

LITERATURE ASSESSMENT COVER SHEET 2020–21

Student Number	09014414
Module Title and Code	(UQ310827): Metafiction: Self-referential texts
Assessment No. and Description	Assessment 2 – Essay 2
Essay Question/Title/No.	To what extent can Calvino's <i>If on a winter's night a traveler</i> be read as a commentary on the processes of writing and reading literary fiction?
Word Count (excluding footnotes and bibliography)	3231
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It may seem a peculiar thing to talk about in a novel - that being reading and writing, as normally the processes of the author's writing and our own reading are taken for granted in lieu of analysing a work of literature from a particular angle. However, when an author like Italo Calvino chooses not only to question his own literary processes but to craft a novel out of the idea then the questions seem to spring forth. In writing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Calvino constructed a literary work which acted as a commentary on the processes of reading and writing literary fiction and tackled it from a multitude of angles. As the novel is 'about the pleasures and frustrations of reading; it is, therefore, a text about texts' – as such, it should come as no surprise that Calvino not only focussed on the innocent preconceptions of the reader when they approach literary fiction, but also spoke of the power held by writers in such scenarios.¹ Calvino also approached, with his novel, the flow of literary power between reader and writer – and how the reader, in most cases perceived as the more submissive of the two, held a great deal of potential in the literary process. Finally, Calvino also spoke from a particular place in time – as he published the novel in 1980, the formative years of the novel took place within a boom of academic literary criticism in the 1970s and as such there is a great deal of commentary on the academic criticism of literary fiction.

Calvino's first words to you, as the reader, are that of guidance – a self-aware introduction to his world of fiction, where he attempts to calm any nerves a reader may have upon the first reading of his novel; 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room'.² Inge Fink, writing for 'Twentieth Century Literature' in 1991, focusses on the calming atmosphere Calvino creates for the reader, which aide him in persuading the reader to set aside any doubts as to the closeness of the relationship between writer and reader; 'because the author introduces himself with the name on the book cover, we never doubt that the voice speaking to us through the text is that of the "real" Calvino, talking to us, the "real" reader'.³ This informal, introductory discourse between the audience and Calvino reinforce perceived preconceptions regarding the novel, where the reader feels comfortable in giving up any real autonomy and put their trust in the writer. Calvino himself, in a 1985 interview with Gregory L. Lucente, detailed the perceived familiarity and 'safety' of a novel that a reader most likely would have leant on in their expectations for *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* – bolstering the idea that 'the fact of *writing* implies an order'.⁴ This idea is reinforced in Calvino's opening chapter, where he almost dictates to the reader as to how they should be feeling; 'It's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You're the sort of

¹ Frosh, Stephen, 'Postmodern Narratives: Or Muddles in the Mind', *Multiple Voices: Narrative in Systemic Family Psychotherapy*, Ed. Papadopoulos, Renos K., John Byng-Hall (London : Routledge : 1997), p.88

² Calvino, Italo, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, trans. William Weaver (London : Vintage : 1998), p.03

³ Fink, Inge, 'The Power behind the Pronoun: Narrative Games in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 37(01) (Spring 1991), p.95

⁴ Lucente, Gregory L., 'An Interview with Italo Calvino', *Contemporary Literature* 26(03) (Autumn 1985), p.253

person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from books, from people, from journeys, from events, from what tomorrow has in store. But not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst'.⁵

This comfortability of structure and plot continues into the novel-proper – or, at least what the audience perceive the novel-proper to be – where Calvino maintains the façade of the by-the-book novel by sending our doe-eyed reader and venturing out into the realm of the plot. As Marilyn Orr bolsters in 'Beginning in the Middle: The Story of Reading in Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*'; 'Calvino sends the fictional Reader and the actual reader on parallel quests and encourage their expectations for a traditional narrative and romance'.⁶ The reader's interaction with the novel is furthered as our 'protagonist' is purposefully left as a blank slate for the reader to transplant themselves onto – as Calvino himself divulges in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*; 'this book has so far been careful to leave open to the Reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the Reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name, which would automatically have made him the equivalent of a Third Person, of a character.'⁷ The innocent preconception of the reader that the novel exists solely for their entertainment is bolstered due to the fact that it is revealed that the 'protagonist' is metafictionally aware that the plot is continuing on a set route and that the world outside of his immediate importance is of no real consequence; 'Where would I go out to? The city outside there has no name yet, we don't know if it will remain outside the novel or whether the whole story will be contained within its inky blackness'.⁸

This pretence – of the plot remaining at a comfortable, expected distance - is eked out by Calvino, all the while as he is strengthening the audience's comfortability in the novel. The audience then finds itself invested in the novel – in the 'detective' plot and in the characters, who have now been gifted names and personalities by Calvino. This comfortability is then used against the reader, as Calvino treacherously subverts the reader's trust in the writer; 'the "real" reader watches how the author plays with his characters, establishing his power by assigning names and pronouns. Although it might seem as if we are watching the game from a safe place outside the discourse, we are nevertheless the ones for whom it is intended: through identification with the characters and our (erotic) desire to discover the mystery we deliver ourselves into the hands of the author, who wins the game by drawing us into the narrative almost against our will'.⁹ This runs parallel with the general theme of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* – that the novel is written as a satirical challenging of the preconceptions of the writers and

⁵ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.04

⁶ Orr, Marilyn, 'Beginning in the Middle: The Story of Reading in Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 21(02) (Spring 1985), p.210

⁷ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.141

⁸ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.14

⁹ Fink, *Twentieth Century Literature*, pp.94-95

readers of fiction. As reiterated by Madeline Sorapure, that ‘Calvino’s book exists to expose faulty assumptions about both authorship and, perhaps more importantly, about readership’.¹⁰ We then are able to see the seemingly conventional, familiar novel as a metafictional nightmare – the reader then finds themselves becoming paranoid over the validity of anything we read in the novel. As is detailed in the novel itself; ‘you find yourself prisoner of a system in which every aspect of life is counterfeit, a fake’.¹¹ Calvino talks of the unorthodox, non-linearity of literary fiction as he details it as; ‘a space which the reader must enter, wander round, maybe lose his way in, and the eventually find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own’.¹² As *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* is referenced by Michael Wood in his article ‘A Romance of the Reader’, as ‘a book about broken narrative promises’.¹³ This is reinforced by the novel itself, as our ‘protagonist’ proclaims that ‘the minute you think you’re on the right track, you promptly find yourself blocked by a switch: in your reading, in the search for the lost book, in the identification of Ludmilla’s tastes’.¹⁴ This idea, of the ‘broken narrative promise’ begins as our Reader finds his copy of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* to be spliced together, due to a printing malfunction, with another text; ‘[you] feel a certain dismay; just when you were beginning to grow truly interested [...] what develops? Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read!’¹⁵ This disruption of the literary status quo, of a consistent narrative, sends the Reader into violent rage; ‘You fling the book on the floor, you would hurl it out of the window, even out of the closed window, through the slats of the Venetian blinds; let them shred its incongruous quires, let sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes gush forth, beyond recomposition into discourse’.¹⁶ Fink details this disruption of the narrative, as she reinforces the idea put forth earlier by Madeline Sorapure, that; ‘there is a fundamental unreliability at the heart of the text [...] that we are dealing her with a playful text, a narrative carnival designed to mock the existing order’.¹⁷ This ‘existing order’ of literary fiction – of the reader acting a submissive follower of the writer, as they are guided through a carefully architected literary experience – is further disrupted as the words themselves begin to lose their power. While they could, before, be trusted to uphold their meaning and powers of description we find that ‘Language, instead of illuminating things, dissolves the clear-cut predictions or structural deductions’.¹⁸ This is referenced in the novel itself, as Calvino writes

¹⁰ Sorapure, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, p.705

¹¹ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.215

¹² Calvino, Italo, ‘Italo Calvino on “Invisible Cities”’, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 08 (Spring/Summer 1983), p.38

¹³ Wood, Michael, ‘A Romance of the Reader’, *New York Times Book Review* 86 (21/06/1981), p.25

¹⁴ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.92

¹⁵ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.25

¹⁶ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.26

¹⁷ Fink, *Twentieth Century Literature*, p.93

¹⁸ Bharvad, Dr. R.K., ‘The deconstruction of form as a postmodern way of narration in Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*’, *Research Review* 03(01) (January 2018), p.129

that ‘the lights of the station and the sentences you are reading seem to have the job of dissolving more than indicating the things that surface from a veil of darkness and fog’.¹⁹

As Inge Fink proclaimed earlier, Calvino constructed the opening pages of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as a way of ‘drawing us into the narrative’ however he bolsters this newfound position you find yourself in by including the reader in the process of writing the novel. As Sorapure details; ‘He invites his readers to play an active role in the construction of the novel and thus to assume some of the responsibilities traditionally belonging to the author’.²⁰ This transfer of power from writer to reader is one way in which Calvino comments on the role that the readers of fiction play in its creation. This ‘shift in power and authority traditionally assigned to the writer to the reader’ results in a commentary from Calvino of the power-structures of the literary world – that, while the writer would be assumed to hold the most power of the two, the reader is the one who actually holds most of the cards.²¹ His commentary runs parallel with the idea that a literary work doesn’t necessarily hold much literary weight if it’s not, in fact, been read – as Sambit Panigrahi bolsters; ‘The diminishing glory of the author, in Calvino’s paradigm, is accompanied by the increasing importance of the reader who provides meaning to the text by his act of “reading”’.²² This idea, of the process of writing literary fiction being beholden to the readers, is reinforced by our Reader, that; ‘if you think about it, reading is a necessarily individual act, far more than writing. If we assume that writing manages to go beyond the limitations of the author, it will continue to have a meaning only when it is read by a single person and passes through his mental circuits. Only the ability to be read by a given individual proves that what is written shares in the power of writing, a power that goes beyond the individual’.²³ Panigrahi iterates on this idea, detailing in ‘Notes on Contemporary Literature’ that; ‘With his act of “reading”, the reader becomes an active agent in the textual creation, displacing the author-god from his unchallenged position of the “creative genius” and making him a point through which the play of language precipitates into the text’.²⁴ This Calvinoean commentary on the literary creation process is directly shown in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, as a one Silas Flannery confesses to bracing his writing to fit with the desires of one of the ‘readers’ of the book – Ludmilla; ‘I do nothing but follow the reading of that

¹⁹ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.11

²⁰ Sorapure, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, p.703

²¹ Roka, Sanjay, ‘Reconciliation Between the Author and the Reader in Italo Calvino’s *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*’, *Master of Arts Thesis: Tribhuvan University: Central Department of English* (August 2017) [accessed: 10/05/2021]<<http://107.170.122.150:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1040/cover%20etc.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>, p.02

²² Panigrahi, Sambit, ‘Is Calvino Postmodern? Re-reading *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*’, *Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science and English Language* 3(15) (April-May 2016), p.3678

²³ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.176

²⁴ Panigrahi, Sambit, ‘Author, reader and text in Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*’, *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 41(04) (September 2011)

woman, seen from here, day by day, hour by hour. I read in her face what she desires to read, and I write it faithfully.’²⁵

With the diminishing of the role of the writer, due to Calvino’s commentary of the reader being the true literary voice of the partnership, it’s not too much of a surprise when it’s developed by Calvino into the literary idea of the ‘death of the author.’ Roland Barthes, father of the idea of the ‘death of the author’ – that being, that a work of literary fiction should be appreciated and understood within a vacuum, being unaltered by the personal attributes of its creator – stated that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’.²⁶ Marana, upon being ridiculed by allegations of fraud, introduces the Reader to Barthes’ idea; ‘What does the name of an author on the jacket matter? Let us move forward in thought to three thousand years from now. Who knows which books from our period will be saved, and who knows which authors’ names will be remembered? Some books will remain famous but will be considered anonymous works [...] other authors’ names will still be well known, but none of their works will survive [...] or perhaps all the surviving books will be attributed to a single, mysterious author’.²⁷ We can also see the idea of the ‘death of the author’ in action as we read Flannery’s diary, and he bemoans that; ‘I feel that what I am writing does not belong to me any more. I would like to vanish, to leave behind for that expectation lurking in their eyes the page stuck in the typewriter, or, at most, my fingers striking the keys’.²⁸

As we have already established, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* is a novel which pulls no punches with regard to commenting on the literary process and on the roles played by the writer and the reader in said process. However, his depreciation in the value of literary context and criticism doesn’t end with his presentation of the ‘death of the author’ – he also works hard to diminish the importance of academic literary criticism. This aspect is notable, as Sorapure notes; ‘the novel intentionally frustrates and eludes the totalizing grasp of traditional critical authority’.²⁹ Calvino’s commentary on this aspect is particularly personal however, as during the process of writing *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* in the 1970s he found himself amidst a boom of literary criticism. William Benzon, as he wrote in ‘Transition!: The 1970s in Literary Criticism’, details the literary context in which Calvino found himself in the years in which he was writing , *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*; ‘literary (and then cultural) criticism became a general way of exploring a broad range of issues, and doing philosophy in a broad synthetic sense. And it required a method in which one talked of literature in the same terms one used to talk about the world in general, whether those are the terms of secular or Christian humanism, Laconian

²⁵ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.127

²⁶ Barthes, Roland, ‘The Death of the Author’, *Image, Music, Text* (London : Fontana : 1977), p.148

²⁷ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.101

²⁸ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, p.171

²⁹ Sorapure, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, p.703

psychoanalysis, Marxist social theory, or any of the various critical approaches that arose'.³⁰ This 'synthetic sense' of literary criticism is referenced in the novel, as the Reader finds that – in a discussion of the book, 'Events, characters, settings, impressions are thrust aside, to make room for the general concepts. "The polymorphic-perverse sexuality..." "The laws of a market economy..." "The homologies of the signifying structures..." "Deviation and institutions..." "Castration..."'.³¹ The perceived ridiculousness of the situation is compounded as it comes to light that the novel as a whole is not even being analysed – only a minute section, as our 'protagonist' finds out; 'you try to gain possession of the novel. But it is not a book: it is one signature that has been torn out. Where is the rest? "Excuse me, I was looking for the other pages, the rest," you say. "The rest? ... Oh, there's enough material here to discuss here for a month. Aren't you satisfied?"³² However, in a moment of commentary regarding this process of reading literary fiction, he proclaims that he only wants to read the book as it is – as a work of literary art, without the pompous preconceptions and filters of literary criticism; "I didn't mean to discuss; I wanted to read..." you say.³³ While the particulars of individual literary theories may be behind us now, that is not to say that Calvino did not also wish to comment on other aspects of academia's relationship with reading literary fiction. As Mariolina Salvatori details in 'Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*: Writer's Authority, Reader's Autonomy'; 'the Lettrice's reading method [...] seems to be based on the technique of prereading or skimming – a technique that in this country is currently advocated in "How to Read" college textbooks'.³⁴ This bite-sized, surface-level process of reading is – as Salvatori detailed – referenced in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as Ludmilla and the Reader are engaging in romantic foreplay and Ludmilla's advances are detailed as; 'if [she was] skimming the index, and at some moments she consults it as if gripped by sudden on specific curiosities, then she lingers, questioning it [...] she is not reading you, single and whole as you are, but using you, using fragments of you detached from the context to construct for herself a ghostly partner'.³⁵

As a final act of commentary on the academic processes of reading literary fiction, Calvino has his two 'readers' – after having been overwhelmed by a tirade of, seemingly surface-level, literary criticism – take a moment to compose themselves and reflect on what they should want from a novel in that moment. As comes as no surprise, they seek literature within the bounds of the aforementioned 'death of the author' – where they can simply enjoy the narrative and writing of the book; making their allegiances known all too well. Speaking first, Ludmilla proclaims that 'The novel I would most like to

³⁰ Benzon, William, *Transition!: The 1970s in Literary Criticism* (January 2017) [accessed: 10/05/2021] <file:///C:/Users/euanj/Downloads/Transition_The_1970s_in_Literary_Critici.pdf> , p.12

³¹ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.91

³² Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.91

³³ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.91

³⁴ Salvatori, Mariolina, 'Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*: Writer's Authority, Reader's Autonomy', *Contemporary Literature* 27(02) (Summer 1986), p.198

³⁵ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, pp. 155-156

read at this moment [...] should have its driving forces only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you, simply allowing to observe its own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves...'³⁶ The Reader is in complete agreement with her, as is detailed; 'on this point you are in immediate agreement with her; putting behind your pages lacerated by intellectual analyses, you dream of rediscovering a condition of natural reading, innocent, primitive...'³⁷

In conclusion, while Italo Calvino's narrative in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* may have splintered and diverged from itself at times, Calvino's own commentary on the process of writing and reading literary fiction remained strong and consistent throughout. In the introductory section of the novel, Calvino commented on the innocent, trustworthy preconceptions of the average reader while also subverting that trust to showcase the power which is wielded by the writer and how much the reader relies on the writer to create an environment for them. Conversely, as we continued through the novel Calvino commented on the frailties of literary writing and the power held by the reader as writing – as we established – could not exist in a real sense without the reader. This is compounded by the commentary on the literary idea of the 'death of the author', which bolsters the strength of the reader all the more. Calvino's commentary on the processes of reading literary fiction is concluded as he explores the disconnect of academic literary criticism and the dwindling examples of an innocent, 'pure' reading experience.

WORD COUNT: 3231

³⁶ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.92

³⁷ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p.92

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