



Reading and Reimagining Post-Brexit London: A Theoretical Exploration of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* Through Gurr and Iser

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Abstract

Ali Smith's attempt at doing a time-sensitive experiment in the post-Brexit urban landscape has given rise to *Seasonal Quartet* in which formal experimentalism assists in rendering the complex post-Brexit reality and the moral engagement of her reading public. Utilizing Jens Martin Gurr's (2021) framework from "Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City", the study argues that Smith's novels serve dual functions: they textualize complex urban realities and shape perceptions of the city, suggesting conceptual possibilities for different urban futures. Gurr's theory posits that literary texts not only depict external urban realities but also invite intervention by using experimental narrative techniques like allusion. Integrating Gurr's ideas with Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, this study examines how Smith's recourse to Charles Dickens's works deprivatizes familiar Victorian contexts, inviting readers to envision solutions to contemporary urban issues. These allusions enrich the text's semantic potential, capturing the complex nature of post-Brexit London and engaging readers in imaginative re-conceptualizations of the city. This dual function—descriptive and prescriptive—illustrates how literature can reflect urban experiences and inspire transformative thinking. Ultimately, the research contributes to literary urban studies by highlighting the transformative power of literature in urban studies and political discourse, demonstrating how literary analysis can influence both understanding and envisioning more inclusive and dynamic urban futures.

Keywords: Brexit fiction, allusion, descriptive, London, prescriptive

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Sunday, August 11, 2024

Accepted: Thursday, February 20, 2025

Published: Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Available Online: Thursday, February 20, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2025.29930.1718>

Online ISSN: 2821-0204; Print ISSN: 28208986



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Introduction

The elusive entwinement of cities of words and brick can be traced back to “myths and legends that fashioned the identity of city-states” (McNamara, 2014, p. 1). The presence of cities in literature has been conceptualized in various ways from its origin to the present time in a way that texts began treating cities more than settings and symbols of ideals, leading to a more recent area of research called literary urban studies. Unlike classical literary urban studies which dealt with flâneur and God’s-eye views, postclassical literary urban studies show a renewed interest in the actual city, which has been called the tentative return of the real in literary studies (Boxall, 2019); this paradigm shift informed by the material turn highlights “the importance of phenomenology in the spatial humanities” (Ameel, 2022, p.6). This return to the real, thereby, raises interest in how actual readers reconstruct the literary city through their prior knowledge to build their own experiences of the city.

As an emerging field, postclassical literary urban studies pursues to view material and literary worlds as intertwining, which entails thinking about literature as a reflection on and an intervention into the world (Gurr, 2021). Any analysis of cities immediately reveals that they cannot be viewed as static objects but as complex organisms always in process not only in terms of their physical attributes but also in terms of the ways they are conceptualized (Michael, 2018). In charting this burgeoning field, the German theorist of postclassical literary urban studies, Jens Martin Gurr attributes double functions to literary texts: “descriptive” in representation of the city and “prescriptive” in allowing for directions for a different city. This dual nature is also evident in the fact that literary texts not only represent an external urban reality but also contribute to shaping perceptions of the urban to underscore that a different city is at least conceptually possible (Gurr, 2021), which is quite in line with the empowering quality of postclassical texts for their readers.

In postclassical treatments of urban concepts, Britain’s approach to conceptualizing the city appears indispensable. In particular, London’s position is of utmost significance. As Peyma and Aliashrafy (2013) believe, “London with its heterogeneous character is symbolized as a place of social encounter and cultural intermixture, a decentered place that stimulates the exploration of transnational models of identity” (p. 73). This unique “decentered” significance of London should be regarded next to the changes in the new millennium’s political aspects that have significantly altered British cities. This alteration, alongside the destruction of Britain’s colonial power, are two major forces behind the 2016 referendum in which the majority voted to leave the EU, indicating further retrenchment and an increase in reactionary policies (Michael, 2018). Brexit as a political outcome is deeply intertwined with economic issues, history, culture, and literature. More than any other city in the Brexit climate, London’s complexity turns it into an unfathomable labyrinth in the process of becoming to the extent that the probability of restoring the complex reality of the city to a human scale is questioned. This article explores how the literary allusions in Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* textualize the complexity and density of post-Brexit London. Additionally, it examines how these allusions enable readers to envision a conceptually different London, drawing on Gurrian theoretical perspectives.

Written in a post-Brexit landscape, Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* offers a sustained mediation on the annus mirabilis that radically changed the landscape of the twenty-first century, embedding the EU referendum and textualizing a cyclical process that cannot be over no matter the outcome of the referendum. In order to make the urban landscape narratable through her Brexit fiction, Ali Smith deploys multiple postmodernist narrative techniques that not only mimic the complexity of post-Brexit London but also give way to "subjective experience of reality shaped by imagination" (Alessio, 2020, p. 155). Therefore, for her to successfully meet the challenge of the complexity of urban space, and enable exploring urban worlds, Smith, through her experimentalism, not only represents the urban reality of London but also contributes to shaping perceptions of urban reality.

The present study argues that while embedding the contemporaneous events of the referendum within the cyclical process of history, Smith's novels reflect the complex realities of London and place readers in the London climate to conceptualize their own version of reality through imagination. In order to develop this argument, Jens Martin Gurr's (2021) ideas from "Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City" will be utilized. In presenting the dual functions of texts, he argues that literary texts not only represent external urban reality but contribute to shaping perceptions of the urban to highlight that a different city is at least conceptually possible, in a way that city literature not only reflects urban reality but also invites an intervention into it. In order for city literature to function like this, Gurr (2021) asserts, it deploys experimental narrative techniques like allusion to mimic a picture of the city and invite various conceptual possibilities. Therefore, since the political quartet of Ali Smith is rife with literary allusions, a Gurrian reading of the novels will prove to be quite fruitful as Gurr's double function seems to be quite in line with Smith's political vision of rendering the complex post-Brexit reality and the moral engagement of her reading public.

Literature Review

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* has garnered significant scholarly interest in the relatively short time it has been part of English literature. Much of the research centers on its political dimensions, positioning the quartet within the trend of post-Brexit fiction and exploring Smith's vision through their complex narratives. While these political readings are insightful, it is also crucial to recognize the importance of Smith's experimentalism, which captures the intricate reality of the post-Brexit metropolis and allows for further conceptualizations. Numerous articles and theses on Smith's quartet emphasize her literary techniques and formal experimentation. Although these works may not provide a literary urban reading, one capturing the relationship between text and city, they all highlight the significance of the Brexit climate and the role of the writer's craft in rendering the nature of the status quo.

According to Monica Germanà, Smith (2017) resorts to simultaneity in both form and content to enhance the nonlinearity of the story and allow for different planes of stories to coexist. Similarly, in her chapter, "BrexLit", Kristian Shaw (2018) argues that what complements the divisive atmosphere of the referendum is "the collage-like, disjointed temporality of the narrative structure" which foreshadows the subsequent fracture of the society (p. 21). Akin to the

previous two studies, in her thesis, Anna Janíková (2020), in analyzing the stylistic features of literary postmodernism, traces two elements of postmodern fiction and elaborates on the way they are deployed to offer a criticism of consumerism, cultural recycling, and manipulating power of the mass media: first, how narrative fragmentation thematizes the issues of chaos and disorientation, and second, how literary references serve to render the cultural memory of the society. Although the aforementioned articles and thesis do consider the significance of Smith's literary craft in rendering the chaotic post-Brexit climate, they do not examine how Smith, through resorting to her literary predecessors, establishes a relation between the texts and the metropolis to mimic the complex texture of London.

Daniel Lea, in his case study of Smith, elucidates that Smith regards storytelling as an instrument to counteract the authoritarian proclivity to "objectify and decode" literature, producing narratives that allow the reader to "live in and through the stories that they encounter and create, continuously repurposing them for the different challenges that life offers" (Lea, 2019, p. 403), highlighting Smith's desire to engage her readers with the text. Similarly, in her article, Laura Schmitz-Justen argues that encounters of the reader with ekphrastic objects like collages in Smith's quartet not only reflect the state of affairs but also propose various responses to it, enabling interpretation beyond hegemonic narratives, and therefore, make a multidimensional conceptualization of the contemporary aura a possibility (Schmitz-Justen, 2022). The studies above, thus, are enlightening in showcasing how Smith's fiction, through her experimental formalism, relies on the reader's engagement and his or her further conceptualization of the current climate; however, none of them offer a detailed study of how Smith's references to her literary predecessors encourage the reader to envision a conceptually different metropolis in the post-Brexit era, which is in line with Gurr's prescriptive function of urban novels.

All the aforementioned theses and articles considered many aspects of Smith's narrative craft in either rendering the complexity of post-Brexit reality or assisting readers in giving a response to the current climate. Nevertheless, no research study has been carried out as to how Smith's references to great works of English literature textualize the complexity of post-Brexit London while foregrounding the role of the reader in shaping a conceptually different metropolis. Gurr's literary urban approach and the double functions he attributes to texts can be illuminating in capturing Smith's visions in her *Seasonal Quartet*, where she promises those trying to cope with troubling realities that "another world is possible [even] when you're stuck in the world at its worst" (Smith, 2020, pp. 176-77).

Method

In his "Charting Literary Urban Studies", Gurr (2021) presents a challenge to the verbal representation of the overwhelming complexity of urban experience. Literary urban studies entail perceiving literature not merely as a representation but as an intervention into the world, acted out through literary tropes and techniques (Salmela et al., 2021). However, texts set in different time periods, deploy different experiential techniques to represent complexity and stage density of urban spaces. Postmodern literary explorations of the city attempt to render the city itself legible

as a text so as to mimic urban complexity and allow for different conceptualizations of the city (Gurr, 2021). As a postmodern author, Smith, through employing incisive allusions in her quartet, provides additional levels of meaning, which suggestively allows for an extreme multiplication and condensation of meaning appropriate to the representation of complexity in the metropolis (Gurr, 2021). Moreover, Smith's employment of literary allusions, "stripped of their original context", invites the reader to explore in fiction a different urban landscape or potential solutions for key issues following the referendum (Iser, 1978, p. 79).

In order to fulfill Gurr's descriptive and prescriptive functions in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, this study explores the way Smith's recourse to her literary predecessors enables the texts to mimic the complex fabric of the metropolis (descriptive) while integrating the reader, trying to cope with troubling realities, to imagine a conceptually different city (prescriptive). To elucidate how allusions can not only capture urban complexity but also invite different conceptualizations of the city, Gurr resorts to Wolfgang Iser's understanding of literature as "depragmatized" behavior in rehearsal in which literary allusions, as part of the "repertoire", lose their familiar context and give way to the new context of the new literary work, thus offering new answers to the reader (Iser, 1978).

This study aims to explore the way Iser's reader-response theory and his conceptualization of the literary allusions inherent in the "repertoire" of the text assist in fulfilling the Gurrian descriptive and prescriptive qualities in *Seasonal Quartet*. Before getting into Iser's model, it needs to be mentioned that "reader response theory [...] highlights that the way materials are understood, the role of the reader, and the active role of reader in understanding and cajoling meaning out the text as well as meaning construction all depend on the readers' previous experience of the text and his or her interpretation procedures." (Rahimipour and Khodadust, 2021, p. 205)

Now, turning to Iser, one could assert that in his model, the "repertoire", the collection of cultural norms and literary references, assists in concretizing the text's potential meaning through the reader's engagement and imagination. Compared to cultural norms, which expose the "deficiencies of a prevailing system", literary allusions, the focus of this study, "assist in producing an answer to the problems set by these deficiencies" (Iser, 1978, p. 79). In essence, the allusions or the negation of allusions acts as a catalyst for depragmatization; through fulfilling or disrupting the expected meaning allusions create interpretive gaps compelling the reader to conduct a creative examination of the text (Iser, 1974). The depragmatization of literary allusions, Iser argues, does not mean that the original context disappears altogether; instead, it becomes a virtual background against which the new subject matter can stand out distinctly (Iser, 1978). Having pushed the familiar context to the background, the depragmatized literary allusions, through creating blanks cause the reader to reevaluate familiar ideas from a new, often critical perspective, forcing the audience to see the alluded-to concept or cultural expectation in a fresh light that invites possibilities of connection and enables the reader to imagine the correction of the current deficient realities through his or her strategies (Iser, 1978).

In Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, there are numerous allusions to renowned works of English literature whose incorporation into new context allows for a

contemporary look at the answers that they provided to the problematics of the metropolis. The most striking of these allusions are to Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (2007b), *A Christmas Carol* (2007a), *Hard Times* (2007c), and *David Copperfield* (2004) that are layered upon each of the quartet's novels respectively. This study, thus, considers the literary allusions, present in the repertoire of Smith's text, responses to the issues at the heart of the metropolis which can be recontextualized once the reader engages with the texts and its familiar elements to finally build up a new meaning and bring about new answers to the post-Brexit climate of London. The study undertakes a reader-oriented approach to study how readers, through allusive references or their negation, are able to fill the gaps, build new meanings, and subsequently effect changes in their post-Brexit landscape throughout the whole process of reading in the *Seasonal* novels, making it above and beyond studying passing ironic references which often expose limitations or contradictions without considering an active part for the reader to bring about a changed meaning / landscape.

Discussion

The Autumnal Split in Post-Referendum London: *Autumn's* Narrative of Detachment

Initiating her quartet in the complex atmosphere dominant after the 2016 referendum in London, Ali Smith endeavors to vividly portray her despair of the wasteland through her narrative. In doing so, Smith skillfully incorporates literary allusions to Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (2007b) into the first season of the cycle to allow for multiplication and condensation of meaning appropriate to the representation of complexity in post-referendum London (Gurr, 2021). Along with the descriptive quality of Dickensian allusions, the prescriptive function finds its tangible manifestation once the deprivatized literary allusions entice readerly engagement (Iser, 1978), and the imaginary correction of deficiencies of the metropolis. References to *A Tale*, therefore, allow for a contemporary look at the split between the two camps of Leave and Remain, and what it will probably lead to if the issue is not addressed properly.

The most striking literary allusion in "Autumn" is the first sentence: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times," (Smith, 2017, p. 8) which plays on the opening sentences of a celebrated English novel, *A Tale* (2007b): "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . ." (Dickens, 2007b, p. 17), lacking the verbatim quotation—"the best"—to firmly insist on the adverse conditions prevailing in contemporary London. Moreover, the allusions to *A Tale* are not limited to the opening chapter. The parallel between the two novels further reverberates when Elisabeth is mentioned to be reading Dickens's historical novel, *A Tale*, as her comatose friend Daniel advised her to always be reading something, or there is no other way to read the world (Smith, 2017). These incisive allusions throughout the novel conjure several of *A Tale's* themes in the background while the newer themes of "Autumn" are foregrounded against the background of these familiar allusions in order for "the new subject matter [to] stand out in clear relief" (Iser, 1978, p. 80). Set to fit the new context, the "deprivatized allusions", while "stand[ing] out in clear relief"

encourage the reader to imagine a city stripped of its deficiencies. Also, through a few words or quotations, all the themes and associations connected to *A Tale* are imported into “Autumn” and add to its “semantic potential”, effecting extreme condensation of meaning appropriate to post-referendum London (Gurr, 2021, p. 58).

The explicit references to Dickens’s urban novel call for more implicit parallels between the two texts. Anna Janíková, in her analysis of “Autumn” (Smith, 2017), presents the dichotomy that both “Autumn” and *A Tale* (2007b) attempt to invoke (Janíková, 2020). *A Tale*, as the name suggests, showcases the duality between London and Paris as representatives of their thought systems: “England, the country of relative peace contrasts with revolutionary and bloodthirsty France and the noble idea of human liberty is set against the brutal and ruthless killing brought about by the French revolution” (p. 52). This dichotomy is also manifested in the divide between the two worlds of the wealthy aristocracy and the world of the famished commoners in Dicken’s metropolis. In Smith’s first installment, another duality—Leave or Remain—can be seen as the result of the 2016 referendum. The issues that have emerged during Brexit are well enunciated in strongly contradictory statements:

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they’d really lost. All across the country, people felt they’d really won. All across the country, people felt they’d done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. (Smith, 2017)

The contradictory images effectively capture the autumnal split in the society of London and echo *A Tale* describing the period after the French Revolution:

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . . . (Dickens, 2007b, p. 17)

Through this allusion, the duality at the heart of Dickens’s novel is “depragmatized and set in [the] new context” of the divided London of Smith where the Leavers rejoiced and the Remainers lamented (Iser, 1978, p. 79). Smith, however, without taking any sides, seems more concerned with rendering this chasm through her allusive recourse to *A Tale* to “create a blank which, at best, offers possibilities of connection” to the reader (Iser, 1978, p. 184). These blanks allow the reader to grasp the significance of those allusions within a new literary context to warn him / her to be wary of the consequences of this split in post-referendum season in order to enable him / her to long for and reimagine a conceptually different London.

Accordingly, the Dickensian allusions in “Autumn” work as a virtual background against which “Autumn”’s main theme of post-Brexit societal and urban split is foregrounded, whereby the reader is summoned to evaluate what is stored in his or her repertoire and indeed achieve the goal of “imaginary correction of deficient realities” in post-Brexit metropolis (Iser, 1978). For instance, to describe

the post-Brexit London where things are falling apart Smith mentions: "Hunger, want and nothing. The whole city's in a storm at sea and that's just the beginning. Savagery's coming. Heads are going to roll," (Smith, 2017, p. 110) to evoke the same dark feeling in the reader that Dickens's broken cask of wine did in *A Tale* (Dickens, 2007b). This allusion to Dicken's classic calls for the reader to reshape the familiar past experiences (the original context) in the repertoire and adapt to the new vagaries of his or her time following Brexit to be able to imagine "correction[s] of deficient realities" (Iser, 1978, p. 79). The reader embarks upon this path since it is only through meaningful engagement with the past crises that the present fracture can be avoided (Sumner, 2023). The reality of the autumnal split in London, therefore, can be reshaped once the reader is aware of the detrimental consequences of the division and the urgency of transformation.

This way, the depth of the autumnal split in London is illuminated through the literary allusions to the work of "the first great English novelist of the city" where social issues are mirrored in urban settings (Eagleton, 2005, p. 143). Multiple allusions to *A Tale* (Dickens, 2007b) import various themes into "Autumn" (Smith, 2017), allowing for condensation of meaning appropriate to the complexity of the city; rather than elaborating on and detailing how the division and detachment is ravaging the entire landscape and devouring the city, in only a few references all the themes and their associations are captured in the novel, fulfilling Gurr's descriptive function of texts in rendering the complexity of urban contexts (Eagleton, 2005). In "Autumn", allusions to Dickens's urban novel, *A Tale*, which, in Iserian terms, is in the "repertoire" lose their familiar context, that of Victorian London, or are "depragmatized" in order to take on the new context, the split in post-referendum London, creating a blank for the reader to entice his or her engagement. Being enabled to see the current urban split between the Leave and the Remain in a new light thanks to the Dickensian allusions, the reader begins exploring the deficiencies of the post-Brexit urban reality (Iser, 1978) and longs for reconciliation and transformation of the metropolis to try out in fiction potential solution for key issues in the city (Gurr, 2021).

Towards Promises of Reconciliation in Post-Referendum London: Winter's Christmas Narrative

Published in 2017 when post-referendum London was experiencing a total sense of despair, the second installment, through literary references to Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (2007a), once more attempts to mimic urban density while associating moral degradation with this complex urban landscape and the urge for a true reconciliatory Christmas season replacing the Brexit one. Gurr's prescriptive function is also fulfilled when Dickensian allusions go beyond being merely imitative by losing their original context and creating a blank that "offers possibilities of connection" to the reader in order to assist him / her to produce an answer, that of reconciliation, to the problems of detachment in the metropolis (Iser, 1978).

Like the first installment, "Winter" (Smith, 2018) is replete with references to various works of art, music, and literature, the most striking of which is to Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (2007a). While "Autumn" (Smith, 2017), through multiple references to *A Tale* (2007b), developed its theme of division and the need for transformation, "Winter", through allusions Dickens's Christmas story, attempts

to drive its point of reconciliation home through featuring a group of characters tied together by familial bonds, and the setting is a family reunion during Christmas, which is quite parallel to *A Christmas Carol*, developing an appealing theme and a reconciliatory message. The first chapter of “Winter” opens with “God was dead: to begin with” echoing Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* (Smith, 2018, p. 7): “Marley was dead, to begin with” (Dickens, 2007a, p. 9). Just like the case with *A Tale* and “Autumn”, allusions to *A Christmas Carol* are not a one-off reference highlighting only one particular theme at a time but function as “the foundation to the [narrative]” to the extent that “Winter” is viewed, Boxall (2013) asserts, as “a story of Christmas redemption that works as a retelling of *A Christmas Carol* (p. 288).

Set in an unexpected family Christmas reunion at Sophia Cleves’s place, “Winter” (Smith, 2018) begins recounting Sophie’s unsettling experience of seeing strange spots at the side of her vision, which gradually get bigger and take the form of a “disembodied head” reminding her of a “head of a child” which is following her everywhere, even “floating by itself in mid-air” (p. 11). No later, Sophia is followed by a vision of a child’s merry head to which she tells Christmas stories to lull it to sleep. Similarly, Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 2007a), visited by three spirits on Christmas Eve, feels disturbed and is eventually transformed into a more congenial man who shows empathy towards his fellowman. Appearing as a Scrooge-like character, Sophia Cleves, the strict Leaver who feels no empathy towards immigrants, is expected to be transformed, taking a more lenient stance on the current division. Through this allusion, the need for a Christmas season and transformation in Dickens’s novella is “depragmatized and set in [the] new context” of the post-referendum London that calls for a Christmas season that brings about a true reconciliation between denizens who have fallen apart (Iser, 1978).

It is through *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 2007a) that Dickens attempts to capture the zeitgeist of the early Victorian period when the Londoners explored and re-evaluated past Christmas traditions and did their utmost to revive carols, family gatherings, and festive spirit in celebrating the Christmas season in order to promote a type of social connection lost in the modern landscape. By incorporating Dickens’s Christmas story into her wintery narrative, Smith appears to cast doubt on the possibility of restoring social connection in the landscape merely through reviving Christmas traditions, as no Scrooge-like transformation is traced in the character of Sophie. The presence of Dickensian allusions in “Winter” (Smith, 2018), stripped of their original Victorian context in Iserian (1978) terms, “acts as a virtual background” against which Smith’s Christmas narrative, “Winter”, “stands out in clear relief” (p. 80). This depragmatization creates blanks for the reader to reevaluate past experiences contained within the repertoire and thereby allow adaptations in order to correct the deficiencies (Iser, 1978). This way, the reader, faced with the split London, realizes that although “the earlier answer”, reviving Christmas traditions, “offers a form of orientation” for the present predicament, it does not work for post-referendum London where things are falling apart (p. 79). What contemporary London truly needs, the reader concludes, is a reconciliatory Christmas that promises a kind of connection or solidarity that is not merely an “empty gestural” but lasts longer, aligning it with what makes Lux wonder: “Okay in any way, to be wishing everybody peace, peace on earth, goodwill to all men,

merry, happy, but just for today, or only for these few days a year? . . . What's the point of Christmas, otherwise?" (Smith, 2018, p. 119), once more highlighting the necessity for a reconciliatory Christmas season that is not just an "empty gestural" but one that lasts longer.

Ergo, the call for reconciliation is well illuminated through literary references to Dickens's Christmas story of transformation and connection. As a retelling of *A Christmas Carol* (2007a), in Boxall's (2019) words, "Winter" in a few explicit references to Dickens invites more fundamental parallels between the two novels that lead to different levels of meaning, that of revival, transformation, connection, and reconciliation, being channeled into Smith's narrative adding to its "semantic potential", thereby enabling the text to mimic the complexity of post-Brexit London and fulfill Gurr's (2021) descriptive function. Along with the descriptive function, Gurr's prescriptive function is also fulfilled once Dickensian allusions to *A Christmas Carol* lose their familiar context in the repertoire, that is the need for transformation which is the revival of Christmas traditions and social connection in the metropolis, and begin to take on the new context of post-Brexit call for a reconciliation which is not an empty gestural, as it is in Dickens's narrative, but one that brings about true connection to the split London. Put another way, the revival of Christmas traditions used to be the "reaction to past historical problems" of Dickens's Victorian period, answers which are no longer valid for the contemporary rupture of the city (Iser, 1978). This de pragmatization, therefore, gives way to the reader to connect with the urban text and imagine a conceptually different London, one deficient of the current split moving towards reconciliation. The transformation, withheld from the character of Sophie, is placed on the reader whose contemporary look at "the earlier answers" to the problem, Dickensian allusions, will offer new answers, enabling him / her to formulate "directions or options for a different future city", one deficient of the current detachment and can bring about a settlement and hope to the split London. (Iser, 1978; & Gurr, 2021).

The Rejuvenation of Hope in Post-Brexit London: The Hopeful Spring

Ensuing "Autumn" and "Winter", expected to breathe new life into the whole quartet, the third installment with a bleaker atmosphere than its predecessors, strike readers as appalling. The gloominess reverberates across the novel through the Dickensian allusions, which greatly illuminate the hard times following the referendum. References to Dickens's (2007c) *Hard Times* in "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) well capture the complexity of the city where denizens' souls are harshly industrialized. Being de pragmatized and set in the post-Brexit context, the Dickensian allusions function as an answer by revealing the deficiencies of the current spirit of the metropolis to the reader enabling him / her to imagine a metropolis devoid of its present predicaments, one that promises glimmers of hope in "Spring".

In the same vein as "Autumn" (Smith, 2017) and "Winter" (Smith, 2018), "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) opens with a Dickensian allusion that parallels the third installment in its main theme of the industrialization of the soul with overemphasis on facts: "Now what we don't want is Facts. What we want is bewilderment" ironically negating *Hard Times*'s already ironic opening: "Now, what I want is, Facts. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition. What we want is

people in power saying the truth is not the truth.” (Smith, 2019, p. 11; & Dickens, 2007c, p. 5), referring to Dickens’s anti-utilitarian sentiments. According to Iser, the negation of allusions works to create indeterminacy in order to simulate the imagination of the reader:

Expectations aroused in the reader by allusions to the things he knows or thinks he knows are frustrated; through this negation, we know that the standards and models alluded to are somehow to be transcended, though no longer on their own terms. These now appear to be, as it were, things of the past; what follows cannot be stated, but has to be realized. Thus, negation can be seen as the inducement to realization—which is the reader’s production of the meaning of the text. (Iser, 1974)

This negation of already ironic allusion catalyzes the de pragmatization through generating indeterminacy for the reader to conduct a creative production of meaning and thereby imagining a different future landscape. In *Hard Times*, Dickens caricatures the “cold-hearted fetishism of facts” that the Utilitarians championed through the character of Gradgrind (Eagleton, 2005, p. 158). The “what I want is, Facts,” which opened the novel, was an ironic echo of the Utilitarian mentality that pervaded the Victorian system at that time. If Dickens’s opening sentence was ironic, so is Smith’s very negation of that sentence, which is her reaction to her own reality. Facing the negation of Dickens’s ironic statement, the reader comes to the realization that Smith is dealing with a different urban reality in the twenty-first century, a landscape which is undergoing a mess of confusing, sometimes contradicting sentiments and ideologies: “What we want is outrage offence distraction. What we need is to say thinking is elite knowledge is elite what we need is people feeling left behind disenfranchised what we need is people feeling” (Smith, 2019, p. 11). Thus, the negation of the ironic allusion induces the reader to realize that Dickens’s Manchester school of utilitarianism in SA4A-run Immigration Removal Center (IRC), the manifestation of the Leave-oriented immigration policies, where the detained immigrants are viewed as the *other* that are not privileged enough to deserve the same right as other denizens (Dickens, 2007c). In disapproving of a post-Brexit landscape in which the system, in its attempt to maintain an effective immigration apparatus, has mechanized its people, including Brittany who gradually becomes indifferent to the plights of the detainees, Smith incorporates the legendary Florence, untainted by the evils of the system, into the narrative to “reawaken characters’ dormant imaginations and emotions, break the frozen sea within”, which is what parallels her character with *Hard Times*’s Sissy Jupe, the savior of the Gradgrind’s family (Jordan, 2019).

The corporate institution of Dickens loses its familiar context of utilitarian philosophy of the Victorian period in the repertoire and readily yields to IRCs in post-Brexit London. This de pragmatization offers possibilities of connection to the reader (Iser, 1978) to probe the deficiencies of the current spirit of the metropolis where an inhumane ideology is instilled into machine-like DCOs as well as the detainees who are not privileged enough to have their own privacy (Smith, 2019). Probing the deficiencies of the city through allusive recourses to *Hard Times* (Dickens, 2007c) offers an opportunity for the reader to seek an answer for the current bleak atmosphere. This way, the reader discovers what finally liberated the

Gradgrind family from the “cold-hearted fetishism of facts” and utilitarian philosophy was the presence of a child, Sissy Jupe, who through her imaginative power caused hope to rejuvenate in their city (Eagleton, 2005, p. 158); in the same vein, the reader regards Florence Green in the novel as the potential for “transform[ing] that which looks fixed” (Smith, 2019, as cited in Armitstead, 2019), connecting her with the hope present at the heart of “Spring” (Smith, 2019a) who manages to convince the head to get the toilets cleaned, or free the trafficked women in a south-east London sex house, or even transform Brittany’s fixed worldviews toward the end of the novel (Smith, 2019, pp. 127, 201). Therefore, faced with the post-referendum London where its denizens are forced into inhumane ideologies, the reader, in communicating with the urban text, is enlightened on the fact that “the earlier answer” in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, which is the presence of a child from the land of imagination does not work for the contemporary London (Iser, 1978). However, the present metropolis, the reader concludes, is in need of agents of change like Florence, who believing that “a shift towards hope will come at the darkest,” takes drastic actions to restore balance and hope to the city (Smith, 2019b). Hope, in *Hard Times*, comes to fruition once the members of the school abandon fact-oriented philosophy and gradually lean toward Sissy’s fancy-oriented philosophy; whereas, in “Spring” hope rejuvenates toward the end of the novel when Brit’s mindset goes through change: “That was Brit in autumn. It’s spring now” (Smith, 2019a, p. 206); although her attitude has undergone changes thanks to Florence, Britany is *still* working at the IRC. This way, the reaction to the current inhumane, fixed ideology, elucidated through Dickensian allusions, would be for the reader to take corrective actions like Florence’s in order to defeat the seemingly fixed ideology that mechanizes people and otherizes the immigrants in London, where they are deprived of inscribing their voice into the urban fabric (Groes, 2011, pp. 14-15). The rejuvenation and thereby fruition of hope becomes possible once the reader takes serious actions to balance out the current deficiencies.

The call for rejuvenation of hope in “Spring” (Smith, 2019a) in the autumnal darkness is well manifested through negation of allusions. It is through these Dickensian allusions that the main theme of resistance to fixed ideologies, achieved through the figure of children who are the harbingers of hope, is imported to Smith’s third installment; in only a few ironic references to *Hard Times*, all the paralleled themes along with their associations are thrust into “Spring”, yielding a condensed text appropriate to the representation of complexity in post-Brexit London, fulfilling Gurr’s (2021) descriptive function. Through these allusions and the parallels that they invite, the reader, facing the inhumane ideology and the urgent need for hope in the new context of post-referendum London, reevaluates what is previously stored in the repertoire, that is post-industrial utilitarian philosophy and the need for a balance between fact and fancy in Dickens’s work, and adapts it to the present ideology implanted in the denizens’ minds which is marginalizing minorities, and hence stealing hope from them all. “To formulate directions or options for a different future city,” (Gurr, 2021, p. 4) the reader needs to accomplish what Florence could partially achieve resistance in the face of seemingly fixed ideology through taking firm actions in order to reconnect denizens and effect a conceptually different city where hope is rejuvenating.

Heroism on Command in Post-Referendum London: *Summer* as the Culmination of the Seasonal Cycle

Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* began with the split London after the referendum and moved toward the possibility of reconciliation in "Winter" (Smith, 2018). In the heart of darkness of "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) hope was lurking to bring about human connectedness. Expected to bring the split and cycle to a close, "Summer" (Smith, 2020) accomplishes this human connectedness, leading not to rejuvenation but fruition of hope in the metropolis. In order for this hope to come to fruition, through Dickensian allusions to *David Copperfield* (2004), the call for heroism is underscored. Just like its precedents, "Summer", through incorporating allusions and paralleled themes along with their associations, renders a condensed text appropriate to the urban landscape. As well as the descriptive function, the prescriptive one is also well fulfilled when the Dickensian concept of heroism loses its original context and is set in the post-Brexit context of London; this de pragmatization creates blanks for the reader to connect with the text and fill in the gaps, through which new concept of heroism is born as a reaction to the current issue of disconnection and marginalization, which withhold hope from fruition and the emergence of a different city, one that Gurr expects.

Near the beginning of the final season, the moment Sacha and her mom are arguing about Sacha's essay on "Forgiveness", the theme of heroism in *David Copperfield* (2004) is established when Grace starts wondering whether she "shall turn out to be the heroine of [her] own life" (Smith, 2020, p. 10), which is a clear reference to the opening chapter of Dickens's *David Copperfield* where David prefaces the story of his life with a question of heroics: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (Dickens, 2004, p. 13). Over the course of penning his life story, David, endowed with close observation and remarkable memory, begins rekindling his early childhood recollections, reflecting on his marriage with Dora, and revoking an image of his angelic second wife, Agnes, all of which provoke pleasant feelings in Dave that leads to his being immersed in his past memories in so far as the narrator, like readers, forgets that it is a lived past not a present that is occurring at the moment, which makes Dave impotent to move forward. Although Dave's truthfulness and fairness assist him in navigating through the moral uncertainties of the time, and ultimately render him a Victorian hero, his fascination with his own recollections incapacitates him to move forward in the present.

Throughout the fragmentary narrative of "Summer" (Smith, 2020), as a memory novel, several characters evoke their recollections: Daniel invokes his flee from Nazism into a British internment camp with his loving father and his relationship with his sister Hannah (Smith, 2020); Grace, still struggling with her separation, constantly shuttles backward in memory evoking her summery old days with her ex-lover, her heyday as an actor in the summer of 1989, both of them to ascertain that they used to be the hero / heroine of their own lives. In a way, akin to David, they are immersed in their past memories so much so that they narrate their memories in the present tense to reinvent and embroider their heroic years. Living in a dysfunctional family, Sacha rekindles the days her parents lived together, or the time swifts were in their city, or the climate was not this extreme. However, just like

Florence of "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) who resists the strict ideologies of her time, the sixteen-year-old Sacha of "Summer" is not trapped in those memories, instead, she wears a shining armor against the landscape she finds unbearably dark believing that the meaning of heroism has changed and that "the modern sense of being a hero is shining a bright light on things that need to be seen" (Smith, 2020, p. 146): Sacha appears to find modern heroism in voicing the plight of the immigrants, like Hero, in detention centers or in being Greta Thunberg in the face of climate change.

This way, approaching the Dickensian allusion, the reader would see that the familiar concept of Victorian heroism within the repertoire loses its "original context" and is "set in the new context" of post-referendum London where citizens are experiencing detachment and isolation, bolstered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Iser, 1978). Assuming that the "earlier answer," the Victorian concept of heroism, is no longer valid for the current spirit of the city, the reader attempts to seek a new definition for heroism as a reaction to the current split in the metropolis (Iser, 1978). In search of a new concept of heroism appropriate to the contemporary London, the reader would see how Smith's narrative develops a Generation Z character, Sacha, who presents the modern sense of heroism in which we need to be in command: Victorian truthfulness and fairness need to be armed with taking action against the adversities of the contemporary landscape rather than being trapped in heroic concepts of the past, that is the pursuit of moral self-improvement. Therefore, this readerly engagement enticed by deprivatized allusions offers the opportunity to correct the current deficiencies of London by giving a new meaning to heroism that, in Gurr's terms, can bring about a conceptually different city (Gurr, 2021).

As the culmination of the seasonal cycle, "Summer" (Smith, 2020) is expected to bring about the fruition of hope in the city through commanding heroism, manifested through allusions to Dickens's *David Copperfield* (2004). It is through these allusions that the main themes of the Victorian concept of heroism, the importance of arming moral self-improvement with action, and appreciating the present rather than being immersed in the past heroic deeds are imported into Smith's text; in only a few words of quotation or allusion all these themes are thrust into the text which adds to the "semantic potential" of the novel, enabling the text to be the representation of London in 2020 (Gurr, 2021, P. 4). The Gurr's prescriptive function is also fulfilled once the reader faces the deprivatized allusion whose familiar context, Dickens's Victorian period, is backgrounded in favor of its new context, Smith's post-Brexit landscape. In adapting the Victorian definition of heroism to the post-Brexit landscape, the reader, through the character of Sacha, comes to the realization that in order for the denizens to reconnect, and hope to thrive in post-Brexit London, all they need is to wear shining armor against this obtuse landscape and take heroic actions, which will thereby promise "directions or options for a different future city," a city where unity replace division (Gurr, 2021, P. 4). This envisioned future city is one where individuals are empowered to enact change, fostering a sense of collective hope and renewed purpose in the face of contemporary challenges. As human connectedness is the major theme that Smith is developing in "Summer", the narrator proceeds to pose its antithesis as the problem:

I mean, I could spend my whole life listing things about, and talking about, and demonstrating with sources and graphs and examples and statistics,

what history's made it clear happens when we're indifferent, and what the consequences are of the political cultivation of indifference, which whoever wants to disavow will dismiss in an instant with their own punchy little. (Smith, 2020)

As Iser (1978) points out:

[l]iterature endeavors to counter the problems produced by the system, Through it, we can reconstruct whatever was concealed or ignored by the philosophy or ideology of the day, precisely because these neutralized or negated aspects of reality form the focal point of the literary work. (p. 73).

Therefore, it is indifference that is posed as the failure of the contemporary landscape to which Smith is reacting. Since hope for change operates at the basis of Smith's *Seasonal* quartet, the reader is prompted to seek the alternative to this prevalent indifference, which is human connectedness, throughout the reading process of "Summer".

Conclusion

This study elucidates the dual function of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* in depicting and transforming post-Brexit London. Integrating Gurr's (2021) framework with Iser's reader-response theory demonstrates how Smith's novels serve descriptive and prescriptive purposes. Gurr's notion of literary texts as models of and for the city underscores that literature reflects and shapes urban realities. Smith's use of Dickensian allusions examines London's complexity while simultaneously inviting the reader to engage with the text and reimagine the city. Reading London is, thus, realized through Dickensian allusion that thrust different layers of meaning into the quartet, textualizing the complex nature of London following the referendum. The prospect of a more inclusive urban future can be reimaged through the literary allusions or their negation that generate Iserian blanks, giving way to the reader to develop a different meaning and reality in post-Brexit London.

The Dickensian allusions in each installment of the quartet textualize the complexity of London. In the first installment, references to *A Tale* (2007b) facilitate a condensation of meaning; rather than offering a lengthy exposition of how societal divisions are fragmenting the urban landscape, Smith employs these references to textualize the complex dynamics representative of the intricate nature of post-Brexit London. In "Winter" (Smith, 2018), the echoes of *A Christmas Carol* (2007a) reveal the inadequacy of reviving past traditions to address modern divisions, emphasizing the need for more substantive reconciliation beyond superficial gestures. Through a few references, various layers of meaning are thrust into this narrative—revival, transformation, connection, and reconciliation—enhancing its semantic complexity to reflect the complexity of London grappling with its post-referendum identity. "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) further enriches the quartet through references to *Hard Times* (Dickens, 2007c), evoking themes of rigidity versus flexibility and the potential for transformation through harbingers of hope, leading to the importation of different layers of meaning to the text. Finally, "Summer" (Smith, 2020), through the lens of *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 2004), hosts key themes such as the Victorian concept of heroism, the importance of pairing moral self-improvement with action, and the value of appreciating the present rather than dwelling on past

heroic deeds. By embedding a few quotations, these themes are seamlessly integrated into the text, enhancing its semantic complexity, which allows the novel to mimic the complexities of London. The quartet as a whole, therefore, through Dickensian allusions encapsulates the complex nature of post-Brexit London, rendering a text that textualizes the complexity of contemporary London, serving Gurr's descriptive purpose.

Smith's allusions go beyond being merely representative, inviting readers to engage with the text and envision potential solutions to the urban and societal deficiencies. Iser's reader-response theory is crucial here in which deprivatized literary allusions allow the familiar elements of Dickens's works to resonate within the new context of Smith's narratives, prompting the reader to imagine a more reconciled urban reality. This call for a true reconciliation is gradually placed on the reader throughout the quartet to reimagine a different urban landscape. In the first season, through the divide present in *A Tale* (Dickens, 2007b) in the background, the contemporary split in London stands out, thereby creating a "blank" for readers to fill with their interpretations and solutions. By viewing the current divide through Dickensian allusions, readers are prompted to explore the deficiencies of the post-Brexit urban reality and consider how these transformations could be actualized in the metropolis. Smith's adaptation of Dickens's Christmas narrative in "Winter" reveals the inadequacy of reviving past traditions to address modern divisions. In post-Brexit London, these references are deprivatized and take a fresh significance, symbolizing a call for genuine connection amidst the city's divisions. "Spring" (Smith, 2019a) further underscores the necessity of hope amidst adversity, drawing on *Hard Times* (Dickens, 2007c) to highlight the contrast between the harsh post-Brexit realities and the potential for rejuvenation through imagination. The deprivatized allusions to *Hard Times* create blanks for the reader to reassess Dickens's critique of utilitarianism and adapt it to present ideologies that marginalize minorities. The goal is to conceptualize a different city where hope is renewed and all denizens feel included and optimistic about the future. Achieving this future city requires redefining heroism through *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 2004). By adapting Victorian heroism to the contemporary setting, the reader, through Sacha's character, learns that reconnecting the city's inhabitants and revitalizing hope in post-Brexit London requires individuals to take heroic actions, offering directions for a different future city, where unity replaces division and despair.

This study demonstrated how literary techniques contributed to urban studies and political discourse. By combining descriptive and prescriptive functions, Smith depicts post-Brexit London and empowers the reader to envision and potentially realize a more inclusive urban future. Ultimately, through the lenses of Gurr and Iser, this study underscored the importance of literary analysis in addressing urban issues and highlighted literature's transformative potential in urban contexts.

Acknowledgments

The present study has no acknowledgments to declare.

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