

SEMINO'S MIND STYLE IN LYNDA MULLALY HUNT'S *FISH IN A TREE*

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Abstract: The paper tackles a linguistic approach to Lynda Mullaly Hunt's Fish in a Tree to underline how the readers can better interpret and perceive the protagonist's disorder, called Dyslexia. This book offers to the reader considerable shreds of evidence of the "mind style" (Semino,2014: 282) of a middle-school student, Ally, who has cognitive potential despite the fact that she is suffering from dyslexia and which turns her into a trouble making child who finally succeeds to surpass her difficulties.

Keywords: Hunt, dyslexia, "mind style," communicational behaviour patterns and linguistic structures.

Fish in a Tree was published in 2015 in New York, being one of Lynda Mullaly Hunt's best selling novels. The book depicts Ally, a middle-school student who has dyslexia and who is a trouble making child, distracting the other colleagues when she is uged to read something and when refuses to ask for help. Due to this kind of disability, she is not able to read and is embarrassed, "always running from" (Hunt,2017: 191), instead of calling for help and pity. Ally has cognitive potential even if she considers that she is worthless: "I'll grow up to be a nobody" (Hunt: 183).

Fish in a Tree is narrated by a sixth-grade girl, Ally Nickerson, who has changed several schools, because of her father who is enrolled in millitary services, and who narrates her day-by-day life exeprience as a dyslexic child in a normal school.

While reading this book, we come across considerable shreds of evidence of "mind style" (Semino,2014: 282) that reveal Ally's unusual mental and emotional profile. She sees things unaccessible to the others, being a good reader of nonverbal communication acts, despite her disorder. All the linguistic aspects encountered in the novel help the reader have a better perception of how Ally's mind works, due to her deficiency. The author tackles the protagonist's self and her academic mind style revealing how she develops her abilities to help her and the others, in her unique manner.

Ally Nickerson is the narrator of *Fish in a Tree* and, during her cognitive development, she offers genuine descriptions of herself. However, Ally's depiction, in the first chapter of the novel, starts with, what Culpeper called "other presentation" (qtd. in Semino: 282). Since the beginning of the novel, we can see the antagonist character, Shay, who depicts Ally as follows: "She's such a freak. ... I fold my arms and stare up at her" (Hunt,2017: 4).

Her teacher Mrs. Hall urges her to solve the task of writing something by herself. She needs to "describe herself," which is a kind of introduction for the new teacher, Mr. Daniels, that will replace Mrs. Hall, who is going to have a baby: "Mrs Hall sighs...I am

only asking for one page describing yourself,” followed by Ally’s retort: “I can’t think of anything worse than having to describe myself” (2).

When she is urged to read, she complains, saying that: “I always get headaches from looking at the brightness of dark letters on white pages for too long” (3). Ally allows us to find out that she has reading and writing problems, and that she is aware of them.

Ally enables us to penetrate her mind, when she is depicted as creating, for all unexpected and unpleasant situations, “mind movies”: “I watch a mind movie....My mind does this all the time-shows me these movies that seem so real that they carry me away inside of them. They are a relief from my real life” (4). These presentations of a “mind movie” are some sort of “implicit cues” (Semino,2007: 283), which show us the workings of Ally’s mind. It is a term used by Semino in the cognitive research on Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident* and, by extension, it represents a methodological lens for our depicting how Ally uses language in two ways, as narrator and as protagonist. Through the “mind movies,” Ally evades from reality, runs away from anxiety, retreating herself into the imaginary stories, most of them being cartoons and exaggerated movies about the impossible desires of her life style.

During the novel, Ally uses many juggleries, sarcastic jokes, and a sketchbook in which she doodles, only for avoiding reading and writing. She calls that sketchbook : “Sketchbook of Impossible Things” (11). In the “Sketchbook of Impossible Things” she draws scenes, mind movies, all reflecting her daily struggles. All those things that will never happen in Ally’s real life are drawn in her “Sketchbook of Impossible Things” for avoiding classwork, inability to read, isolation and her poor school performance. This instrument represents a getaway from her problems and a secure “helper” when she can not read. Her effort for learning how to read and the acquisition of confidence make her to use Sketchbook less and less. This Sketchbook represents a symbol of Ally’s previous life before meeting her teacher, Mr. Daniels, who helps her with dyslexia. When she becomes able to learn, she has to do more important things: “As I draw, I think about my sketchbook and how I love it but don't draw in it as much anymore. It used to be the only thing that made me happy. Now I have other things, too” (228).

Similarly, when she must write, she pretends to do that, repeating the word “Why?” on an entire page. The question “Why?” has an essential role in depicting human behaviour. It indicates a state of curiosity or decision, using cognitive or external resources. It implies the capacity to identify or construct a problematic state. It also implies the identification of solutions and assumes the triggering of solving an action. “I write with one hand and shield my paper with the other. I know I better keep the pencil moving, so I write the word ”Why?” over and over from the top of the page to the very bottom. One, because I know how to spell it right and two, because I’m hoping someone will finally give me an answer” (5).

Ally describes her inability to write and the difficulty of forming letters and of writing some lines on paper: “I squint a bit, hoping the lights will hurt my head less. And then I try to hold my pencil the way I’m supposed to instead of the weird way my hand wants to” (5).

Because of her inappropriate behaviour, she is urged by her teacher to go to the principal's office. While staying in the office she looks out of the window, which offers to the readers the opportunity to have an imaginary sight of what is outside the office. When she is in the principal's office she refuses to talk and remains quiet. She is used to causing problems and for her, a life without negative consequences is like the rain avoiding the sky. "I think about how me avoiding consequences would be like the rain avoiding the sky" (14). Also, when she stays in the principal's office, she sees a wall poster which brings about her headaches as concerns reading it. She depicts it in the following passage: "The letters on the poster look like black beetles marching across the wall. I could probably figure most of them out, but I'd need a lot of time. And when I'm nervous, forget it. My brain goes blank like an Etch A Sketch turned upside down and shaken. Gray and empty" (13-14).

The ironic way in which Ally is depicted is obvious when she wore Alice in Wonderland's costume. Her bully colleagues, Shay and Jessica, made fun of her: "I came as Alice in Wonderland... Shay and her shadow, Jessica called me Alice in Blunderland all day" (7).

Ally's favourite book is *Alice in the Wonderland*, which depicts "a world where nothing makes sense made perfect sense to me" (19). This symbolic character takes part in various events from a world which she hardly understands. Her references to Alice reveal the fact that Ally likes reading and she knows how to apply in her daily life the lessons learnt from books, which, unfortunately, she cannot read them by herself.

Her providential meeting with Mr. Daniels occurs in the moment when Ally does not have any hope of recovering. He is that person who beliefs in her artistic talent, maths abilities and who sees her cognitive abilities in solving difficult problems.

Mr Daniels, in an indirect way, helps us to find out more information about Ally. She uses some questions, whose answers Ally is capable to provide:

"What do you like, then?"

"Buffalo wings," I say.

He laughs a little. "What do you like about school?"

"Leaving."

He waits for me to say more.

"I like math. And art. I like to draw."

"Oh, well, that's cool. Do you draw a lot?"

"Yeah."

Any child with special disorder needs attention from the others, but does not want to be remarked for being a sick child, but for what he or she really is: "I need attention like a fish needs a snorkel" (9). Ally is that kind of person who does not want attention from the others, she does not allot mental states to the others. She only wants to be accepted for being different: "That's what I want. To feel like everyone else" (96). But dyslexia, which makes her life difficult, helps her to develop cognitive abilities which allow her to become the leader of her class, and win an award for poetry. This combination of her artistic and maths abilities, despite her dyslexia, makes her behave in

a unique manner. Her disorder and social limitations are compensated through her desire to be accepted.

Pointing to her personal experience of reading, Ally states: "I pull out a book and open it, but the letters squiggle and dance. How are other people able to read letters that move?" (17) This unusual quotation offers an explanation regarding what a dyslexic person is like. Made by the others to believe that she is dumb, she also believes that all her colleagues see the letters "dancing," which means that she thinks that she is less capable, but not different.

She is smart enough to avoid rudely and malicious conversations with her colleagues Shay and Jessica and approaches a good method of ignoring them: "Since there is no good answer to give, I stare at the page in my book. I'll ignore them. I've taken their teasing before" (20).

Another person who depicts Ally in a positive way is her mother, who is a waitress and who wants more for Ally. She is a realistic person who offers Ally moral support "...I want more for you. And you're so smart. Good at math. A gifted artist. ..." (27).

Ally reveals to the readers all her difficulties in relation to reading, as they are depicted in the next passage: "Reading for me is like when I drop something and my fingers scramble to catch it and just when I think I've got it, I don't."

The importance of Ally's familial connections is depicted through coins, mostly nickels. They have also been a symbol for her grandfather and her father, who taught Ally and her brother Travis, when they were young, to collect coins. In Ally's opinion, the coins are representations of a valuable diversity and difference.

We, as readers, experience a wide variety of emotional involvements in Ally's life, and a good example for Ally is her brother, Travis, who shares Ally's dyslexic problem and who taught her that behaving differently can produce good and interesting results. On the other hand, the protagonist is able to make inferences about her colleagues's behaviour, that go beyond what they say or behave: "I'm not perfect, but at least I'm not mean" (63).

In her relation with Mr. Daniels, when she is provoked to admit that she has dyslexia, she doubts her unconscious inner strength and wonders: "So now I'm stuck. I don't know who to be: the one who admits that I can't do it, or the pretender" (97). Finally, she decides to be honest and solve her problem, and no longer run away as she usually did.

The novel progresses and permits us to see that Ally is more confident and that she learns to use coping strategies as a habitual way of living. One of the most relevant examples concerns the fact that when she learns how to play chess with her teacher Mr. Daniels, she watches "a mind movie where chess pieces come to life" (163), thus, acquiring a new skill. Her coping strategies expand into self-teaching which allows her to improve her skills, as it happens by the end of the book when she is able to imagine positive images.

The novel *Fish in a Tree* does not provide any clue regarding Fowler's term "underlexicalisation," because Ally has not a limited or simple vocabulary. She is limited

in reading and spelling words not in speaking acts. Her limitation is due to her inability to read. In Ally's case, "overlexicalisation" suggests the abundance of metaphors, similes, personifications and hyperboles which will be presented in detail in the Figurative Language unit.

Ally is the only one from her class who has vocabulary notions and who can better offer, to her colleagues and to the readers, the definitions of the two terms "alone and lonely." She knows better how to explain the terms, because she experiences feelings lonely: "But being lonely is never a choice. It's not about who is with you or not. You can feel lonely when you're alone, but the worst kind of lonely is when you're in a room full of people, but you're still alone. Or you feel like you are, anyway" (123-124).

Also, Albert, her best friend offers us the meaning for the word "ally," which is posted on the election poster: "Ally is your ally"(202). He further explains to the readers the homonym of Ally: "You know, a word with the same spelling but different sounds and meanings. A-l-l-y spells your name, but it also spells „ally”with a long i sound at the end. An ally is someone who is on your side. Someone who sticks by you. Like allies in wars" (203).

Ally is the master of the philosophy of the word, maybe because she is the narrator of the novel and she constructs the entire plot. She makes the rules in her own manner and grants significance and value to the words. She has the ability to speak about themes which have upset her for many years: "I think of words. The power they have. How they can be waved around like a wand—sometimes for good...And how words can also be used for bad. To hurt" (184). This above passage shows us the power of words irrespective of circumstances.

The first person narrative perspective is associated with the use of Present Tenses for making the reader get involved with the story. Through the frequent use of simple grammar structures, the reader could better experience what Ally does, thinks (an overview on her insight thoughts), feels, prefers, happens to her and behaves. This stylistic choice is a framework for connecting young children that are experiencing the same problem of being isolated and feeling different. Being a book addressed to children, we can observe the lack of complex grammar structures in order to make it more accessible and an easier reading instrument.

Ally, the protagonist of the story, is an intelligent student who demonstrates to the readers, along the novel, that she has artistic talent and maths skills, but no English skills. Despite her lack of English skills, as a narrator, she uses figurative language which consists of similes, metaphors, idioms, personification and hyperboles. Her narrative style reflects the fact that she offers us many items of information hidden in beautiful words, meant to be discovered only by the clever readers. She introduces us into the world of figurative language only to communicate better her ideas which are often misunderstood because of her special disability, dyslexia.

Ally draws our attention with plenty of similes just for highlighting the importance of being dyslexic, for being more persuasive about this issue, rendered in the following passages: "Reading for me is like when I drop something and my fingers scramble to catch it and just when I think I've got it, I don't" (37). When she is helped,

she finds reading difficult, as it is underlined in the passage: “When Mr. Daniels talks about books, ... asking me to read them would be like asking a lobster to play tennis” (53).

Her narrative techniques are charged with similes related to the other characters. For instance, regarding her brother Travis, she argues that “he smells like grease.” This kind of smell is irritating many people, but Ally finds it pleasant because it is connected with her brother, and makes her feel better and confident.

The list of figures of speech continues with the metaphors. There are plenty of metaphors which help the protagonist to grow up and develop. All of them reveal her struggle for having friends, for learning how to read and behave:

“Her voice reminds me of a pin hidden inside a candy bar” (20).

“Every word is another shovelful of dirt from the hole I’ve dug for myself” (59).

“You, on the other hand, are so low, you could play tennis against a curb” (71).

One of the most significant metaphors is Ally’s comparison between a broken bicycle and her brain. It specifies that her brain is like the wheels of a bicycle, with learning disability in a disabled social society:

“Why in the world are you talking about bikes and wheels coming off?” “My brain,” I say, leaning my forehead against the cold wall. “My brain will never do what I want it to do” (138).

The title of the book, *Fish in a Tree*, is a metaphorical representation of Einstein’s theory of relativity. It reflects the fact that even if Ally thinks that she is dumb and stupid due to her incapacity to read, she is able to do other things that normal people do. Mirroring her life style marked by dyslexia, reading was always a disturbing issue and a challenge. Ally feels insecure in a domain which she cannot manage, having hard time in reading and writing. Despite her inability, she is able to do complex calculations which do not diminish her unhappiness.

The hyperboles, which represents an extreme exaggeration of truth, functions as an amplification of Ally’s feelings and wishes and is meant to convince us that she has difficulties in having good relationships increased by her impulsive character:

“It’s like she ripped a bush out of the ground and wrapped the bottom in foil.”(6)

“I rather eat a bag of hair” (84).

“I’d rather eat crayons than do the rest of it, though” (130).

“I’d sleep at school if it would help” (166).

The last chapters from the book have positive connotations. For instance, Chapter 43 depicts a proverb, defined in Oxford Languages dictionary as follows: “Time to set the world on fire!”(38). It is used by Ally’s teacher, Mr. Daniels, who represents a guidance for her meant to teach her how to read. He represents the impulse of encouraging her to do something extraordinary. The proverb also provides the title for Chapter 43, that describes the materials needed to lit a fire, namely steel, flint and magnesium. The three friends Ally, Keisha and Albert show her what real friendship means and Ally reveals her confidence in herself in relation to the bully fellow Shay.

Ally's difficulties are illustrated through metaphorical idiomatic expressions and phrases charged with both literal and figurative meaning. Each idiom is well thought so as to amplify the strength of the actions performed by the characters:

"I put some muscle into it" (74).

"That girl can flap her gums about me until the sun rises and sets again. I really don't care." (94) Keisha said

"...to go jump in a lake..." (151).

All these figurative speech constructions can be regarded as the embodiment of Ally's cognitive processes which characterize the mind style of this character.

Undoubtedly, the personal pronoun "I" is the top key word in the novel and reflects Ally's egocentrism. This frequent use of the first person pronoun "I" reveals Ally as the centre of the consciousness in the novel. She is the most important character and wants the reader to become aware of that.

The use of "I" gives the impression that Ally is focussing on herself, on her own actions, thoughts and dyslexia, thus revealing her being different and not mean: "I'm not perfect, but at least I'm not mean. And then my heart sinks, because I realize that I just was. I guess I did it because I was lonely. Now I know that there are worse things than being lonely" (63).

Ally is revealing her status of a "person deixis." The use of the first-person narrative highlights immediacy and connection. Ally is shy in sharing fears, emotions, struggles and concerns aloud, even to her friends and family members. The readers are the witnesses to her inner conflicts and intensely empathize with her.

Another benefit of using "I" concerns the fact that it generates a connection between the reader and the protagonist, helping the former to trust Ally's ideas: "And I have never had the kind of friends who have matching bracelets, but I have always wanted them" (60).

The narrative perspective on the first person offers the readers the opportunity to know Ally's character and her development as well. We are the witnesses to her evolution and hang with her for better and for worse. Besides the first person narrative, the second-person point of view is also employed, allowing the reader to be an active participant in the narration. It is a rare approach used in fiction but more frequently used in articles, technical books, text messages and how-to books. The most frequently used second person pronominal forms are: "you, your, yours," for instance in "I'd like you to read this" (217).

Life experiences are important elements which facilitate the perception of the mental and emotional profile of a human being. We, as human beings, take the items of information from our living environment, select, adapt and integrate them into our system of knowledge.

Ally's narration has a well defined structure; it implies action and real and fictional subjects. Ally grows up, listening to the stories from *Alice in Wonderland*, then she narrates her own stories and, together with them, her experience and conception about her life and life in general. Ally uses movies to communicate, to express her struggles and distress. "My mind does this all the time—shows me these movies that

seem so real that they carry me away inside of them. They are a relief from my real life” (3-4).

The audithorium has to decode her messages. Consequently, the movies operate through the knowledge, emotions, feelings, practical sense and social communication of receivers. In her movies, Ally depicts many visual elements due to the fact that she is dyslexic and constrains the audithorium to process the information given through the images. The story of a movie is perceived only through the cognitive and emotional activities of the readers. Experienced mental and emotional states join the readers due to their intense need of empathy. The way in which Ally evokes her movies functions as a testimony to her strong ability of memorizing and thinking.

Ally's conversations with her fellows, her family members and her teacher are under the form of dialogues, comprising no reported conversations. Conversations are directly rendered as they are happening in the moment of reading. When she narrates, she filters out the information and embodies it with plenty of figurative language elements, suggesting that she has not a Theory of Mind problem. As she seems to know how much a reader needs to know, we can say that there exists a problem related to the Theory of Mind in the way her narration abounds in details. This aspect is reflected in the following paragraph:

But my mind shows me that insect in that train car.
It's a dragonfly with brilliant greenish-blue wings and tiny goggles over its eyes.
The car is old with dark wood walls and dark green curtains. Like from Grandpa's
Westerns. And the people have old-fashioned clothes. I see them like they're with me
now. Some of the men are sleeping. One is waving the dragonfly off with a newspaper,
not even noticing its tiny goggles. Ladies with the most beautiful dresses sit there, too.
...(68).

Her direct narrative style abounds in child-like patterns due to the excessive use of “and” and “but,” suggesting that a person with dyslexia has difficulties in her/his relations with other people, regarding both the communicational and social sphere. The “mind movies” represent Ally's imaginative life-patterns. Through these movies, she informs the audithorium about her critical thinking. The images, which are not simple fantasies, illusions or daydreamings, arise within her mind and, in a distinct and concrete way, connect all that is happening around her. These inner images bind her immediate context to an unconscious state of mind. Ally expresses herself in “mind movies,” exactly as other people do in verbal terms. We opine that “mind movies” symbolically demonstrate that her disability has turned into ability.

Dyslexia is one of the learning disorders which, as concerns Ally, is reflected in terms of her precarious accommodation to the school rules and, of course, to the classroom rugulations: “Seven schools in seven years and they're all the same. Whenever I do my best, they tell me I don't try hard enough. Too messy” (2). Many times she is impolite, maybe a little bit sarcastic with her teacher, as it is shown in following paragraph: “What if I told you that I was going to climb a tree using only my teeth? Would you say I coul do it then?”(1). She avoids reading tasks because these are too

difficult for her and she cannot achieve it in a proper manner. She can not keep up with her classmates due to the fact that habitual adaptation features are secondary to the defence and removal mechanisms which are exaggerately developed, being rendered concrete as: shutting up, running away or making troubles. "I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep them from doing something I'll regret. I wish I could put my mouth in there, too."(8) She is disappointed, impossible to be learning motivated. At Ally her insuccesses provoke emotional states and extrem behaviour. I'm afraid to open my mouth because sometimes things just come out that get me in more trouble" (11).

Ally finds out that her achievements do not satisfy the other people's expectations, her teachers' and parents' demands and, of course, these expectations are not in concordance with her own efforts either: "And looking around the room, I remember thinking that my reading differences were like dragging a concrete block around every day, and how I felt sorry for myself. Now I realize that everyone has their own blocks to drag around. And they all feel heavy" (245).

Ally has many skills and abilities which help her to overcome her dyslexia and lack of empathy. These skills are related to the visual learning style, space-visual thinking, the making of sudden connections, original and unconventional thinking, simultaneous processing of information, global comprehension, solving problems, taking decisions quickly, exacerbated curiosity, rich imagination, intuition, creativity, communicative skills, empathy and resilience. Repeated failures, experienced during her schooling periods, have deeply and intensely influenced her: "It . . . it makes me feel like I'll grow up to be a nobody" (183) or "Even when I do something right, I feel like I've done something wrong. If I were a coin, I'd be a wooden nickel" (125).

As Culpeper (2011) claims in Semino's article "Language, Mind and Autism in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*" (2014), Ally is often unfairly treated as being impolite, generating behavior conflicts due to the way Mrs.Hall would expect her to behave and how Ally actually behaves, finally offering to her teacher the yellow greeting card. This represents a behaviour conflict with the teachers' expectations and desires and brings about Ally's negative emotional reactions. When she unintentionally does and says things, she has that ability to attribute mental states to the others.

According to Leech's Politeness Principle (qtd in Semino,2013: 299), Ally is guided by Mr. Daniels' principles, rendered as follows: "Maximize dispraise of other." They do not generate anymore contempts and humorous situations and do not draw the fellows' attention and dispraise. She is taught to "Minimize dispraise of other" (299). "Even when I do something right, I feel like I've done something wrong. If I were a coin, I'd be a wooden nickel" (125).

Another maxim taken from Leech, called The Modesty Maxim, captures Ally's communicative behaviour when she is able to accomplish her project. She succeeded to "Minimize praise of self" (299) and it is shown in the following paragraph: "I know what kind of grown-up I want to be. But I don't know who I am now" (184).

These depictions of Ally's communicational behaviour, both as a protagonist and narrator, in terms of many irrelevant details, which are in opposition with relevant

details, contributes to rendering the idea that she has The Theory of Mind problem, which can be easily assimilated with Dyslexia disorder. It appears clearly stated in the following quotation: "I stand tall, but everything inside shrinks. The thing is, I feel real bad. I mean, I felt terrible when the neighbor's dog died, never mind if a baby had died. I just didn't know it was a sad card like that. All I could see were beautiful yellow flowers. And all I could imagine was how happy I was going to make her" (10).

Lynda Mullaly Hunt's novel, *Fish in a Tree*, can be interdisciplinarily approached via Fowler's term "mind style" with the intention to capture "an impression of protagonist, Ally's world view" (qtd in Semino, 2007: 166). According to the "mind style" concept, *Fish in a Tree* reveals an internal representation of the world in which, Ally, the main character, lives, including the presentations of others characters' minds and, of course, the workings of her mind.

Ally's "world view" has the advantage of offering a representation of the world within her mind: "My head swims with all that's changed. In school. And in me" (243). It is a combination between Ally's mental and emotional representations, including feelings, emotions, values, attitudes and beliefs.

Palmer's term "fictional mental functioning" can be also employed to refer to Ally's mental processes as thoughts, memories, mind movies, desires and moral values, all being part of a reader's or researcher's perception of fictional minds.

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