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The Art of Deception:
Knowledge Distribution in English Literature

Abstract: *This essay addresses the formal textual realization of knowledge distribution and processes of deception as a special case of discrepant awareness. Case studies of Shakespeare's play* Hamlet *and Ian McEwan's novel* Sweet Tooth *serve to conceptualize deceptive relations as a three-way intrafictional communicative act between the deceiver, the deceived, and the audience, primarily designed to catch and entertain the reader's interest.* Hamlet *also mobilizes the supposedly stable deceptive triangle, so that the structural positions of deceiver and deceived displace each other, resulting in a politically condemning and poetically just view of courtly tactics of the Elizabethan Age as well as of societal power-play on a larger scale.* Sweet Tooth *employs modes of deception to show that – contrary to official political discourse during the Cold War era – the relation between the epistemological category of truth and the ontological category of reality is an unstable one, governed by the authority which guides the respective formations of knowledge.*

1 Introduction: Deception as a Literary Motif

Based on the well-proven insight that knowledge is power, the following pages seek to explore the question of knowledge distribution in literary texts, focusing on drama and narrative. The predisposition of an individual character is a crucial aspect of plot-analysis. Which character knows what, who knows more than the others, and how can this surplus knowledge be used to the character's advantage? How is this constellation of knowledge dramatized in literature? In fiction and in real life, characters often resort to the act of deception, which constitutes one of the driving forces in history, culture, and more specifically: literature. A closer look reveals how the perspective structure of a text is closely connected with the distribution of knowledge in that text. This raises additional questions: which narrative techniques are advantageous to represent which kinds of deception? Are there historically specific variations in knowledge distribution throughout literary history? Answers to these questions are crucial for the understanding of a fictional narrative or dramatic text. My analysis therefore aims to

develop a communicative model with which to adequately conceptualize and describe knowledge relations in literary texts. I will thereby focus on a specific motif and relation between characters commonly referred to as deception. Deception is the driving force behind a series of powerful (meta-)narratives running through the fabric of Western culture, from Ulysses' deception of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* in Greek mythology, in which the hero repeatedly outwits his opponents, to the elaborate dream-conspiracy in Christopher Nolan's blockbuster movie *Inception* (2010).

My analysis of deception connects with the aim of this volume to shed light on the relation between knowledge and its literary representation. The argument proceeds in three steps: first, I offer a dynamic communicative model for deception in literature, based on Stempel's and Wolf's ("Schutzironie") model of ironic communication, which I suggest could be called the deception triangle. Next, I will test and validate my model using examples from two different literary periods and genres, namely Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the novel *Sweet Tooth* (2012) by Ian McEwan. I thus aim to offer a selective overview of the diverse forms and functions that the dramatization of deception can fulfil. The model and analysis can of course only provide a first sketch and exploration of a topic which has so far gone virtually unnoticed in literary and cultural studies. Only a few studies dealing with deception exist, and surprisingly none of these theorize the specific configuration of deception in fictional texts and its wider implications for the understanding of literary communication, but rather take the everyday use of the term for granted (cf. Attridge; Thompson; Lynch).

I thus argue that as an age-old literary motif, deception appears to serve three dominant functions. Firstly, it provides engaging plot-twists: the star-crossed lovers who are duped by fate or scheming antagonists, adultery in all its forms and guises, political intrigue at court or in parliament, battle tactics, tricksters and fraudsters all make for good entertainment and serve as catalysts for reflections about the state of humanity and the world in general. Secondly, apart from being entertained, the audience can also be affectively tied into the plot, either as unwitting victim of deception or unobserved accomplice of the deceiver. This in turn heightens the immersive and aesthetic potential of the literary text. Thirdly, deception of readers can also raise interesting metafictional questions, for example about the deceptive power of fiction as a cultural technique.

Deception as a phenomenon dependent on the distribution of knowledge between text and reader can be classified as a specific case of what in drama theory has been termed as "discrepant awareness." Evans distinguishes three types of "relative awareness of audience and participants […] available to the dramatist: he can keep the audience less informed than the participants, equally aware with them, or more aware than they" (vii–viii).[1] Evans applies this concept to Shakespeare's comedies and shows that most of his comedies derive both their dramatic and comic effect from the fact that the audience knows more than the characters. My model is based on the distinctions made by Evans and transposes these on the dynamic shifts within narrative and drama. I aim to show that, as a literary motif and device, deception as a sub-form of discrepant awareness is not limited to comedy but can also play a pivotal role in other genres, text types, and media.

Deception can take on many different forms in various character constellations. The basic setup is that one figure attempts to convince others of facts or manipulate them into actions by means of persuasion and/or providing false information or withholding true information. But as I aim to show, deception does not only unfold on the diegetic level, i.e. on the plot level between characters. It also plays a pivotal role in the relation between reader or audience, author and text: readers too can be deceived by literary characters or narrators themselves, and the author is of course often consciously and directly responsible for the deception. Texts can mislead readers into believing something which is later revealed to be untrue. In this case, the reader takes on the role of the deceived instead of watching characters deceive others or being deceived. My exemplary analysis of the novel *Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan will demonstrate this second case.

2 Communicative Model of Deception in Literature

Knowledge distribution between characters in literary texts shall be defined as a formation of power based on language and on concrete actions derived from this discursive power. The configurations and effects of discursive knowledge about specific situations are precisely what constitutes literature

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1   On the issue of varying types of awareness, cf. also Pfister (79–87).

as a privileged site of observation and reflection, in which exemplary world-models are imaginatively constructed and put to the test (cf. Horatschek).

Based on a communicative concept of literary texts featuring a sender (author), message (text), and receiver (reader/audience), I would posit a triangular model for deception in literary writing.[2] This model is primarily applicable to narrative and drama, but also extendable to the medium of film. The model rests on a concept of knowledge transmission and distribution between characters (and thereby also from narrator to the reader) and the consequences this entails in the diegesis. The core criterion and definition of deception is that of an *intentional misleading of characters by another character to reach an advantageous goal, which is possible on both the textual and extratextual levels, and which is signalled to the reader during the course of the text*. The intentionality of the deceptive act is the key criterion, as for example an unintentional mistake in passing on information or mishearing information can also lead to a transmission or distribution of faulty information, but this cannot be classified as deception. However, the mistakes can well lead to dramatic irony, such as the fatal miscommunication between the two lovers in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Dramatic irony and deception are structurally analogous in so far as there are three instances involved: the person who creates the irony/the deceiver, the victim of irony/the deceived, and the accomplices/the audience or witnesses, which can either be the reader him- or herself and/or other characters in the fictional world.[3] From the perspective of the deceiver, the outcome of the deception can either be successful or unsuccessful, or a mixture of both. Uncovered deceptions can be met by counter-deceptions, such as in the elaborate plot-twists of Restoration comedy.[4] The proposed model of literary deception is dynamic in so far as it can be used to analyze

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2 The proposed model is structurally similar to Karl Bühler's "Organon-Model" of communication, comprising sender, receiver, material manifestation and content of the message, cf. Bühler (24–34).

3 My model is derived from Müller's triangular model for ironic communication (2000). On ironic communication, cf. also Stempel and, in continuation of this model, Wolf ("Schutzironie").

4 To cite only one example from William Wycherley's play *The Country Wife* (1675): the protagonist and notorious rake Harry Horner pretends to be a eunuch so that the husbands of attractive town ladies will not consider him a

changing situations step-by-step as the text unfolds. Furthermore, it expands to both the intratextual (deceptive relations between characters) as well as extratextual levels (deceptive relations between the author and the reader/audience, whereby this relation is in turn unidirectional as the audience cannot deceive the author), thereby taking into account the fact that a literary text or film in itself can also be part of an artistic deception which goes beyond the willing suspension of disbelief inherent to all fiction.

   Taking the specific communicative situation of literary texts into account, the basic layout of these relations is always triangular. Besides the deceiver and the deceived, there is usually an (intrafictional) audience of other characters who know about the deceptive plan and react according to the degree of their awareness. Finally, and most importantly, there is of course the audience or readers of the drama, novel, or film, who constitute the decisive point of convergence of all the knowledge distribution in the text (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Model of Knowledge Distribution in Literary Communication
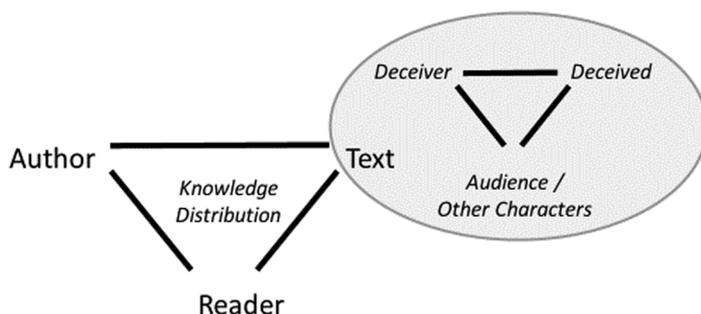
The schematic illustration of the model visualizes the knowledge distribution as black lines and shows how versatile and multidirectional these relations can be. It distinguishes two levels of deceptive communication: in the ellipse on the right, firstly, the intratextual level of deception, which features the deceiver, the deceived, and (optional) other characters, who either witness the deception, somehow know about it, or are in some way affected by

threat and therefore allow him to keep the company of their wives and satisfy his (as well as their) sexual appetite.

its outcome. Secondly, it features an extratextual level of deception, which extends to the author and the narrator as his or her proxy deceiving the reader by means of withholding crucial information until the very end of the text. On all these levels, the question of knowledge distribution plays a central role so that deception can unfold.

To create an engaging plot, this knowledge distribution in the text is necessarily unbalanced: initially, the deceiver always knows more than the deceived. The audience or readers however *always* know less at the beginning of a text than at the end, hence the pleasurable curiosity and suspense of engaging with fiction in the first place. During the course of reading the text or watching the film or play, readers tend to acquire more knowledge than all the characters, depending on the perspective structure of the text. For example, in *Hamlet* the audience is aware of the deceptive plans of the protagonist as well as the counter-deception of his antagonists, Claudius and Polonius, fairly early on. The play facilitates this through the selection and combination of scenes in which the characters reveal crucial information about their plans: Hamlet's planning of the "Mousetrap"-play, with which he hopes to reveal the guilty conscience of his father's murderer, is shown *before* the actual staging of the play. Likewise, Claudius's plotting of Hamlet's assassination by means of sending him to England is acted out on stage before the audience. Thus, in these examples the knowledge of readers and viewers is at the same level as that of the deceivers, and the pleasure of reception is derived from predicting the outcome and then watching the deception unfold and either succeed or catastrophically fail.

However, in many 20th- and 21st-century examples, especially in film but also literature, the audience is not aware of the exact plan of deception, or not even aware that a deception is taking place. For the reader, this induces an element of surprise and affective involvement with the text. Audiences have to decode and interpret subtle clues and surprising plot-twists. One typical example of this second type of deception is the spy narrative, another one the crime story which, together with the intradiegetic deception plot, leaves the audience largely in the dark about how the heist operation will exactly unfold.

I would label the two above mentioned types of knowledge distribution between text and recipients as *synchronous* and *asynchronous* knowledge distribution. In the first type, the recipients know as much as all deceivers

involved, in the second type they only belatedly unravel the deception, either during or after its unfolding. Taking the recipients into the equation and thereby extending the focus beyond the text and plot thus takes into account the dynamic production, transmission, and reception of information in a drama and narrative. In the following, my provisional model will be put to the test by examining the motif of deception in both a dramatic and a narrative text.

3 Case studies: Deception in *Hamlet* and *Sweet Tooth*

In the long tradition of scholarly debate revolving around Shakespeare's famous play, there is a persistent discussion concerning the true nature of Hamlet's madness.[5] Some say that he is truly mad, with occasional bouts of sanity, others maintain that he strategically employs simulated madness as a strategy to deceive his opponent Claudius, who assassinated Hamlet's father.[6] While Claudius's regicide is the ultimate deception – nobody openly suspects him to be responsible for Old Hamlet's death – this act lies temporally before the events of Act I. For this reason, the murder serves as the prehistory, motivation, and context for the unfolding deceptions in Shakespeare's play, but is not an integral part of the action in the play itself.

The unclear ontological status of the father's ghostly appearance at the beginning of the play draws attention to the question of Hamlet's sanity. Although other characters also see the ghost, its words are heard by Hamlet alone. For the purposes of my analysis, I assume that Hamlet is consistently sane and his madness serves the plan to throw his opponents off his trail so that he can exact his revenge on them. Contrary to some other interpretations, my reading expressly excludes the possibility that he is truly mad,

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5 The longevity of the debate becomes apparent in an editorial note in an 1864 women's magazine, which announces a new study on "Shakespeare's Characters: Chiefly Those Subordinate." According to the editor, the author of this study asserts that Hamlet is merely acting mad and that "those have read the whole play with very little reflection, who conceive that Shakespeare intended to portray real and not feigned madness in the character of Hamlet" (1864, 247).

6 While Qazi and Findlay view Hamlet's madness as a discursive product, Lidz, referring to Sigmund Freud's famous reading, places his madness in the context of psychoanalytical approaches to oedipal neurosis. Bali also assumes a mixture of sanity and madness at work in Hamlet's character.

because his deliberate actions and logical speeches to his confidantes point to a consistent and rational logic behind them. Apart from the feigned madness there are also other deceptive acts which will be briefly taken into account, namely

1) the "Mousetrap" play Hamlet stages to prove his uncle's guilt
2) the letter Hamlet swapped for his own forged version, thus consigning its bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their deaths
3) the poisoned cup and daggers for the final duel, which lead to the deaths of the protagonists.

Each of these intertwined acts of deception rests on deliberately distributed faulty knowledge that induces the victims to unwittingly determine their fate, in all three cases with ultimately catastrophic consequences.

The first case of deception consists of the deceiver, Hamlet, vowing to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.170) and to thus induce the deceived characters to presume him mad by way of the language and behavior he subsequently displays before them. He swears and insults other characters, especially Ophelia, utters apparently nonsensical phrases, stares wildly about, and neglects his outer appearance (2.1.75–97). Although Hamlet later claims that he is "not in madness but mad in craft" (3.4.185–86), the deception is so convincing that Ophelia exclaims: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.149). Although not the primarily intended target, Ophelia thus is the main victim of his deception, so much so that after Hamlet's murder of her father Polonius she turns mad herself. In contrast to Hamlet's pun-ridden speeches, Ophelia's madness is conveyed in a semiotic code that is beyond language. She primarily expresses herself through songs and flowers, thus highlighting the difference between deluding and actual madness.[7] In this context, Lidz maintains that "[w]hereas Shakespeare is ambiguous about the reality of Hamlet's insanity and depicts him as on the border, fluctuating between sanity and madness, he portrays Ophelia as definitely, one might even say classically, insane" (88). But the apparent misogyny of ascribing madness to women is not so

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7   On the relation between Ophelia's language and her madness, cf. Findlay's feminist reading (1994).

clearly cut: rather, Hamlet and Ophelia can be fruitfully read as two ways in which young adults respond to the stifling atmosphere and deadly tactics employed at Elsinore, by cutting loose from traditional communicative systems and establishing a new model of communication, leaving behind the established system of knowledge and power distribution, and thereby claiming and regaining control and autonomy over their own body – in the case of Ophelia – and mind – in the case of Hamlet. Ophelia's madness thus serves as a foil to make Hamlet's madness appear all the more contrived.

Despite or precisely because of his intellect, Hamlet comes dangerously close to the precipice of madness, which he then makes Ophelia topple into. But at the same time, the change of code from sanity to madness also lets Hamlet escape the linguistic rules and established forms of power-play at Elsinore. From his privileged position as an outsider, he is free to take on the role of deceiver in a way that would have been impossible, had he remained within the court's system of linguistic representation.

Meanwhile, the principle targets of the deception remain skeptical: Polonius expresses doubts ("Though this be madness yet there is method in't," 2.2.202–03) and King Claudius is even more clear: "what he spake, though it lacked form a little, was not like madness" (3.1.163–64). Thus, the deception only partially succeeds. While it buys Hamlet some time to first hesitate, then brood and despair, and finally devise and organize further steps against his enemies, the targets of his deception remain unconvinced. This is partly due to several jibes and hints which Hamlet hides in his speeches (to Polonius: "you are a fishmonger. […] Then I would you were so honest a man" (2.2.171–73). The broken or defective Code which Hamlet uses on his opponents both excludes them from a mutual communication while at the same time sending a message to them on his own terms. As a consequence of the failed deception, Claudius and Polonius plan to send Hamlet away to England because they consider him a threat and hope to thereby calm him down (3.1.168).

In the second instance, the deceiver (Hamlet) inserts information about Claudius's presumed means of murdering Hamlet's father into a play called "The Murder of Gonzago" performed by travelling players: "I'll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks […]. The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience

of the King" (2.2.529–40).[8] Hamlet here transforms his knowledge about the murder into a new artificial code, the fictional frame and semiotics of a staged play with the aim of disguising his message which has to be decrypted by Claudius, in order to uncover him as the culprit. Hamlet acts as the author of a play-within-a-play, thus meta-dramatically pointing out the parallels between the creation of fiction and the creation of deception.

Because only the culprit could know exactly how Old Hamlet was poisoned, Claudius's abrupt departure from the performance exposes his guilt to Hamlet (3.2.258). The deception here consists of strategically sharing information only the deceiver (Hamlet) and the deceived (Claudius) are privy to, thereby excluding the intrafictional audience, the members of the Court of Elsinore. Claudius is deceived because he as the original deceiver does not expect anyone to share his knowledge and therefore is tricked into giving himself away. The decisive point, however, is that up to the moment of the staging of the play, Claudius is unaware that his regicide has been exposed, and he subsequently becomes suspicious of Hamlet. On the other hand, the deceiver (Hamlet) has also revealed his knowledge of the murder to the murderer, something he clearly intends. The audience of *Hamlet* however, have synchronously been informed of Hamlet's plan prior to the staging of the play, so it has full knowledge of what happens and why.

While Hamlet's first and second acts of deception involve complex sets of logistics as well as verbal and non-verbal knowledge distribution, the third act of deception works on a purely textual level. Claudius had planned to send Hamlet to England with "letters congruing to that effect the present death of Hamlet. Do it England!" (4.3.62–63). But the supposed victim finds the letter in the purse of one of the two courtiers (5.2.15–24), and turns the deception against the King and his unwitting henchmen: staying behind, Hamlet sends the two alone to England with a new sealed letter which states that "He [the King of England, D.S.] should those bearers [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, D.S.] put to sudden death" (5.2.46). Claudius's planned murder of Hamlet by means of the letter he would unwittingly deliver into the hands of his killers thus fails due to Hamlet's knowledge of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's allegiance to the King. Hamlet subsequently turns the

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8   The information about the poison poured into the ear was revealed to him by the ghost of his father in Act I, 1.5.60–70.

deception around by making the two unsuspecting aides fall prey to exactly the fate intended for him. The play here follows the pattern established in Hamlet's simulated madness: the characters who bear the brunt of his revenge are not his main opponent directly – he is too powerful – but (more or less) innocent bystanders. The Prince's plans thus make the two hapless aides to the King unwittingly "go to't" (5.2.56). The triangular structure of deception devised by the King, whereby Rosencrantz and Guildenstern function as pawns on a chess board, is thus taken up by Hamlet and thrust back at the deceiver, placing a new dyadic relation of counter-deception atop of the earlier one. The knowledge of the reader and audience here are on a par with that of the deceiver and thus superior to that of the deceived.

In Act V, the final plan of deception which unfolds during the supposedly playful duel between Hamlet and Laertes once more follows the established pattern of knowledge distribution, but heightens the complexity of the deception: the setup of poisoned swords and cups of wine is laid out as a premeditated plan for the audience before the fateful event begins (4.7.125–59). Viewers later watch the unravelling of Claudius's and Laertes' plan to kill Hamlet either with Laertes' poisoned sword or by poisoned wine handed to him by the King. First, the Queen unwittingly drinks the wine and then Hamlet, suspecting the plot, swaps swords with Laertes after he himself has been injured by that sword. Subsequently, Laertes is also fatally poisoned.

As far as the distribution of information goes, the audience is again ahead of the deceived and knows more than the various victims and perpetrators of deception. Watching the failure of the murderous deception thus enables the audience, who have become attuned to the deceitful court culture at Elsinore, to try to anticipate and then fully appreciate the both tragic and poetic justice wrought on all of the protagonists at the end of Act V. The retrospective piecing together of the weaknesses of Claudius's plan and how the contingent nature of especially Gertrude's actions initiate its spectacular failure offer a heightened aesthetic and emotional experience for the audience.

The intricate web of deception and counter-deception woven into *Hamlet* thus reveals the precarious status and power of knowledge: through the introduction of the element of plotting, knowledge can be turned against the powerful and the deceiver can easily become the deceived, as soon as

new knowledge is created by implementing new codes or elements into the diegesis. Once the "rotten […] state of Denmark" (1.4.90) comes into the open and the games of deception proliferate, there is no safety for the deceiver anymore: Hamlet falls prey to similar deceptive tactics he has been using all along. The theoretically stable unidirectional thrust of the deceptive triangle – the deceiver wields the power and the deceived is powerless – gives way to a dynamic multidirectional movement and creates instability, in which the structural positions of deceiver and deceived are persistently switched. Shakespeare's play thus offers a politically condemning and poetically just view of courtly tactics of the Elizabethan Age as well as of societal power-play on a larger scale.

My analysis now moves on to my contemporary example. After the critical acclaim of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), which features a twist-ending that exposes the whole preceding story as a product of the narrator's imagination, rearranged memories and archive research, the author explores the theme of deception further in his 2012 spy novel *Sweet Tooth*.

The novel's plot is set in early 1970s England. Up to early adulthood, the homodiegetic narrator Serena Frome – "rhymes with plume" (1), a hint at the invented nature of a *nom de plume* – shows a talent for mathematics and is admitted to the University of Cambridge, where she soon becomes disenchanted with her subject area. While at Cambridge, she becomes romantically involved with Tony Canning, a middle-aged professor who, before abruptly ending the affair, secures a low-level position for Serena with MI5. A more exciting opportunity appears when Serena is offered a chance to become an agent in a new covert program codenamed "Sweet Tooth." To counter Communist propaganda during the Cold War, the agency wants to offer financial assistance to young writers, academics, and journalists with an anti-Communist agenda. Serena, who is an avid and quick reader of fiction, is given the task of assessing the aspiring writer Tom Haley.

Serena is immediately taken by Haley's published short fiction. She travels to the University of Sussex, where he works, to offer him a stipend from the fictional Freedom International Foundation. Soon the two begin a sexual affair, but things gradually start to unravel. Serena discovers that Professor Canning (who, it turns out, broke off their affair only because he knew he was dying from cancer) was in fact a Soviet spy, and she was recruited because the agency wanted to keep an eye on Canning. Haley's first novel

is a great critical success, but MI5 is dissatisfied with its dystopian, anti-capitalist subtext. Finally, his affair with Serena is exposed by the press, and the whole Sweet Tooth program is publicly disgraced. Serena fears that she has lost Tom's love forever, now he knows she has deceived him all along.

Up to this point, the plot is fairly conventional and combines the spy- with the love-plot. As is typical of spy-narratives, the protagonists repeatedly swap the position of deceiver and deceived in the deception triangle throughout the text, with the readers of the novel as the silently observing third party trying to piece together often sketchily asynchronous knowledge offered to them by the narrator. Serena (and the reader) are initially unaware that Tony Canning is a double agent who works for the British Intelligence but was also blackmailed into helping the Russians. This information is only revealed on page 333. Serena thus is both deceiver and deceived: she deceives Tom and is in turn deceived by Tony. For the remainder of this analysis, I want to focus in more detail on how exactly the deception in the closing part of *Sweet Tooth* is set apart from my previous examples and explain its metafictional implications.

The final plot twist ads a new direction to the well-worn pattern of the spy tale: in a letter to Serena, Tom reveals that he had known about the program for months, and instead of ending the affair, had decided to turn the story into a novel. But his project, in which Haley tells the tale of Serena's deception from his point of view, turns out to be dissatisfying from the beginning. As Tom confesses to Serena: "The problem, I decided, was me. Without thinking, I was presenting myself in the guise of the typical hero of an English comic novel – inept and almost clever, passive, earnest, over-explained, urgently unfunny" (357). The solution, for Tom, is to change his perspective and tell the story from Serena's point of view:

> I tried to imagine being you, being in two places at once, loving and … reporting back. How could I get in there and report back too? And that was it. I saw it. So simple. This story wasn't for me to tell. It was for you. Your job was to report back to me. I had to get out of my skin and into yours. (358)

The reader thus learns that the (intrafictional) author of *Sweet Tooth* is in fact Tom Haley, despite its being written from Serena's autodiegetic perspective. This is a morally highly ambiguous move – while conducting his relationship with Serena and goading her on, Tom is transforming their lives into fiction:

> I could retreat to the typewriter to describe the moment, from your point of view.
> Your duplicitous point of view, which would have to include your understanding,
> your version, of me, lover and Sweet Tooth item. My task was to reconstruct myself
> through the prism of your consciousness. (359)

In a veritable writing frenzy, Tom completes a preliminary version of the
whole *Sweet Tooth* novel the reader now holds in hand: "I had my mate-
rial, the wafer of gold, and the motivation to hammer it out. I went at it in
a frenzy, more than a hundred thousand words in just over three months"
(364). At the close of the letter, Tom asks Serena to marry him. The novel
ends before she can respond.

Due to the asynchronous nature of knowledge distribution, readers are
left unaware of the true narrator until the very end.[9] This information was
left out at the beginning and throughout the novel. Much like the twist-
ending of *Atonement*, McEwan's 2012-novel thus too features the nar-
rative device of the missing opening frame.[10] If the identity of the "true"
intrafictional author had been stated right on the first pages of the novel,
the narrative situation of a male author telling the tale from the perspec-
tive of a female character would have been clear from the start. The whole
story would have been placed in a very different context or frame, and thus
understood in a different way. As is typical of twist-endings, this results
in a surprise effect for the readers. Readers can thus experience as closely
as possible what it might feel like to be deceived. Of course, Serena must
experience rather more intense emotions after discovering that her lover
has turned the tables on her. By means of the narrative device of the miss-
ing opening frame, readers are thus affectively drawn into the text and its
deception triangle. They no longer only witness intrafictional characters
falling prey to various deceptions from a detached audience-perspective, but
rather, along with Serena, are revealed to be in the structural position of the
deceived. This amounts to a seismic change in the aesthetic experience of

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9   As Ksiezopolska argues, there are some hints scattered throughout the novel
    which point to the fact that the "Serena" who is presented as the narrator is in
    fact an invention of a male author, such as her style of narration, mathemati-
    cally precise way of thinking – after all, this novel is set in the early 1970s – and
    almost inconceivable all round loveliness.

10 On the structure and implications of this narrative device in McEwan's *Atone-
    ment*, cf. Wolf ("*Atonement* als Synthese").

reading the novel. In the hierarchical position of levels of communication, a logically higher extradiegetic level of deception is added to the deception depicted on the diegetic character level: that of the author deceiving the reader by deliberately withholding information which is belatedly revealed at the very end. The novel demonstrates how reader experience and character experience can be roughly aligned, but can never fully converge. Fiction, it is shown, has the power to seduce and deceive, and the novel not only tells the reader, but rather dramatizes this insight through its narrative structure.

Apart from the metafictional insights as well as the aesthetic and emotional turmoil both the protagonist and the readers may experience at the revelation, the implications of *Sweet Tooth* also extend into the political realm: as Walker argues, the novel dramatizes a form of "'covert authorship,' a mode of invention reliant on secrecy and deception that, in evoking the conspiratorial sense of plotting, links the manipulations of Cold War politics to narrative manipulation, thus suggesting that the author holds as much potential for control as a spy" (495). Metafictional reflections are thus linked to wider societal issues, raising ethical questions about the relation between trust, authorship, politics, and poetics: in a culture dominated by the Cold War conflict between East and West which was conducted with all means available and on all levels of society, even the seemingly most private realm of emotional and sexual bonds between two individuals proves vulnerable to deception and betrayal. Of course, betrayal in love has been an age-old motif not only in literature, but *Sweet Tooth* places it in a specific historical context by showing that a politically motivated deception ultimately comes back to haunt the deceiver in an instance of poetic justice. Furthermore, the dramatization of unreliability in the twist-ending of McEwan's novel points to the intimate bond between author and reader – a relation based on trust and willingness in which the power of knowledge is all too often forgotten until it is brought drastically into the open at the end of the text.

4 Conclusion

The two examples scrutinized have shown that deception, as one central outcome of uneven knowledge distribution in drama and fiction, potentially works on three levels: firstly, the diegetic level of character and plot, which

is the level on which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* spins its webs of deception. Secondly, the extradiegetic level of narration can also be used to dramatize deception, as seen in McEwan's *Sweet Tooth*, which metafictionally plays with the reliability of narrators and authors. Thirdly, I have shown that the extradiegetic level on which deception takes place is closely linked to the extratextual level of the reader and author, audience and dramatist. In the case of *Sweet Tooth*, the two authors – the intrafictional Tom Haley and the extrafictional Ian McEwan – are at the same time hierarchically stratified yet also strangely intertwined and competing for the reader's trust, surprise, and sympathy.[11] The triple textual voices of Serena, Tom, and ultimately also that of McEwan thus resound together in a metafictional echo chamber, which is made up of the various versions of the "Sweet Tooth" novel: the work in progress authored by Tom, his ventriloquism of Serena's voice, and finally the novel by McEwan the reader holds in his or her hand. Contrary to the official Manichean narrative maintained by political leaders and media during the Cold War with its seemingly clear-cut division between good and evil, *Sweet Tooth* employs fictional means to show that the relation between the epistemological category of truth and the ontological category of reality is a highly spurious and relative one, and is governed by the perspective or voice who determines these formations of knowledge. While readers think they are viewing the world through Serena's eyes, who is also initially portrayed as the sole deceiver, they are being manipulated into believing this throughout the duration of the novel: the spectator of deception becomes its victim and the deceiver becomes the deceived. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the audience is made aware of the fact that no character on stage has the moral upper hand, and that even the most carefully devised plan can be foiled by chance or fate. The deceiver can easily become the deceived. Furthermore, the metafictional elements in the texts I have analyzed show how plotting creates additional knowledge, unavailable for the deceived, and thus demonstrate that the authoring of all fiction has a deceptive element to it, as exemplified in Hamlet's staging of the "Mousetrap" play and Tom's writing of the manuscript.

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11 Cf. Ksiezopolska (422–426), who draws attention to the striking similarities between McEwan's own early short stories and the ones that Haley writes in *Sweet Tooth*, which are mostly paraphrased by Serena.

Although I could here only give a brief and highly selective overview of forms and functions of deception in literary texts, the drama and the novel I have analyzed appear to be indicative of a broader trend in literary history deserving closer scrutiny, namely that most pre-20th-century novels (and also plays) represent deception on the diegetic level of plot, whereas late 20th- and 21st-century examples, which could easily and very helpfully also be extended to the medium of film, tend to expand their webs of deception onto the extradiegetic level of narration, and thus also take it closer to the realm of the reader/audience. Furthermore, I have demonstrated that conceptualizing deceptive relations in literary texts as a three-way intrafictional communicative act – which takes the form of a triangle of knowledge distribution between the deceiver, the deceived, and the audience – helps to better understand how narrative plots unfold and are driven on, and how they exert their seductive grip on the recipient. The examples have also shown to what – usually dramatic and both positive and negative – ends knowledge can be put to use. They demonstrate that the question of knowledge distribution is a central category in literary communication, a phenomenon that has so far been surprisingly neglected in literary studies.

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