playing with our expectations. Evie likes to think of Jack as "gone" instead of "dead" as the former word is less "uncompromising", it can keep up the appearance of something that is only "temporary", thus favoring illusion (Swift, 2021: 76). In this case, the plural meaning of "gone" creates an ambiguity that makes the harsh reality of death less prominent, interpretable and therefore easier to cope with, as one can choose to disregard or suspend it, at least upon occasion. She has come to experience what her mother had warned her about, that life was not fair, i.e. that "her turn would come", which it has, "And look what a turn it had turned out to be." (*ibidem*: 77) Here, we have three meanings of the term "turn", with a change of part of speech for the third: the first use denotes someone's spot in an order, the second refers to change, and the last is a phrasal verb that points to an outcome. This is another example of plural meaning employed in the limited, linguistic context of two sentences.

Ambiguity of linguistic expression points to another overarching theme of the novel: the way people can play more roles. At some point in his career, compere Jack Robinson took a turn himself, called a "lucky break" by him, and signed as a sitcom actor, revealing the depth of his talent in cinema as well (*ibidem*: 82). This break, while the term usually means interruption or dismantling of something, comes to connote the very opposite, i.e. a putting together of things and a continuation. Jack gains the opportunity of capitalizing upon and displaying another side of his complex personality, i.e. of embodying another role. Evie too grows from a prancer in her youth into a businesswoman in her mature years – having a company with her husband, the actor, producer and equally-accomplished businessman.

5. Conclusions

The novel begins with the middle part of the three main characters' lives and their progressively successful act in Brighton in the last two years of the fifties – master of ceremonies Jack, and the magician's act performed by Ronnie and Evie. In this part, the preoccupation seems to highlight compere Jack as the central figure of the novel, portraying him as a versatile, brilliant individual who holds the whole show together. However, in less than twenty pages, the spotlight and chronology quickly go back in the year before the outbreak of WWII, describing Ronnie's childhood and adolescent years, for quite a lengthy part of the book, taking into account its modest number of pages. Then, the narrative planes shift back and forth, mostly covering the middle ages of the three friends' lives, to finally get to Evie, depicted in her final years, when we realize that control in terms of narrative voice has slowly but definitely passed on to her. This creates a bafflement for the reader, as we have left one apparently gifted individual who seemed to be the hero-material in the beginning, Jack, to occupy ourselves in detail with Ronnie, to then bow to the female protagonist's authority in terms of both main narrator and versatility as a character. Moreover, although she left Ronnie in her youth for Jack, with whom she has had a fifty-year-long successful marriage, we are left to wonder if she did not in fact regret Ronnie, and just how soon this happened, since she visited Evergrene in the hopes of finding him there, and it is his presence that she feels in the room with her as an elderly lady, and face that she thinks she sees in the mirror one year after her late husband Jack passes away. More clues to this conundrum are the way she named her company – Rainbow – given that the appearance of a rainbow on stage was the final trick that Ronnie did before literally disappearing before the eyes of the audience who was already in awe. Also, the rope he used to unroll on stage, coming out of his mouth and pulled by Evie in the same final show, which looked as something that united them as they were on opposite ends of the stage, becomes the invisible thread that grey-haired Evie seems to suggest has been secretly connecting them all these years.

We are left wondering about the answer to at least a few questions: Who is the protagonist of the book? Is the protagonist male or female? Who was the better entertainer? Who did Evie truly love more? Is Ronnie still alive? The overall interpretation of the novel seems to be ambiguous, as each character or situation appears to be and not be in a certain way at the same time, open interpretations lying everywhere, and this ambivalence is paired with one in linguistic expression, in the tool of the double meanings, the two aspects ending up mirroring each other. This is the reason why we have tried to analyze the language, focusing on its quality of doubleness, as it reflects the main feel of the story, which is plural meanings. We can therefore agree and support Massie's contention that Graham Swift requires "careful reading", as one

“might so easily miss the significant line”, and, as a soulful writer, Swift has indeed “the lightest of touches” (Massie, 2020).

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