

## The Pragmatics of Dreams in James Hogg's 'Cousin Mattie'

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### Abstract

Scottish writer James Hogg (1770-1835) made highly sophisticated use of the supernatural in his realist works. Though judged as a 'childish' and a 'naïve' writer by contemporary reviewers, Hogg exploited the possibilities offered by the Scottish Borders' tradition for his narratorial purposes, in so doing conveying subtle critiques of contemporary social issues outwith the text. In 'Cousin Mattie' (1820) Hogg employed the superstitious belief in foretelling dreams and the fairies' magic number of seven to construct the plot of his tale. Through flouting Grice's 'maxims' of 'quantity' and 'manner' with a highly ambiguous ending, the 'maxim of quality' by a strategic use of the supernatural, and by intertextually referencing contemporary ballads of infanticide, Hogg exposed the social stigmatization of unwed mothers and the harsh reality of life in rural Scotland. Ambiguity concerning the reasons of Mattie's death made more acceptable an issue deemed 'indelicate' to nineteenth-century bourgeois readers, whom Hogg left to discern symbolic meanings, avoiding threatening their assumptions of literary politeness, and leaving the possibility of different interpretations, neither of which excludes the other.

**Key words:** James Hogg, 'Cousin Mattie', pragmatics for literary communication, pragma-stylistics, Grice's maxims.

## 1. Introduction

The present paper will discuss the function of dreams, and their implicit meaning, in James Hogg's (1770-1835) tale 'Cousin Mattie',<sup>1</sup> where Sandy—Mattie's cousin and juvenile playmate—becomes her subsequent lover, fathering her child and causing indirectly the death of both mother and baby who, seemingly, die in childbirth. The cause of Mattie's death, however, is never revealed clearly; the reader is kept in suspense until the end with regards to the interpretation of Mattie's dreams; and Hogg ends his tale with a double line of asterisks, leaving several questions unanswered.

A recent interest among stylisticians has heightened the need for a pragmaticist approach to the analysis of literary texts based on Laurence Horn's (2004; 2007) neo-Gricean notion of 'quantity implicature', a reductionist re-elaboration of Grice's (1989) maxims of conversation, in order to discuss what remains implicit in what characters actually say.<sup>2</sup> In comparison with Grice's maxims, neo-Gricean accounts aim at a less complex framework because they hold that Grice's list of maxims is too complex, open-ended, and not very coherent. Hence, according to Horn, Grice's set of 'quantity', 'relation', and 'manner' can be reduced to two pragmatic principles: the Q principle (Quantity) and the R principle (Relation), responsible for the generation of 'implicatures'. The 'maxim of quality' is left out because the speakers' duty to make their contribution truthful is considered an essential assumption.<sup>3</sup> However, are speakers always completely sincere? Even when a speaker tries to say the truth, he or she may choose the degree of truth in order not to violate another important principle of communication, namely politeness. In addition, though Horn's Q/R principles may help to clarify the stylistic effects of word choices within the characters' fictional utterances, for a discussion of literary communication at a higher level than the characters' dialogues, namely between the author and the potential readers of a work, textual passages longer than the characters' exchanges need to be considered. The 'maxim of quality'

(being truthful), which Horn left out, also need to be re-valued for literary communication, particularly in Hogg's case, as he made strategic use of the supernatural in his works. For these reasons, Grice's less reductionist set of maxims—informativeness, relevance, truthfulness, and clarity—may still be important tools for elucidating the complex dynamics of the literary phenomenon.

Though Grice never conceived of his Cooperative Principle beyond the verbal exchange, nor did he ever '[extend] his discussion to social context', his insights on how an 'implicature', that is an indirect meaning, can be conveyed by flouting the maxims of conversation may still be put to more potentially creative use for discourse analysis of that which is beyond the utterance (Lindblom, 2001: 1620, 1602). Regarding literary analysis, for instance, Grice's notion of 'implicature' may clarify 'how authors and readers go about "co-creating" the literary work' (Mey, 2009: 550), or why an author may be perceived as impolite when flouting the maxims in plot construction (Sell, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on what Hogg may have wished to communicate in 'Cousin Mattie', and on how his linguistic act was then received by the critics in 1820. Both purposes will be achieved by considering the significance of textual features such as character construction; how information about events in the plot development is withheld or provided for effects of suspense; and why Hogg chose the particular chronotope of early-nineteenth-century Scotland for his tale. Without being deterministic, the paper will argue that Hogg's historical position may have influenced specific textual choices (Sell, 2000), and that the readers' positionality may then have affected the interpretation of and the reaction to such authorial choices at the time of first publication (Mey, 2001; 2009). Mediating Hogg's cultural background for the potential readers of the twenty-first century (Karpenko, 1993; Sell, 2000; B. Pettersson, 2009), and considering the dynamics between Hogg's individuality and overarching categories such as

gender, class, and ethnicity (Christie, 2000), the paper will clarify why Hogg's tale was cited as a literary example not to follow at the time of first publication (Gold's *London Magazine*, 1820).

With these aims in mind, literary meaning will not be viewed as a 'homogeneous phenomenon' (A. Pettersson, 2010a: 433) because Hogg's own act of writing and the multiple readers' experiences of his tale allow for different meanings which do not exclude one another: this is an effect that Hogg may have wished for by leaving the end of his tale open. For the same reason, context will also not be assumed as unitary, since various literary meanings derive from a different text's, author's, and reader's reality (Sell 2000; B. Pettersson 2009).

This paper will provide a stylistic analysis of the purely linguistic and more 'fixed meaning' of some extracts of Hogg's tale, as well as an analysis of the 'critical meaning', deriving from the particular, individual reading experience of the reviewers of Hogg's time (A. Pettersson, 2010a: 435). It will be argued that the latter may have been greatly influenced by class prejudices against Hogg's poor origins rather than by considerations of his literary skills. A stylistic analysis of Hogg's character construction, for instance, will expose how Hogg foregrounded adjectival phrases related to the eighteenth-century discourse of sensibility for his own critical purposes, while Gricean considerations of Hogg's 'floutings' will show that his tale is a masterpiece of literary techniques. Awareness of the author's historical, cultural, and biographical backgrounds will highlight that Hogg's tale, though surely originating in a desire to entertain, may also have functioned to have his readers 'reflect on' specific issues external to the text, towards which Hogg may have wished to draw their attention (A. Pettersson, 2000: 46). Emphasising the innocence of both protagonists by using tropes derived from the discourse of sensibility, as well as avoiding being explicit about the reasons of Mattie's death, may have been designed to render Hogg's treatment of motifs

such as infanticide and pregnancy out of wedlock more acceptable to nineteenth-century bourgeois readers, leaving them to discern symbolic meanings, perhaps to avoid threatening their assumptions of literary politeness.

The following sections will provide some critical considerations on how to apply pragmaticist principles (thought applying to oral communication in the real world) to the world of fiction, and a brief overview of pragmatics for literary communication. It will then pursue an analysis of Hogg's tale on these terms.

## **2. 'Doing things with words' in the fictional world**

One of the fiercest debates concerning the use of pragmatics for analysis of literary discourse has been concerned with the question of empirical truth in the semantics of fictional narration, particularly in relation to phenomena such as 'realism' and the 'fantastic' (Bange, 1986: 83). One of the norms governing the semantics of language is that a proposition must respect truth-conditions, for example a sentence like 'it is sunny in Stirling' is true precisely when it is sunny in Stirling. As a consequence, the analysis of 'fictional discourse poses a difficult problem' (Searle, 1979: 58), and 'the difference between fictional and serious utterances' needs to be explored (p. 60). Searle claims that fictional discourse is made of 'pretended illocutions', in the sense that a character or a narrator may 'engage in a performance which is *as if* one were doing or being the thing [...] without any intent to deceive' (p. 65, emphasis in the original). Searle then arrives at the conclusion that fiction is a 'parasitic' use of language as 'the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world' (1979: 67). However, P. Bange claims that the problem arises from the fact that fictionality has been treated 'using the tools of semantics' instead of being considered 'a modality of discourse [...] founded in the

framework of pragmatic relations' (1986: 83-84). Bange observes that 'the question of truth and fiction' should not be answered by taking as a default value the way a modern, western culture conceives of historical truth or of 'scientific knowledge [...] as the absolute system of cognition', arguing instead that 'fictionality [...] should be judged in relation to beliefs common to a group at the moment of the production of a text' (1986: 82, 84). Anders Pettersson adds that fictionality, though 'a very important device' of the literary work, should be considered as an 'ancillary function' rather than a fundamental one because 'it does not transform the basic pragmatic functioning of the text' (2010b: 184–200).

In addition, it is rather difficult to distinguish between what is fictional and non-fictional not only in a literary text, but also in the real world. A fictional work may contain fictional characters, though it may be set in a world that really exists (Searle, 1979); and fictionality is not a trait which characterises only the literary discourse as it can also be present in 'everyday communication' (Bange, 1986: 83). This is why A. Pettersson views a literary work as characterised by the 'presentational literary discourse' which, though it may be constructed through fictional characters and events, provides 'webs of representations' that make the reader 'reflect on and ponder over reality'; as a result, though fictionality may be a feature of the literary work, it does not affect its 'pragmatic force' (A. Pettersson, 2010b: 184–200). Furthermore, regarding the question of truth conditions A. Pettersson claims that 'if the communicated purpose is [...] presentational and not informative, it is not important to the reader whether the communicated belief is correct or not' (1990: 117). Literature is not written 'with a view to communicating true statements', and the reader's literary experience may be seen as an 'indirect thinking about reality', which may 'prove cognitively or emotionally rewarding' (A. Pettersson 2000: 120, 36, 310).

Searle (1979) also discusses the fact that different literary genres set different expectations in relation to the world represented. While a fairy tale may admit the use of the supernatural

as this is consistent with its narrative conventions, a naturalistic novel cannot admit the same intrusion into the real dimension, since '[w]hat counts as coherence will be in part a function of the contract between author and reader about the horizontal convention' (Searle, 1979: 73). In the 'historical romance' *The Three Perils of Man* (1822), Ian Duncan (2007) observes that Hogg exhibits a fusion of the two dimensions, an 'early postmodern magic realism' which counters the post-Enlightenment 'progression of cultural stages from superstition to reason' (pp. 194, 195). The present paper will hence assume that by drawing consistently upon the supernatural without rationalising it, and that by presenting Cousin Mattie's dreams as fictional tools 'to ponder over' reality, Hogg failed to satisfy the mutual expectations of the literary contract with the post-Enlightenment readership of his time,<sup>4</sup> by appearing to flout Grice's two sub-maxims of quality — 'don't say what you believe to be false' and 'what you lack adequate evidence for' (1989: 27). It will be argued that some critics exploited Hogg's failure to observe such a contract in order to motivate their negative reaction, while simultaneously ignoring his 'implicatures', namely the disturbing realities that, through such use of the supernatural, Hogg was indirectly asking them 'to reflect on' (A. Pettersson, 2000: 46) .

### **3. The pragmatics of literature**

Having shown that the mutual expectations between author and reader prompted by literary genres are based on pragmatic conventions rather than semantic ones, and that pragmatic principles do not need the condition of semantic truth to function, this section will describe how the pragmatics of oral interaction may be applied to the dynamics of literary communication, negotiating the differences between the oral and the written mode, since the latter is not a conversation.

One of the major concerns about using pragmatics for literary analysis is that the act of writing and the reading experience are non-simultaneous processes and, as a result, an author cannot enjoy immediate feedback from the reader as in a real conversation (Sell, 2000). There are different ‘distances’ that a critic needs to take into account when applying pragmaticist principles to the analysis of a literary work: firstly, the historical distance between reader and author when dealing with authors of previous periods (Sell, 2000). As it will be shown in the following analysis, Hogg’s writing was influenced by important cultural aspects, such as the bourgeois literary discourse of early-nineteenth-century Britain and the oral tradition of Borders Scotland. Hogg’s tale also mirrors social aspects such as the religious discourse of the Calvinist Kirk and the contemporary emerging discourses of empire which affected the life of the inhabitants of rural Scotland at his time of writing, and whose anxieties Hogg voiced in ‘Cousin Mattie’. A literary-pragmaticist analysis should reduce the historical distance between Hogg and a twenty-first century reader, providing a critical discussion about his socio-cultural background and exposing how the latter may have influenced his choices at the level of cultural tropes, character construction and plot development, and how Hogg himself may then have tried to ‘co-adapt’ (Sell, 2000) his own individuality to such conventions. In this way, a modern reader will be able to achieve a more precise feeling of how a reader contemporary to Hogg may have interpreted Hogg’s tale. By highlighting the linguistic and communicative features of Hogg’s tale, such cultural mediation might also shed new light on Hogg’s literary talent and hence establish his position among the Romantic writers.

To this purpose, Grice’s set of maxims may still be productive for the literary-pragmaticist scholar. The philosopher of language Paul Grice (1989), by devising a set of ‘maxims’ for communication, argues that their intentional ‘flouting’ on the part of the speaker is meant to convey an indirect meaning, which he calls ‘implicature’. The latter is not so much conveyed

by what the speaker literally states as by what could have been said but is ultimately suppressed, relying on shared knowledge with the hearer to convey an implied message. According to Grice, communication is constrained by expectations of quantity (make your contribution sufficient); of quality (make your contribution true); of relation (be relevant to the topic under discussion); and of manner (avoid ambiguity, obscurity of expression, and be orderly). The paradox is that Grice's maxims are continuously flouted in conversation, in order to generate indirect meanings, and even more in literary communication. Though Grice's theory was conceived for analysis of oral exchanges, recent studies have shown how potentially productive it might be for literary analysis as well (Mey, 2000, 2009; Sell, 2000). Previous applications of pragmatics to literature have been mostly concerned with speech-act theory which, having being devised for oral conversation, 'lacks concepts adequate for dealing with the distinctive character of literary language', an aspect that may have limited the real potential of literary pragmatics and contributed to its discrediting (A. Pettersson, 1990: 19, 22).

Roger Sell (2000) claims that Grice's Cooperative Principle might be very productive for 'a historical yet non-historicist literary pragmatics', since an author, too, might flout a maxim 'for some special and striking effect' (Sell, 2000: 52). Sell adds that readers, though patient with a writer flouting the maxim of quality, 'when it comes to flouting the maxims of quantity, relevance and manner, may well dislike being steamrolled by authors they experience as impolite' (2000: 59). In Hogg's case, the flouting also of the maxim of quality was perceived as impolite by his contemporary readers because it disappointed their expectations of post-Enlightenment literary conventions, according to which the use of the supernatural in literary discourse had to be rationalised.

#### 4. The magic realism of 'Cousin Mattie'

In Hogg's early nineteenth-century Scotland, Edinburgh was a centre of sophisticated culture, reflecting the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment and the influence of eighteenth-century empiricists such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. These figures had established 'absolute standards of taste', which mirrored 'elitist' attitudes towards the autodidacts and would greatly influence the subsequent early-nineteenth-century Scottish *literati*'s opinion of Hogg, who—being a 'peasant poet'—would be regarded only 'on their own terms' (Bold, 2007: 19). Hogg's writing was accepted when in the form of more rural genres such as ballads and songs, as this was in line with the Romantic figures of the 'rustic peasant-poet' and the 'bard'. Hogg's image as the Ettrick Shepherd, however, would later become a problem for his literary career, as it would struggle with 'a historiography which at once valorized the poet as voice of a primordial stage of society close to nature and depreciated him as an uncouth relic doomed to extinction by the logic of economic and cultural improvement' (Duncan, 2007: 149). The same Edinburgh *literati* would have problems with encouraging Hogg's attempts at dealing with more urban and sophisticated literary genres, such as the historical novel, the drama, and the narrative poem.

In addition, Hogg's writing style was characterized by an imaginative power fuelled by the traditional ballads and supernatural tales from the Scottish Borders, which he had inherited by his mother, a popular bearer of Ettrick's oral tradition. Concerning works such as the narrative poem *Mador of the Moor* (1816), contemporary reviewers critiqued Hogg's conflation of supernatural and natural, claiming that his 'wavering between one and the other gives the [p]oem a character of inconsistency, which, for the respect we entertain for the talents of Mr H—, we are sorry to see' (*Champion*, June 9 1816: 182). Likewise, the following year Hogg's attempt at the theatre with the publication of *Dramatic Tales* (1817) was judged as 'a poor school-boy's performance, —a coarse and unenlightened *commixture*

of Allan Ramsay, Robert Burns, and Walter Scott, into an irregular fairy tale, dramatized and *colloquized* for the occasion' (*Monthly Review*, Feb. 1819: 183, emphases in the original); Hogg was hence apparently regarded as a naïve, childish writer, and his lack of education was considered to be the cause of such inconsistencies. Yet, revealingly, twentieth-century studies of Hogg's creative process have shown that 'his ghosts, brownies, visions and dreams always carry a symbolic and thematic significance, whatever their real status in the real world' (Groves, 1988: 93). Hogg's use of the supernatural had its own 'implicatures' as, in some cases, it was meant to convey a critique of contemporary social issues. The fairies' abduction of illegitimate unchristened children in *Mador* was a veiled critique of the Scottish Kirk's stigmatization of children born out of wedlock; while, more generally, the supernatural reflected Hogg's unwillingness to comply with contemporary appropriations of tradition as they tended to diminish the value of oral culture.

The dreams in Hogg's tale, where Sandy and Mattie become lovers and conceive a child out of wedlock, foretell the negative consequences of their transgression, an event which will lead to the death of both mother and baby. In Hogg's biography, Gillian Hughes argues that 'Cousin Mattie' may be mirroring a personal 'hidden episode in Hogg's own life': John Wilson, one of Hogg's literary friends and well established in Edinburgh literary circles, claimed that Hogg's 'usual dress' included 'a brooch in his unfrilled shirt, adorned with the hair of a Tenant Lass in Ettrick Forest who died in a certain condition in the 89' (2007: 173).<sup>5</sup> The real cause of Mattie's death, however, is never disclosed by the narrative voice. After the dialogue of an old married couple near Mattie's tomb, who reveal that she was buried with her child, the reader is left with a double line of asterisks and no further explanation. Hogg ends his tale with a 'graphological deviation', through which he appears to be 'flouting' Grice's 'maxims of manner' and 'quantity', showing a reluctance to provide further

information, possibly to have his reader reflect on the harsh, ‘unaccountable’ reality of rural Scotland.

The ‘implicatures’ that Hogg may have meant to convey may be clarified by providing some background on his historical and social contexts as they are mirrored in the text, hopefully achieving a closer idea of what the readers of Hogg’s time may have inferred. Hogg left them to decide for themselves whether Mattie died giving birth or whether she was killed by Sandy out of fear, as the husband of the old couple near Mattie’s tomb seems to imply: ‘What was the corpse like?’, he asks, ‘Was’t a’ fair, an’ bonny, an’ nae blueness nor demmish (damage) to be seen?’ (p. 441).

Mattie may also have killed both herself and the child, in order to avoid public repentance as it would have been required by the Scottish Kirk. Henry Graham (1906) offers a vivid description of this public humiliation, observing that ‘offenders stood “at the pillory”—a raised platform or a stool in front of the pulpit, clad in a cloak of sackcloth [...] to be admonished by the minister until he was satisfied of their penitence’ (p. 321). These events were a source of great pleasure and spiritual pride for some members of the congregation, who smiled and smirked at their ‘neighbours in disgrace’ (Graham, 1906: 322). Hogg himself, like Robert Burns, had to appear ‘with a red face on the Stool of Repentance’, as he fathered two daughters out of wedlock (*Letters I*, p. 314; Hughes 2000; 2007).

Though it has been argued (Hughes, 2000) that the lower classes were more tolerant of unwed motherhood and illegitimate children than the gentry, further research (Symonds, 1997) shows that among the peasant women, too, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy represented a wasted economic value, a shame that needed to be hidden, no matter whether its consequences could lead to the death of both mother and child. They were not the carrier of economic alliances like women of the upper class, whose chastity represented a higher financial value, as ‘property could be redistributed by their marriages’ (Mitchison and

Leneman, 1998: 81). However, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy among the lower classes could signify the loss of their servant position, an important aspect for their survival, particularly at a social level where marriage was not an opportunity open to all.

Hogg appears to be exploiting Mattie's 'unaccountable' dreams to foretell a social transgression that will carry negative consequences for the eponymous protagonist. In her first dream when aged seven, Mattie is offered a rose by a lady, probably her dead mother, who warns her never to separate from it or she will die in a fortnight. In the same dream, Sandy craves for the rose and Mattie gives it to him. The lady then tells Mattie that Sandy will be her murderer. Seven years later, Mattie dreams her dead aunt who warns her to be aware of Sandy as he will cause her death in seven days. Yet, in Hogg's tale, dreams have their own temporal logic and foretell Mattie's death at the age of twenty-one, fourteen years after her first vision.

At the level of plot construction and dialogues between characters, the supernatural belief in foretelling dreams conveys a strong symbolism which, as argued by Penny Fielding, 'can be seen to dramatise the control of female sexuality by women themselves' as '[b]oth the women who appear in Mattie's dreams warn her against sexual transgression and symbolise it as a form of death' (2006: 11). Such visions, however, also serve a narratological purpose, through which Hogg increases the effects of suspense on the reader regarding the risks of Mattie's later condition, and through which Hogg constructs a plot that, as argued by Ian Duncan, 'is remarkable for the interruptions that delay fulfilment' (2004: 583), in no way reflecting a naïve use of the supernatural.

At the level of literary communication between the authorial voice and the bourgeois readership of his time, on the one hand Hogg appears to comply with contemporary discourses of women's sensibility and Romantic re-evaluations of John Locke's developmental theory of childhood from innocence to experience—according to which a

child's mind was a *tabula rasa* to be written—only to clash with both discourses by suggesting the far more disturbing reality of infanticide and child death, which at Hogg's time was well represented in the ballad tradition. The latter offered a realistic depiction of the hardships to which a child was exposed since its birth: not necessarily its killing, but also abortion, abandonment, stillbirth or accidental neonatal death (Atkinson, 1992: 375). Such harsh reality, however, struggled to cohere with the dominant ideology of bourgeois sensibility in contemporary elite culture, which promoted the figure of a delicate and motherly domestic heroine—the supporter of British moral values, absolutely incapable of killing her child—and according to which childhood represented a unique state of happiness and purity, of spontaneity and illusion from which the adult could learn.

A stylistic analysis of the three main characters' construction reveals that, at first glance, Hogg appears to be drawing upon the dominant discourses of his time and complying with their ideology. Flora, Sandy's elder sister and Mattie's cousin, who in Hogg's tale plays the role of 'guardian angel', is presented by the narrator as follows:

*How I do love a little girl about that age! There is nothing in nature so fascinating, so lovely, so innocent; and at the same time, so full of gayety and playfulness. The tender and delicate affections, to which their natures are moulded, are then beginning unconsciously to form; [...t]heir hearts are like softened wax, and the impressions then made on them remain forever. Such beings approach nigh to the list where angels stand, and are, in fact, the connecting link that joins us with the inhabitants of a better world. How I do love a well-educated little girl of twelve or thirteen years of age.*

At such an age was Flora Finagle, with a heart moulded to every tender impression, and a memory so retentive, that whatever affected or interested her was engraven there never to be cancelled. (p. 433, emphases mine)

At the level of communication between narrator and implied reader, in this passage Hogg complies with the contemporary vogue for tradition-gathering, showing a narrative voice that shifts from first-person, as if it were an 'internal informer', to third-person, as if it were an 'external observer' playing the role of ethnographic collector of rural stories among the Scottish Borders, as observed by Penny Fielding (2006: 7). Hogg then draws upon the

Romantic discourse of sensibility in the adjectival phrases that characterise Flora as ‘so lovely’ and ‘so innocent’. The parallelism between the initial and final sentence of the first paragraph depicts a ‘voyeuristic’ narrator—as Fielding (2006) defines him—who claims: ‘How I do love a little girl about that age!’, then shifting into a third-person voice in the last part of the extract, where the narrator assumes a more distant, objective point of view. This reinforces the reliability of Flora’s depiction, whose ‘heart’ is described through the Lockean discourse of children’s stadial development from innocence to experience, which Hogg exploits to increase the overwhelming effects that Mattie’s dream will soon have upon Flora’s ‘retentive memory’ in the tale.

Cousin Mattie, on the other hand, is introduced through her own words when telling her dream to Sandy—while overheard by Flora. Though only seven, Mattie is described by the narrator as ‘far beyond her years in acuteness’ (p. 437), endowed with articulate speech, and as having been raised in accordance with the principles of bourgeois delicacy as ‘[h]er mother was an accomplished English lady, though only the daughter of a poor curate, and she had bred her only child with every possible attention. She could read, she could sing, and play some airs on the spinnet; and was altogether a most interesting nymph’ (p. 437). Through such a narrative voice Hogg seems to parody the typical depiction of the bourgeois heroine in contemporary sentimental novels, an aspect that, as it will be shown later, serves a critical purpose.

Though only a year younger than Mattie, Sandy’s language, on the contrary, is still the inarticulate speech of a child. After hearing Mattie’s prophetic dream, where he supposedly will kill her in a fortnight, Sandy recounts his chivalrous fantasies about being a knight who fights against Robin Hood, making the promise that, once adult, he will marry and protect Mattie, and claiming that: ‘[w]hen Sandy gows byawman, an’ gets a gyand house, him be vely good till cousin, an’ feed hel wi’ gingebead, an’ yean, an’ tyankil, an’ take hel in him’s

bosy yis way' (p. 434). Through the long passages of Sandy's unintelligible speech, Hogg flouts the maxims of quantity and manner. The effort required of the reader to understand them implicitly contributes to conveying Sandy's immaturity and alienation from the real world. His estrangement is then reinforced at the level of characters' dialogues as, when trying to report Mattie's dream to his mother, Sandy 'made such a blundering story of it, that it proved altogether incoherent, and his mother took no further notice of it' (p. 435), through which Hogg anticipates to the reader Sandy's inability to protect Mattie and behave responsibly later in the tale.

The series of asterisks at the end leaves several unanswered questions. What does happen to Mattie and Sandy? Why do they not marry? Why does Sandy not attend Mattie's funeral? How does Mattie really die? Giving birth? Does she kill both her child and herself? Are both mother and child killed by Sandy? Why does Sandy flee away? Hogg provides no answer.

The Scottish Kirk would have required public penance of both Mattie and Sandy. Adhering to Calvinist dogma, the Kirk presented itself as 'the body of the elect [...] chosen by God', and a Scottish congregation's observance of the strictest discipline confirmed its predestination among this privileged group (Mitchison and Leneman, 1989: 17). After public repentance before the congregation for three Sundays, Mattie and Sandy would have been allowed to marry, since their relation would not have been considered incestuous. On the other hand, if Sandy did not accept responsibility and fled, leaving Mattie to deal with the matter alone, and if the latter did not mention Sandy's name to the Kirk session, she would have been considered an adulteress, having probably sinned with a married man whom she may be protecting. Mattie would hence have had to face the congregation for twenty-six Sundays (Devine, 2006: 88), no easy matter for a young girl. Is this what happens to Cousin Mattie in Hogg's tale? Does she kill herself and her child to avoid public shame? Historically, this kind of things did happen as the lawyer Hugo Arnot reminds us in his *Collection of*

*Criminal Trials in Scotland* (1785), where he states that four women condemned to death penalty for child-murder admitted that dread of public repentance had been ‘the cause of their crime’ (p. 350).

The tragic conclusion of Hogg’s tale suggests a disturbing oral tradition prevalent in nineteenth-century Scotland: the ballads of infanticide. By treating a violent reality so bluntly, this tradition clashed with the discourse of contemporary bourgeois literature, where women were depicted as the vessels of British moral values. Deborah Symonds observes that ‘doctors and novelists [...] struggled with the prospect of infanticide and concluded that women could not kill their infant’ (1997: 3); while Ann Rowland (2004) claims that the ‘tension between the revival’s idealization of childhood and ballad scenarios of violence against children [...] was partly managed by the emptying out of the ballads’ content in order to present their cultural form as a bearer of national tradition’ (cited in Fielding 2006, p. 12).

According to one theory of their function (Atkinson, 1992), ballads were not prescriptive of women’s propriety but had rather a healing purpose. The story depicted in ‘The Cruel Mother’, for instance, provided a detailed, harsh description of the killing moment as shown in the following extract,

She’s taen out her little penknife  
And twinn’d the sweet babe o’ its life.

She’s howket a grave by the light o’ the moon (howket = dug out)  
And there she’s buried her sweet babe in.

As she was going to the church  
She saw a sweet babe in the porch.

O sweet babe and thou were mine  
I wad cleed thee in the silk so fine.

O mother dear, when I was thine,  
You didna prove to me sae kind.<sup>6</sup>

This detailed description provides a real experience of the critical moment, offering a catharsis of disturbing emotions, associated with a maternity gone wrong, not necessarily

child-murder but also miscarriage, stillbirth or accidental death during delivery, particularly when a pregnancy would be hidden and a mother would give birth alone (Atkinson, 1992: 375); and this is what Hogg may obliquely be suggesting to have happened to Cousin Mattie.

In Hogg's story, no one has been informed about Mattie's pregnancy, including Flora, who at the time of the sad episode lives far away, raising her own family. At Mattie's funeral, when Flora's husband investigates the causes of her death, Flora's father is vague, providing 'an equivocal answer, [...] to avoid entering into any explanation' (p. 440); while upon 'inquiry[ing] at others, [...] all testified their ignorance of the matter' (p. 440). The 'unaccountable' aspects of this passage and the secrecy about Mattie's condition may also imply an indirect critique of the clash between the legal discourse and the landlords' arbitrary power in Hogg's time. According to the Scottish Act Anent (about) Child Murder (1690-1809) 'any woman who concealed a pregnancy, called for no help at birth, and whose child was dead or missing was to be found guilty and hanged' (Symonds, 1997: 5).<sup>7</sup> In a peasant society where the economy was based on family unity, with all members contributing to the farm's management, the loss of a single individual, particularly someone like Mattie who apparently had become the backbone of such unity since Flora left, could signify the loss of reliability before the landlord, who might give the farm to another family and render Mattie's kins completely destitute.<sup>8</sup>

Last but not least, at the level of discourses of empire, Hogg portrays the failed performance of a cross-national marriage between the two protagonists: Mattie, who is of English origin, and Sandy, who is Scottish. At Hogg's time, this political union of Britain was promoted in the national tale, originating among Irish women writers Maria Edgeworth, with *Belinda* (1801) and *Leonora* (1806), and Sydney Owenson, with *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Ina Ferris (2002) claims that its happy end, by portraying a cross-national marriage between the main characters, became an allegory for depicting political reconciliation

between the British nations; it promoted, however, an idyllic image of empire which blocked and invalidated other realities (Ferris, 2002: 47). The protagonists of the national tale—and of its re-appropriation by Walter Scott, the historical novel—were members of the upper-middle classes of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands, the ones who really benefited from the imperial economy at the expense of the lower classes, whom Hogg voices in ‘Cousin Mattie’. The reality of marriage in rural Scotland was very different, and the ballad tradition mirrored the ‘hardship of courtship and the difficulties of marriage’ among members of the peasant class, who could marry late in their twenties and only if they achieved the necessary economic independence (Symonds, 1997: 3). Some might never marry, depending upon the generosity of a master for their entire life.

These are all possible ‘implicatures’ at which Hogg may have hinted in ‘Cousin Mattie’: disturbing issues which he never raises directly, but rather suggests through a graphological deviation, leaving the readers of his time to infer for themselves the social problems that he may have been addressing. Contemporary reviewers condemned the ‘strings of tales about dreams and apparitions, all of which, [...] are not worth reading, and were not worth writing’ (*British Critic*, 1820: 624). Gold’s *London Magazine* attacked the same series of tales ‘with decided reprobation’ (1820: 639) for its use of the supernatural without any rational explanation and published, paradoxically, the tale of ‘Cousin Mattie’ in its entirety as an example ‘of the principles which the author wishes to convey’ (p. 633), and which the readers were advised not to follow. Indeed, this anonymous reviewer appears as having blamed Hogg’s tale for a far more shallow reason and as not having inferred—or, perhaps he pretended not to—the more disturbing issues that Hogg may have been implicating.

## 5. Conclusion

Though it will never be possible to know Hogg's real intentions—and, perhaps, they were unknown even to him—a literary pragmaticist analysis allows for speculation about a wider range of possible interpretations that Hogg may have wished to trigger in the readers of his time. They should not be considered as the correct answer to the implicatures suggested by the asterisks at the end. Instead, each should be viewed as possible in its own right since giving primacy to one would exclude the options offered by the others, and diminish the potential of Hogg's tale's critical value.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> James Hogg, 2004 [1820] 'Cousin Mattie'. In Ian Duncan (Ed.) *Winter Evening Tales* by James Hogg. (The Stirling / South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 433-441. Quotations from Hogg's tale will be from this edition, and page references given within parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> At the PALA 2012 Conference in Malta, Siobhan Chapman presented a paper on Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) drawing on Horn's 'quantity implicature to offer an analysis of the implicit communication' of characters attitudes towards 'The Troubles' that led to Irish Independence', at which time the novel is set; drawing likewise on Horn's 'quantity implicature', Dan McIntyre presented a paper on the television series *The Wire* to develop the analysis of a scene, 'where dramatic dialogue is so sparse that a text-based analysis alone would be virtually useless' to infer pragmatic meaning (from PALA 2012, *Language, Narrative and the New Media* 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> July 2012, University of Malta, Book of Abstracts).

<sup>3</sup> Horn's two principles are mostly concerned with 'conveying information in the most economical way'. For a detailed and critical discussion of Horn's 'quantity implicature' see Siobhan Chapman's *Pragmatics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 90-91.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of post-Enlightenment's expectations about fiction see Ian Duncan's 'The Rise of Fiction', in *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), pp. 116-144.

<sup>5</sup> See also Norah Parr (1980) *James Hogg at Home: Being the Domestic Life and Letters of the Ettrick Shepherd*. Dollar: Douglas S. Mack, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Cruel Mother', No. 20. In James Johnson (Ed.) *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803).

<sup>7</sup> The same issue is also at the heart of Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818).

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<sup>8</sup> See Christopher Smout (1980) 'Aspects of Sexual Behaviour in Nineteenth-Century Scotland'. In Peter Laslett, Karla Oostervan and Richard Smith (Eds.) *Bastardy and its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Non-Conformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North-America, Jamaica, and Japan*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, pp. 192-216, (p. 214).

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