

Compare and contrast the ways in which Alexander Masters in *'Stuart: A Life Backwards'* and Khaled Hosseini in *'The Kite Runner'* use a range of narrative techniques to show how characters are affected by the past.

The past is a central theme in both *'Stuart: A Life Backwards'* (2005) by Alexander Masters and *'The Kite Runner'* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini. How this affects the characters shapes the narratives of the books, their relationships with other characters, and the settings that they find themselves in. *'Stuart: A Life Backwards'* is a nonfiction biography of Stuart Shorter set in Cambridge, Britain, showing the lasting impact that trauma in his life, ranging from sexual abuse to police brutality, has had on him. Stuart is also affected by shame at his own aggression. This theme of shame is also central to *'The Kite Runner'*, a fictional novel set in Kabul, Afghanistan and California, USA, which tells the story of Amir's struggle to find redemption following his betrayal of Hassan, who he abandons when he is being raped and frames as a thief. In this way, both texts focus on the haunting effects of past abuse, though *'Stuart: A Life Backwards'* primarily focuses on Stuart as a victim of this abuse, while *'The Kite Runner'* focuses on Amir an observer and even a culprit.

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The narrative voice used by both Masters and Hosseini help them to depict the effects of the past, albeit in opposing ways. Stuart's story is narrated by Alexander, who provides observations of Stuart's life, for instance, 'Street life is testimony to' Stuart's 'self-defeating powers of adaptation'. Masters uses a high register to provide an apparently objective, scholarly overview, however,

quotations from Stuart are also used, giving him a voice of his own, which is blunt and expletive compared to Masters". When Masters describes the abuse in Stuart's past he uses legalistic, Latinate lexis such as 'sodomised' and 'indecent assault'. The phrase 'perform fellatio' is an almost euphemistically formal way of explaining what Stuart describes as having 'a grown man's dick down your throat'.

The contrasting voices, with such different registers, highlights social inequality in contemporary Britain, showing us that since Stuart's past has left him disenfranchised and virtually illiterate, Masters is needed to give his story both coherence and credibility for a potentially judgemental reader. However, the use of Stuart's direct speech lends a raw and shocking quality to the narrative, giving us an authentic insight into his mind and how his past has affected him. Hosseini uses a different technique – the central character, Amir, narrates his own story retrospectively, allowing the reader first rather than second hand insight into his past. After the crucial moment when he betrays Hassan, he says 'I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running... Hassan was the price I had to play, the lamb I had to slay to win Baba'. This helps the reader understand Amir's shame and why he feels the need for redemption – that it was not just fear that drove him to betray his friend, but selfishness. The harshness of the verb 'slay' suggests that Amir is ashamed of this attitude. Amir's narration foregrounds the reason why he frames Hassam as a thief in order to get him out of the house - 'when he was around, the oxygen seeped out of the room'. This metaphor shows that past events left him with a physical inability to be in Hassan's presence. Amir also acts as a bridge between Afghanistan and America, able to explain the intricacies of both to unfamiliar readers. For instance, he explains the inequality between Pashtuns and Hazaras in Afghanistan, his exploitation of which accentuates his guilt over the past, as can be seen when he

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The writers' uses of structure and chronology also (explore) the effects of the past.

'Stuart: A Life Backwards', is told in reverse chronology, as Stuart himself suggested, beginning with the end of Stuart's life and working back towards the beginning. Masters likens this approach to - 'tacking like a sailboat against the wind', reflecting Stuart's difficulty remembering and coming to terms with his past. Masters further explains why he heeded Stuart's structural suggestion, with the rhetorical question 'Isn't a life a sum of its pasts?', making the reader wonder

what in Stuart's past has, as Stuart puts it 'murdered the boy I was'. The verb 'murdered' implies that something tragic has completely killed the old Stuart.

Masters emphasises this as a key factor in telling the story backwards, explaining that the approach works because Stuart's 'sense of existence is already broken

into fragments.' This metaphor suggests that his past has destroyed his very sense of self. Hosseini also deviates from chronology in 'The Kite Runner', as the first

chapter takes place in 2001, then the rest of the novel unfolds chronologically from his childhood. The opening line, 'I became what I am today at the age of

twelve' alludes to Amir's past, and how he is unable to move on - the present tense 'am' shows he is still profoundly influenced by the past, although the reader

does not yet know what happened. Further clues as to why Amir cannot move on are given in this chapter, such as in the sentence- 'I knew it wasn't just Rahim

Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins' - the personification of the past as speaking to him emphasises how he feels it haunts him. The past is also

personified with the phrase 'claws its way out' - the verb 'claws' suggests a

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menacing quality to these memories, and the imagery of the past re-emerging from the earth emphasises a haunting inescapability that prepares us for the events about to unfold.

AO1 beautifully conveyed

The authors share with the reader both positive and negative perceptions that Amir and Stuart have of others that are shaped by their pasts. For Stuart, this is shaped by his fear of 'the system', which, Masters explains, 'has chased him about like a bad rain cloud ever since he was twelve years old'. The verb 'chased' personifies 'the system', making it sound predatory. This hatred is exemplified when Stuart responds a policeman's innocent greeting with a vitriolic rant where he fumes at the hypocrisy and brutality of the police – the actions of the individual policeman are irrelevant to Stuart, who sees him as part of a violent system, as he explicitly describes with a focus on sensory descriptions from his experiences such as 'blood all across the walls and screaming', showing the vividness of his past memories. Amir's perception of others also gives us an insight into how his past affects him – his shame can be seen through the elevation of Hassan to a status of moral purity and innocence in his narration. During the rape scene he is said to have 'the look of a lamb' mirroring Biblical depictions of Jesus, and also echoing the Afghan custom of slaughtering a lamb to be feasted upon. This imagery depicts Hassan as selfless, as is foregrounded in the repeated refrain of 'For you, a thousand times over' throughout the novel. Amir remarks in the novel 'Everywhere I turned, I saw signs of his... unwavering loyalty' – the premodifiers 'everywhere' and 'unwavering' emphasise his almost impossibly flawless behaviour. Amir's idolisation of Hassan serves to accentuate his own guilt about his past by emphasising his negative self-image.

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Both writers show that the past has caused their characters to withdraw from or destroy relationships, becoming isolated from the world around them. Stuart isolates himself physically from the rest of society, even the rest of the homeless, by sleeping on Level D of the car park, described as an 'eerie, vast space. Empty... not a car, not a car, not a car, nothing, nothing'. The repetition of negatives foregrounds the isolation of this space. Stuart, in his own words 'hated and attacked anyone I got close to', as Masters expands - 'he has attacked his half-brother, trashed his parents' pub, once threatened his own mother with a knife', even threatening to kill his own son. Masters observes of Stuart's tendency to destroy the good things in his life - 'it is as if he's taken out the gutting knife and mashed his catch to a pulp'. Here, the lexical field of pulverisation ('mashed', 'pulp') demonstrates Stuart's complete destruction of everything around him.

Hosseini also shows this isolation: although Amir forms a relationship with Soraya, he blames himself for their infertility, saying 'perhaps someone, somewhere had decided to deny me fatherhood for the things I had done.' This emphasises his shame over the past, as he irrationally holds his betrayal of Hassan responsible for his childlessness. Hosseini personifies Amir's sense of emptiness as 'sleeping between us like a new born child' to convey the loss that he feels, and to emphasise a physical and emotional distance with Soraya; like Stuart, Amir's past taints his present relationships. Stuart's relationships are also affected by his past - he says he 'can't have a relationship' as he finds sex 'dirty and disgusting.' The alliterative, visceral reaction to sex shows the legacy of abuse in Stuart's past, and how it leads him to destroy relationships. Masters expands on this, saying his new girlfriend's 'tenderness suggests someone about to eat a meal' this juxtaposition shows how Stuart is unable to trust those who show him affection - Stuart even

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sees the positive noun 'tenderness' as predatory, because his past has permanently 'tainted' his perceptions of relationships.

Both Masters and Hosseini use settings to explore themes of escaping the past.

Stuart repeatedly runs away from his family home. On one occasion when Stuart is running from home he says to a man who asks where he is going, 'Anywhere.

You take me - I'll go,' showing his need for physical distance from the trauma,

with the minor sentences emphasising the urgency he feels. Eventually, Stuart

demands to be taken into care, and never returns to his past home. In 'The Kite

Runner' Amir flees Afghanistan, but unlike Stuart, Amir needs to return in order to

atone for his past. Amir feels uncomfortable when confronting the destruction

and poverty Afghanistan has faced while he was away - to Amir, the country

represents his past with Hassan, who, like Afghanistan, suffered violence while

Amir was able to escape unscathed. Although he protests - 'I don't want to go to

Kabul. I can't!' when Rahim Khan asks him to return and find Sohrab, he realises

that it is the only 'way to be good again' and needs to return in order to find

redemption. When asked if he still thinks of Afghanistan as his country, Amir

replies 'I think a part of me always will', representing how his past will always be a

part of him, even though he finds it difficult to confront.

Both texts explore the effects of the past over a long period of time and reach ambiguous resolutions. Stuart's life comes to a tragic ending. Masters uses banal details when describing the event, specifying that it was the '11:15 London to King's Lynn train' that Stuart stepped in front of, or mentioning the 'discarded

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A02 syntax well used to suggest disarray

close analysis of detail lacking

crisp packets' that Stuart's corpse 'crashed down among'. This juxtaposition of the mundane and the devastating further accentuates the tragedy of the moment whilst simultaneously placing Stuart's true story in the context of modern Britain, where suicide is the leading cause of death amongst young men. The ending is never fully resolved, as Stuart's death is deemed to be 'neither suicide nor accident, but unfathomable'. The reader, like Stuart's friends and family, is left questioning whether Stuart's difficulty in coping with his past led him to end his life. 'The Kite Runner' also lacks a neat resolution, as Amir remarks 'if someone were to ask me today whether the story of Hassan, Sohrab and me ends with happiness, I wouldn't know what to say.' However, his narration takes an optimistic tone despite this uncertainty, as is shown in the quote 'when Spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting.' The seasonal metaphor reflects the cyclical passage of time, and provides some sense of conclusion to the novel, which up until this point has focused on the past, as Amir is finally looking to the future. The ambiguous resolutions of both texts reflect reality, showing that the effects of the past on their central characters are uncertain and unresolved.

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Word count: 2000

Absolutely stellar response for the quality and rigour of discussion, which is consistently comparative in its exploration of authorial approaches, both in overview and in detail. Outstandingly perceptive and mature analysis of techniques and effects, informing wholly relevant discussion of key theme. There