



Mindstyle and Mind-Modelling in *A Little Something Different* by Sandy Hall

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Introduction

Sandy Hall's novel *A Little Something Different* (*ALSD*) follows college students Lea and Gabe, in the beginning of their relationship, through 14 different perspectives ranging from human perspectives to that of an object. Mindstyle is used in *ALSD* to depict the non-human narrators' unique perceptions, establishing the overtness of the protagonists' mutual affection, through unusual narrators. The theme of miscommunication in *ALSD* is primarily caused by Gabe's partial deafness from a car crash, however, this is something he does not disclose to Lea. Interestingly, the reader is never given access to the protagonists' perspectives unless mediated through conversation from an alternate point of view, highlighting miscommunication as the core theme of the novel. This essay analyses how the attribution of humanistic traits to the genderless, non-human narrators Bench and Squirrel establishes an initially shallow mind-model. In the analysis of each character, this essay establishes how rich mind models are formed for each character's mindstyle, and how these rich mind-models are then useful in portraying the theme of miscommunication.

Theoretical framework

Mindstyle is defined by Fowler (1996) as 'the world view of an author, or a narrator, or a character constituted by the ideational structure of the text' or 'point of view on the ideological plane' (214). Semino and Culpeper (2002) develop this definition by expanding on the aspects of world view 'that are primarily personal and cognitive in origin, [...] These aspects include an individual's characteristic cognitive habits, abilities and limitations' (97). Semino and

Culpeper's clarification that mindstyle refers specifically to the *personal* world view is significant as the world view of Bench, for example, and the cognitive limitations that an object may have, differs wildly from the cognitive limitations of the human and animal narrators in the novel. Semino and Culpeper also suggest that mindstyle 'is best approached by combining the analysis of linguistic patterns with theories of cognition' (98). It is with this combination that I will analyse the mindstyles of Bench and Squirrel.

The cognitive function that I will be using in this analysis is the process of mind-modelling. Stockwell (2022) defines mind-modelling as a process in which readers 'cast their minds across the world-boundary between their own reality and the one depicted in the text' (135). Mind-modelling, then, is a necessary process in comprehending the distinct mindstyles of each character as the reader must be able to cast a significant mental model of the character as they interact with their mindstyle. This is a key distinction between mindstyle and mind-modelling as the latter directly refers to the reader's process of mind casting, where the former is the distinct qualities of the characters mind as it is portrayed. Mind casting as a component of mind-modelling literary characters allows readers to consider the perspective of an object or animal that is unlike their own. Stockwell's (2019) detail that mind-modelling allows us to 'begin to build up a rich mental model of [a character's] mind and life as a whole' is key in that it refers to a *richness* of the mental model (178). Stockwell (2019) distinguishes between a rich and shallow mind-model by the type of character that they produce: 'Shallow modelling produces a relatively flat, tokenistic type of character, whereas the mental modelling of a richly imagined character can involve a great deal of readerly investment in the literary work' (179). This distinction between shallow and rich modelling is used to distinguish between the levels of mind-modelling in the characters of Bench and Squirrel. Stockwell's outline of the richness of mind-models is useful in this analysis as both mindstyles occur multiple times and thus, a deeper understanding of the characters allows readers to build a rich mental model of them. Stockwell (2022) also identifies the different 'enactors' of a character: 'alternate versions of a character [...] (such as an earlier or later version, an unrealised speculative, possible or

imagined version), [...] These enactors, attached to their particular world-levels, build into our model of the character's mind' (135). The idea that there are several different enactors for one character is important in the analysis of Hall's novel as there are multiple, short sections of prose under each character over the span of a year. Therefore, the changes or similarities in the character's attitudes over time must be looked at as different enactors of these characters throughout this analysis.

Another key idea to discuss in terms of mind-modelling the non-human character is the idea of human interference in non-human mindstyles. In discussing the Theory of Mind (ToM), Stockwell (2020) explains that 'a person builds a 'theory' (that is, not a direct physical observation) that other people possess minds and operate in roughly similar ways, though within a broad window of possibilities' (139). In *ALSD*, Hall's non-human minds Bench and Squirrel, operate similarly to those of humans. Bernaerts (2014) states that 'non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers "empathize" and "naturalize"); at the same time' (69). This analysis looks at the necessity of such attribution in the formation of shallow mind-models. Understanding ToM means that the attribution of humanistic traits onto animals creates a much simpler mind-model to cast, as the human-like mind is much easier for the human mind to comprehend. The initial model that we achieve, then, is a human representation of "benchness" and "squirrelness", rather than representations of "personness" that is typical for human narrators. This distinct "benchness" and "squirrelness", instead, is later developed in the first-person narrative mode. Importantly, non-human narrators are 'character narrators and/or homodiegetic narrators' in that they are not omniscient but rather their narration is focalised through a biased perspective (Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman, and Vervaeck, 2014: 70). This is indeed the focalisation that Hall uses in the novel, and such a narrative style allows for a richer mind-model to be formed as this mode allows us intimate knowledge of Bench and Squirrel's perceptions and experiences.

Analysis

Bench

Bench's initial shallow mind-model is formed through the tokenistic depiction of Bench as an older, grumpy figure. Bench is 'the oldest bench' on the green and claims that they 'get no respect' (Hall, 2014: 8). The superlative 'oldest' and the pessimistic phrase 'I get no respect' is reminiscent of the mindstyle of a grumpy, elderly person. The declarative 'I get no respect' draws upon the known phrase in western culture 'respect your elders', thus portraying Bench's demand of respect from the young students on campus as directly linked to their position as 'the oldest bench'. Indeed, these two clauses are part of the first sentence in Bench's perspective, furthering Bench's mindstyle as that of an old person as their age and need of respect are linked syntactically. Fowler (1996) refers to 'conventional codes such as (indeed, primarily) language encode world views which are accepted as common sense' (42). Thus, Bench's reference to being the 'oldest' and their demand of respect draws upon the conventional language codes of an older, irritable figure in western culture. Additionally, Bench refers to students as 'these kids' depicting Bench as old through use of the plural noun 'kids', aligned with common phrases that older generations use, e.g. kids these days... (Hall, 2014: 234). Bench's reference to students as 'kids' then draws upon Fowler's idea of common sense as the conventionality of 'these kids' being used by older people is considered common sense. Bench also refers to the girls as 'broad's' (Hall, 2014: 150) using an outdated term for women that the older generation may use. These linguistic patterns are examples of the cognitive process of an older person expressing their thoughts on young adults, thus creating a shallow mind-model via the stereotypical caricature of an old person. This caricature highlights an important factor of shallow mind-modelling in that there is a lack of unique "benchness" and instead Bench is characterised as a human stereotype. Such an attribution of the "old grump" stereotype to Bench emphasises the need for human characteristics to be placed onto non-human narrators for readers to legitimately cast a shallow mental model of the non-human narrator's mindstyle.

To enrich this shallow mind-model, as Stockwell (2019) describes, ‘readerly investment’ is necessary (179). The rich model of Bench’s mindstyle is established by the varied use of words used for a person’s bottom: ‘butt’, ‘rear ends’, ‘behind’, and ‘tuchus’ (Hall, 2014: 8). Fowler (1996) describes this specified, vocabularic variation as ‘overlexicalization’, a process in which ‘a proliferation of terms in some semantic field indicates an unusual preoccupation with a part of the culture’s, or the writer’s, experience.’ (219). This ‘unusual preoccupation’ with people’s behinds, as evidenced through overlexicalization, then contributes to the building of the rich mental model of Bench’s mindstyle. The mind-model becomes rich here as readerly investment in the character is required to comprehend that Bench would encounter people’s behinds more than any other body part, and thus understands humans in this way. Indeed, Bench can decipher human emotion through their behinds as Bench claims that Gabe ‘seems a little tense. [...] he’s turned all wrong’ and that Lea and her friends’ presence is ‘ruining the perfect butt’ (Hall, 2014: 149) as their presence makes Gabe nervous, making him tense his muscles. The adjective ‘tense’ and the phrase ‘turned all wrong’ are significant in creating a rich mental model of Bench’s mindstyle as it indicates that Bench understands, at least to some degree, human emotion via muscle movements. Indeed, Bench is correct in this analysis of Gabe’s emotion as he says to his brother that ‘today with Lea kind of sucked’ (Hall, 2014: 155). Bench, then, can sense human emotion differently to the way in which humans do so, thus readerly investment in the character is crucial in understanding Bench’s unique cognitive processes. The difference in cognitive processes between humans and Bench is where the distinct “benchness” begins to add to the rich mental model. Unlike the caricature associated with Bench initially, the ability to comprehend human emotion via body language in a way that humans are unfamiliar with (i.e. how one’s backside clenches) enriches the mental model of Bench by evidencing an instance of unique “benchness”. Furthermore, this cognitive process evidences the cognitive limitations of Bench as they have no regard for the relationship between Gabe and Lea as most other characters do, but rather just wants Lea to leave so her presence will stop ‘ruining’ the experience of having Gabe sit on them. The verb ‘ruining’ and

the premodified noun 'perfect butt' encapsulate the cognitive limitations of Bench as they are unable to understand the nuances of a romantic relationship and is solely focused on the sensation of being sat on. Bench's focus on Gabe's physical reaction (tensing) to Lea emphasises the theme of miscommunication as Lea understands this discomfort to be associated with his dislike of her, when he instead 'couldn't hear anything she said' due to his injury (Hall, 2014: 155).

Bench's general negative attitude also increases the richness of this mind-model as Bench regularly uses the verb 'ruining', for example, when someone speaks, 'ruining the quiet time [they were] enjoying' (Hall, 2014: 8). The negative tone of the verb 'ruining' along with its repeated use allows for their mindstyle to be considered as one of a moody, pessimistic character. Indeed, Bench complains both when people do not sit on them in winter, and when people do in summer: 'no one sits on [them] all damn winter' and 'why is it that as soon as the days get warmer, I have to take part in every personal conversation on Earth?' (Hall, 2014: 139, 234). The pejorative exclamation 'damn' and the hyperbole 'every personal conversation on Earth' highlights the Bench's general displeasure whether being sat on or not. The contradiction of both the declarative and the interrogative are communicated by different enactors of Bench, as they happen seasons apart. The different enactors both having a disdain for how people interact with them allows for a rich mind-model of Bench as a consistently moody character. The repeated tone of general discontent creates a rich mental model of Bench's mindstyle as it is sustained that Bench has a negative disposition that becomes recurrent. Therefore, the conventional code of language used by Bench stereotypes them as an old, irritable figure, first establishing a shallow mental model of Bench's mindstyle. This mental model is then enriched through overlexicalization and repetition, as well as Bench's disregard for the novel's core focus (the relationship between Lea and Gabe), allowing for a more specified mindstyle to be formed, and thus a richer mental model. Bench's rich mind-model is then utilised in establishing the theme of miscommunication as, despite Bench's enjoyment of 'quiet time', they'd 'like to tell [Gabe] that he should probably talk' (Hall,

2014:149). The verb 'like' emphasises Bench's physical inability to communicate and help Gabe, thus emphasising the simplicity of miscommunication through the richly modelled mindstyle of Bench.

Squirrel!

Squirrel's mindstyle is recurrently depicted as that of a bubbly, excitable character. Such an actively happy mindstyle is portrayed through the consistent use of exclamatives, including the heading 'Squirrel!' (Hall, 2014: 11) in each of Squirrel's sections. The exclamation of Squirrel's name establishes them as an excitable character, creating a shallow model of their mindstyle as a hyperactive animal. Such excitability is furthered by the exclamatives 'nuts nuts nuts!/Acorns!' (Hall, 2014: 11). The short sentences, heightened by 'Acorns!' on the next line, exaggerate the hyperactivity of Squirrel, creating a shallow mind model of them as excitable. The epizeuxis of 'nuts' adds to the shallow model of Squirrel as it foregrounds the stereotype of squirrels eating nuts. Where Bench's repeated tone of pessimism aids in developing a richer mind-model of their mindstyle, in the case of Squirrel, the repetition of 'nuts' creates a shallow mind-model in that it is a tokenistic characterisation of any squirrel. Squirrel's focus on nuts is then a projection from human experience as humans associate nuts with squirrels and thus this mind-model is shallow as it is tokenistic, rather than unique to this individual squirrel. The mind-model of Squirrel's mindstyle becomes rich once they express hesitancy of Lea, questioning her intentions: 'is this a trap? [...] trying to see if she has a net or a cage or a brown bag that she's going to capture me with' (Hall, 2014: 12). The noun 'trap' in the interrogative characterises Squirrel as hesitant and untrusting, whilst the syndetic listing of 'net or a cage or a brown bag' enables the assumption that Squirrel has had multiple encounters with humans attempting to 'capture' them. The verb 'capture' furthers Squirrel's hesitancy as it emphasises that the attempts to take them have been against their will. The characterisation of Squirrel as hesitant enables the reader to cast a rich mind-model of them via the suggestion of their past experiences. Indeed, the specificity in Squirrel's list of capturing methods

suggests that Squirrel's empirical experience has led to this hesitancy, thus forming a rich mind-model of Squirrel by illuminating their vulnerabilities.

Like Bench, Squirrel's cognitive limitations allow for a richer mind model to be formed as they refer to the English language as 'human' stating 'I wish I knew human and could answer her' (Hall, 2014: 12). The noun 'human' highlights the difference in species between Lea and Squirrel and the substitution of 'English' with 'Human' evidences the cognitive limitation in Squirrel's knowledge of the English language. This substitution allows the reader to have a richer mental model of Squirrel's mindstyle as it is unlike that of the human reader and thus requires a casting of readers' minds to imagine a consciousness unlike their own. Furthermore, the verb 'I wish' develops the mental model of Squirrel as an animal that desires socialisation with humans. Indeed, later in the text Squirrel exclaims 'I don't know what you're saying but I'm sure I love you! We are going to be best friends' (Hall, 2014: 75). The verb 'love' in the exclamative permits a rich mind-model of Squirrel as an animal that has a desire for friendship and love. Squirrel's expression of their own desires enriches their mind-model as the reader can comprehend the wishes of Squirrel and their desire for friendship. Additionally, Squirrel's characterisation as an animal that desires human connection is further emphasised by the declarative 'we are going to be best friends' (Hall, 2014: 75). Not only does the premodified plural noun 'best friends' indicate Squirrel's knowledge of friendships but the future tense verb phrase 'going to be' indicates Squirrel's recognition of the evolution of relationships over time. Such an indication of the non-human narrator's awareness of the passing of time is also evident in Bench's aforementioned complaints over various seasons. Bench in this sense, displays at least an awareness of seasons changing and thus time passing, providing richer mental models as the reader intimately learns that both Squirrel and Bench are aware of time's passing. This indication then creates a rich mental model of Squirrel's mindstyle as they understand feelings of want, affection, friendship, and relationships' developments over time. Furthermore, Squirrel's reference to the 'human' language and their knowledge of relationships highlights the simplicity of human relationships

in the novel. Indeed, David Herman (2020) highlights that ‘animal autobiographies situated near the more explicitly human-centric end of the spectrum can be used to allegorize unresolved tensions and contradictions in the broader culture’ (4). Squirrel’s simplistic outlook on their friendship with Lea, then, ironically highlights the simplicity of the protagonists’ mutual affection. All Squirrel needs from Lea is conversation and they assume they ‘are going to be best friends’, whereas Gabe and Lea have spoken multiple times and cannot reach the same optimistic conclusion. Additionally, Squirrel’s inability to speak English is aligned with Gabe’s partial deafness, as it is something neither of them can change. This similarity in limitations, but contrast in thoughts about relationships with Lea, emphasises Gabe’s shyness as the inhibitor of his relationship with Lea, rather than his injury.

The theme of miscommunication is heightened by Squirrel’s understanding that Gabe is attracted to Lea, despite Squirrel’s inability to know ‘human’ and understand them. Importantly, Squirrel becomes a confidant for both protagonists, as Gabe says, ‘you really are a very good listener’ (Hall, 2014: 164). Despite Squirrel’s cognitive limitations, even they can understand that ‘he likes the girl, I can tell. She was sitting by him before, but now she’s gone and he looks sad’ (Hall, 2014: 152). The declarative ‘he likes the girl, I can tell’ emphasises the overt attraction between the protagonists, creating a sense of irony as everyone, even a squirrel that does not speak ‘human’, can tell they like each other. The mind-model of Squirrel is enriched as it is understood that they can read emotion, identified in the clause ‘but now she’s gone and he looks sad’. The adjective ‘sad’ indicates that Squirrel’s understanding of human relationships is contingent on their body language, much like Bench, as it has been established that this is the only language that the animal and humans share. In comparison to Bench, though Bench understand human body language, they are unable to reciprocate in a way that Squirrel can. Indeed, Squirrel communicates through body language as they decide to ‘fluff up [their] tail, hoping that’s the response he’s looking for’ (Hall, 2014: 152). The action of fluffing their tail is aligned with the noun ‘response’ highlighting body language as Squirrel’s only form of communication. Body language as the communicative channel between Squirrel

and Gabe emphasizes the theme of miscommunication between Gabe and Lea, who can both comprehend physical and verbal communication. In contrast, Bench states ‘if I could, I would grow spikes [...] They would sit down and I would grow a spike right into their rotund rear ends. Then they’d stop taking me for granted’ (Hall, 2014: 140). The verb ‘grow’ in Bench’s case replaces their ability to communicate their feeling of being taken for granted. However, the hypothetical conjunction ‘if’ and the low modality of the verb ‘could’ indicate Bench’s physical limitations to communicate with others. Therefore, the richly modelled mindstyles of Bench and Squirrel are used to heighten the theme of miscommunication between Gabe and Lea, ultimately emphasising the simplicity of communication and forming relationships.

Conclusion

In sum, the shallow mind-models of both non-human narrators rely on initial human-like traits to establish their mindstyles. These shallow models are then enriched by intimate details of the characters’ outlooks through different enactors, or in indications to their past experiences. Ultimately, the mindstyles of non-human narrators are used in Hall’s *ALSD* to emphasise the simplicity of communication between humans. The importance of the non-human narrators Bench and Squirrel is in the rich mind-models that illuminate their cognitive limitations as an object and animal. These limitations emphasise the unnecessary complications created by the two uncommunicative protagonists Gabe and Lea. Overall, non-human narrators in Hall’s *ALSD* ultimately reveal the simplicity of human relationships, illuminating the ways in which humans overcomplicate even the simplest actions: communication.

References

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