



# Narrating Brexit

Ali Smith's approach to post-referendum Britain in the *Seasonal Quartet*

Charlotte Duistermaat

6274013

BA thesis, English Language and Culture

Utrecht University

Supervisor: dr. Simon Cook

Second reader: dr. Ruth Clemens

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## Abstract

After the Brexit referendum on 23 July 2016 turned out in favour of the Leave campaign, multiple Brexit-themed novels appeared, concerned with the causes and consequences of Brexit. One example of this, is Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, a cycle of four books. This thesis contributes to the growing field of research on Brexit and literature by asking the question: How does Ali Smith approach Brexit, using narrative strategies? Through a close reading informed by Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972), this thesis analyses the narrative strategies used throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* to approach Brexit and its consequences.

This thesis analysed three aspects: Smith's use of narrative voice and mood, division as a consequence of Brexit thematized in family conflicts, and Smith's use of analepses and intertextual references. The analysis of these aspects shows that Smith uses alternating narrative voices in the quartet, which enables her to express a myriad of subjective opinions in an objective manner. Additionally, distant homodiegetic narrators are used to describe family conflicts that mirror the division in post-referendum Britain. Furthermore, the analysis shows how Smith uses analepses and intertextuality in order to create a new context from which Brexit can be understood. Together, these strategies allow Smith to approach Brexit in an open and objective manner, focussed on observing and understanding Brexit. Smith does not judge either Leave or Remain voters, but sides against the dividing consequences of Brexit. Ultimately, she calls for more openness towards each other, instead of fear and violence.

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# 1 Introduction

On 23 July 2016, a referendum was held in the United Kingdom to decide whether the UK should leave the European Union or remain part of it. The run-up to this referendum was turbulent as two campaigns, the Leave and Remain campaigns, tried to win over potential voters with opposite ideas. The growing polarization that ensued from the cleft between the respective Leave and Remain camps, inspired violent acts; on 16 June 2016 MP Jo Cox, member of the Labour Party, was murdered by a far-right extremist. Soon after the referendum, the term BrexLit was coined by Kristian Shaw to refer to the growing number of novels concerned with Brexit. One of these Brexit-themed novels was Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), which was published on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, less than three months after the referendum. *Autumn* is thus a post-referendum novel rather than a post-Brexit novel, since article 50, had not even been triggered at the time (Rau 36). *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) followed *Autumn*, and form Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, a cycle written with the intention to be "as contemporaneous as could possibly be" (Smith, "Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet"). This means that Smith embeds her novels in the present and tries to publish them shortly after writing. This enabled her to write about Brexit and its aftermath alongside other current crises, such as the refugee crisis, or the COVID-19 pandemic. In this thesis I will explore how Smith approaches Brexit in her *Seasonal Quartet*, specifically the narrative strategies she uses in her approach.

## 1.1 Brexit: causes and consequences

As argued by Kristian Shaw, Brexit "merely revealed the inherent divisions within society" (16). It is the result of "more than three decades of Euroscepticism, resistance to mass migration [...], the eurozone crisis, and the corresponding failures of the left [...]" (16).

Thomas Docherty adds various resentments to this list, such as the high unemployment level

due to political failure, the growing cleft between the wealthy and the poor: a general feeling of dissatisfaction and inequality (188). The Leave campaign acknowledged these feelings by proposing to “take back control”. This slogan encourages people to reclaim something that was lost, it refers to an imagined time in which the British felt in control (Docherty 182). The EU became the scapegoat for this loss of control, because, according to Brexiteers, the EU prevented the UK from controlling their own borders and laws. Similarly, the Leave campaign held the EU responsible for the influx of refugees in the UK. Additionally, Docherty points out that a sense of unacknowledged English exceptionalism fuels the Leave campaign, which is “a sense of superiority of the English national character over any and all other peoples and races” (194). The immediate cause for this strengthening sense of English exceptionalism, is the 2014 referendum about Scottish independence, in which the Scottish voted against withdrawal from the UK (Docherty 185). This vote was followed by a surge of support for EVEL, English Vote for English Laws, which lies “at the very core of Brexit” (186). EVEL expresses a resentment and a jealousy towards Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, who have “‘taken control’ of their lives” (186), as opposed to England, which supposedly had no legal autonomy due to the EU.

Brexit made the division throughout the UK visible, but also deepened it. The referendum was not a landslide victory for Brexiteers, 51.9 percent voted to leave the EU, 48.1 voted to remain. The closeness of the vote made it harder to accept the legitimacy of the referendum for most Remain voters, who called for a second referendum. Additionally, the majority in England and Wales voted to leave the EU, whereas the majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. These different outcomes revived national tensions between England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales (Varty 64).

## 1.2 Brexit and literature

A first attempt to put together different perspectives on Brexit and culture, is the essay collection *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018), edited by Robert Eaglestone. This volume focusses on Brexit as represented in literature because literature is “especially closely linked to national identity” (Eaglestone 1). Brexit is closely linked to national identity as well; questions like ‘what is it to be British, who can and cannot be British?’ lay at the heart of referendum. At the time *Brexit and Literature* was published, Brexit still was a developing event. Thus, the question that this volume tries to answer is: “[W]hat kind of historical narrative will eventually emerge from our current and future predicaments as exposed by Brexit?” (Eaglestone xviii). I hope to contribute to answering this question, by looking specifically at how Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* approaches Brexit. In both *Brexit and Literature* and in other studies, Ali Smith’s *Autumn* is described as one of the first significant BrexLit novels (Pittel 61; Rau 36; Shaw 20; Wally 68). However, the *Seasonal Quartet* has not been studied as a whole at the moment, since the last instalment, *Summer*, was only recently published, in August of 2020. By approaching the quartet as a whole, I hope to continue the work started in *Brexit and Literature* and to gain more insight into the literary narrative of Brexit as presented by Ali Smith.

Previous analyses of *Autumn* have already noted that Smith uses a collage technique in order to capture the post-referendum “structure of feeling” (Pittel 63; Rau 42). I want to parse the technicalities involved in creating this collage, thus, I aim to assess how Ali Smith approaches Brexit using narrative strategies. I will close read sections of the *Seasonal Quartet* which refer to Brexit, in order to analyse Smith’s depiction of it. My close reading will be informed by Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), as translated by Jane E. Lewin. The definition of Brexit used throughout the thesis is broad, it refers to both

the causes and the consequences of Brexit, such as division, the refugee crisis, the British identity, and the borders within the UK.

I have divided my analysis in three sections. The first investigates the narrative mood and voice in the *Seasonal Quartet*, which analyses how Smith uses a polyphonic narrative in order to paint a seemingly objective picture of Brexit. The second explores the theme of division in families as a consequence of Brexit, and argues that families in the quartet are microcosms, which mirror the division throughout post-referendum Britain. The third section further explores the quartet's fragmented narrative and argues that Smith uses historic and intertextual references to memorize Brexit in a multidirectional model of memory.

## 1 Narrative strategies used in the *Seasonal Quartet*

Ali Smith's *Autumn* was a praised BrexLit novel because "it avoids being lured too much into the discursive arena of Leave and Remain camps", although it is clear that the rhetoric used by the Leave campaign is disapproved of (Pittel 63). This seemingly objective perspective on Brexit is ascribed to the collage the novels assemble of the post-referendum "structure of feeling" (Pittel 63; Rau 42). This collage consists of multiple characters and narrators, the alternation of past and present scenes, and intertextual references. The various narrators create a heteroglossia in the novels, a polyphonic choir of voices and opinions that are sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting. This section explores Smith's use of narrative voice and mood in creating this polyphonic narrative, and how this enables her to approach Brexit in an open, objective manner.

### 1.1 Extradiegetic narration

Multiple parts of the *Seasonal Quartet* are told on an extradiegetic level by a heterodiegetic narrator. This means that this narrator is not part of the story, which they tell from outside the story-world (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 228). This narrator has, in Genette's terms, zero focalization (189), meaning they are able to access the thoughts of all characters. I have distinguished two voices within this extradiegetic narration, one narrates with an organizing voice and performs directing functions, the other with an observing voice, which almost seems to be nonfiction.

According to Genette, the directing function becomes apparent when a heterodiegetic narrator makes comments "that [are] to some extent metalinguistic [...] to mark its articulations, connections, interrelationships, in short, its internal organization" (256). An example of a directing function occurs at the start of *Winter*:



“[...] this isn't a ghost story, though it's the dead of winter when it happens, a bright sunny post-millennial global-warming Christmas Eve morning (Christmas, too, dead), and it's about real things really happening in the real world involving real people in real time on the real earth (uh huh, earth, also dead):” (Smith 4-5).

First of all, the narrator breaks the fourth wall by explicitly stating that this, the novel the reader is holding, is not a ghost story. Additionally, they reflect on the process of writing this story by emphasizing the temporality of the story, it is written “in real time”, or, in Ali Smith's words “as contemporaneous as could possibly be” (Smith, “Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet”). The directing function becomes clear in the short summary about the story that will follow next, but also in the colon with which the sentence and chapter ends. This colon emphasizes that the previous sentence acts as a comment on the internal organization of the following text. The directing functions bring out diegesis as the narrative mood, it draws attention to the “presence of the informer” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 166). The voice of this directing narrator is that of the organizer of the text, it could even be the author commenting on their own text.

Smith also uses extradiegetic narration in order to reflect on the present state of the UK, and to describe art. In these descriptions, an observing voice becomes apparent, which narrates almost in a creative nonfiction style. This might seem impossible, since Ali Smith has referred to the *Seasonal Quartet* as novels, which are fictional. However, this characterizes Smith's writing in general: it challenges the “problematic territory of the fiction/nonfiction dichotomy” (Ryan-Sautour). The quartet is fictional but set in reality: “it's about real things really happening in the real world”. Smith's quartet might thus be defined as metafiction, which “pose[s] questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Kostkowska 98).

Just like directing functions draw attention to the text's fictionality, Smith's observations about post-referendum Britain question the border between fiction and reality: "All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing" (Smith, *Autumn* 59), a contemplation of the division in the UK which eventually boils down to a simple "here/there" (Smith 61). In observations like these, the distinction between fiction and reality is unclear. It reads like a personal essay, although the narrator does not side with either Leave or Remain voters. Instead, this passage describes the feelings of both sides after the referendum and sides against the division throughout the country.

That the objectivity in this observation of post-referendum Britain is a deliberate choice, arguably follows from a passage at the start of *Summer*. This fragment describes how to deal with the detachment with which people react to racism, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and the climate crisis:

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

*so?*

So.

Instead, here's something I once saw. (Smith 4-5)

The heterodiegetic narrator of this fragment speaks with the voice of the organizer again and performs a directing function in the last sentence. Furthermore, the fragment shows how "sources and graphs and examples and statistics" are met with detachment, expressed with the

word “So”. According to Thomas Docherty, Brexit “is an assault upon intellect” (194): intellectualism is seen as elitist. The Leave campaign endorsed gut-feelings instead, because, as Michael Gove remarked, “The people of this country have had enough of experts” (qtd. In Docherty 192). In order to avoid such a response, the narrator makes their point with an indirect approach through prose. Through the voice of an observer the state of the country is described, but it also describes art in order to approach post-referendum Britain. These references to art will be analysed in section three.

## 1.2 Intradiegetic narration

Switching from an extradiegetic to an intradiegetic level of narration enables Smith to express subjective opinions in the quartet. This shift is often announced with a directing function, the passage in *Summer* cited above ends with “So:” (Smith 6), after which the chapter ends with a colon, and a new chapter told by a homodiegetic narrator starts. They are present as characters in the story they tell (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 245) and have a variable internal focalization (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 189). The distance between the story and the narrator grows larger through the use of either transposed or reported speech, which results in mimesis as the narrative mood (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 166).

Through the internal focalization of Elisabeth in *Autumn*, a dislike of the consequences of the referendum is expressed. She describes how it has caused “the end of dialogue” (Smith 112), people are no longer willing to listen to each other’s ideas, closing themselves off for any ideas outside of their own bubble. Elisabeth also notices this in the “new kind of detachment” (Smith 54) of the people in her mother’s village following the referendum. “Half the village isn’t speaking to the other half” confirms Elisabeth’s mother (Smith 54), however, Elisabeth herself demonstrates the sense of detachment in dialogues with her mother. When her mother

talks about being emotionally tired because of Brexit, for example, Elisabeth does not react to what her mother says, but instead starts nit-picking at her choice of words (Smith 56-7).

In *Autumn*, the main characters' perspective on Brexit reads as an extension of the heterodiegetic narrator's perspective. However, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer*, also introduce homodiegetic narrators with different perspectives on Brexit. One of the protagonists of *Spring*, for example, is a security guard called Brittany, who works in a detainee centre where refugees are held in abysmal conditions. Brittany shows a similar, if not worse sense of detachment than Elisabeth in *Autumn*: "Thing is, Josh, I can't really, don't really, give a fuck, Brit had said" (Smith 157). This indifference enables Brittany to approach the detainees she guards without a guilty conscience, even though they are treated unfairly: "One of the deets in constant watch had been throwing it. He did it all the time, to get attention" (Smith 159). Both Brittany and her colleagues refer to detainees with "deets", an inside joke about the similarly named insect repellent, since "[e]verything about this job is repellent" (134). This language depersonalizes the detainees and enables Brit and her co-workers to feel indifferent about their inhumane treatment.

Brit displays the sense of English exceptionalism associated with Brexiteers, when a co-worker speaks Welsh: "Different languages shouldn't be allowed in England. Britain. She meant Britain" (Smith 327). Her fear of unfamiliar languages comes across as xenophobic, a fear which the Leave campaign exploited in order to gain voters. Perhaps surprisingly, Brittany dislikes the consequences of the Brexit referendum as well:

But all this. This endless. It's eating the, the, you know. Soul. Doesn't matter what I voted or you voted or anyone voted. Because what's the point, if nobody in the end is going to listen to or care about what other people think unless they think and believe the same thing as them. (Smith 163)

Similar to Elisabeth, Brittany also mourns the ineffectiveness of dialogue, the indifference with which people treat each other. Despite the different views Brittany has towards Brexit and its consequences, Smith presents Elisabeth and Brittany in a similar way. She shows how they both regret the consequences of the referendum and are simultaneously affected by the same detachment as a result of it. Smith is able to humanize and connect both sides of the earlier mentioned division in the UK, by exploring different perspectives. Letting both sides narrate their own story without judgement from the heterodiegetic narrator, is crucial in approaching them in an objective manner.

## 2. The Family as Microcosm

Division and detachment as a consequence of Brexit are central themes in the *Seasonal Quartet*, which Smith symbolises in families. The four novels all contain unusual families: in *Autumn*, Elisabeth's mother is divorced; in *Winter*, the sisters Iris and Sophia have colliding political views; *Spring* shows the disconnect between Brittany and her mother after her father's death; and *Summer* describes the dysfunctional Greenlaw family, in which everyone seems to be in conflict with everyone. In this section I will argue that Smith uses these conflicts within families as a strategy to approach the broader division in post-referendum Britain.

### 2.1 Family clefts in *Winter* and *Summer*

Family dynamics and conflicts are the most foregrounded in *Winter*, which "takes a more domestic approach at addressing the specific mood of Britain's divided society" (Pittel 64). This novel is about the Cleves family, which consists of Sophia, a socially isolated Leave voter, her sister Iris, who is a left-wing activist, and Art, Sophia's son, who is stuck between them. When Art, Sophia, Iris, and Lux, a young Croatian immigrant, find themselves stuck together in Sophia's house for Christmas, the division between the Cleves becomes apparent in dialogues between Sophia and Iris:

The so-called vote, his mother says, was a vote to free our country from inheriting the troubles of other countries, as well as from having to have laws that weren't made here for people like us by people like us.

Depends whether you think there's a them and an us, Iris says, or just an us. Given that DNA's let us know we're all pretty much family.

Oh there is most definitely a them, his mother says. In everything.

Family is no exception. (Smith 206-7)

This dialogue is focalized internally through Art as homodiegetic narrator, but through the use of reported speech, the distance between the narrator and the story grows large, the presence of Art is only visible in dialogue tags, like “his mother says”. Additionally, Art does not contribute to the discussion. As a result, the description of this discussion is objective, and the narrative mood is mimesis. Additionally, this discussion shows that the cleft between Iris and Sophia mirrors the dichotomy between Leave and Remain voters. Sophia’s perspective on the referendum reflects the Leave campaign’s slogan, “take back control”, and argues that the vote put the UK back in control of their laws and their borders. Iris advocates the equal treatment of all people, by arguing that there exists no “them and us”, which reads as a plea for a more lenient immigration policy.

Sophia and Iris have a longer history of arguing about their political views, which becomes apparent in flashbacks to their youth. The Brexit referendum is not the sole cause of the cleft between them, but just the newest addition to an existing political cleft. In *Summer*, however, Smith describes the dysfunctional Greenlaw family, in which the division is caused directly by Brexit. The parents of Sacha and Robert Greenlaw are divorced, their father now in a relationship with their neighbour. Additionally, Sacha is a young left-wing activist, whereas Robert continually expresses right-wing thoughts, derived from members of the Conservative Party: “I simply noted, like our prime minister’s chief adviser wrote in his blog, that children who come from poverty or grow up in it aren’t worth educating [...]” (Smith 35). Robert expresses support for the ideas of the Conservative Party with Boris Johnson as the prime minister, an outspoken Brexiteer. Robert’s endorsement of these ideas causes conflicts within his family, which are described in dialogues focalized through distant

homodiegetic narrators as well. Brexit also causes friction between Sacha and her parents, albeit in a less obvious way: “Like it’s nothing to do with you that Brexit got done, his sister says” (Smith 79). Sacha accuses her mother, Grace, of voting Leave in the referendum. The effects of Brexit on their family are explained most eloquently by Grace:

What had they all wanted from each other in that vote, say, the one that had split the country, split her own family as if with a cheesewire, sliced right through the everyday to a bitterness nobody knew what to do with, one so many people used to hurt people with, whichever way they’d voted, a vote that could now be so anathema to one of her own kids and so like a permission to be foul to others for the other [...]. (Smith 312)

In this interior monologue Grace connects the division throughout the UK as a result of Brexit to the division in her family. She condemns the division, but does not judge either Leave or Remain voters because it does not matter “whichever way they’d voted”, since both sides are part of the division created.

## 2.2 From the private to the public

The dysfunctional families throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* function as microcosms, symbolic of the nationwide division caused by Brexit. In *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (2003), Kenneth Plummer argues that there is no real distinction between the so-called private and public spheres. Plummer bases this argument on *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (1998), edited by Joan B. Landes, in which it is argued that gender norms are created in the public sphere, and reproduced in the private, familial sphere (Plummer 70). Plummer uses the term “intimate citizenship” to refer “to all those areas



of life that appear to be personal but that are in effect connected to, structured by, or regulated through the public sphere” (70). Politics, for example, can leak into the private family sphere through “noninteractive public spheres” (74), meaning various traditional media. These media present a “one-way path of communication” (74) about topics such as Brexit, which people can watch or read, but not interact with. These media influence an individual’s political opinion, and thus influence the debates people have within families. In the *Seasonal Quartet*, family conflicts are indeed influenced by noninteractive public spheres. Robert, for example, reads and parrots the ideas of the prime minister’s chief adviser’s blog, which causes conflicts within his family. Plummer’s theory opens up the possibility to read the family dynamics described throughout the quartet as microcosms, symbolic of the post-referendum division throughout the UK. Additionally, these family conflicts show that the division caused by Brexit is not a neat division between two already distinct groups. It is a division that cuts through families, which begs the question of how one might begin bridging this cleft, if not even families are able to overcome this division.

### 2.3 Bridging the gap

Luckily, Smith presents us with a resolution, which is connecting with the Other: the European Daniel in *Autumn*; Lux from Croatia in *Winter*; Florence, the daughter of a refugee, in *Spring*; and arguably the detained refugee Hero in *Summer*. These characters are the elephant in the room of the Brexit debate, they personify the immigration debate at the centre of Brexit politics (Shaw 25). They are described in a negative and depersonalizing way by different characters: in *Autumn*, Elisabeth’s mother calls Daniel “an old gay man” (Smith 77) and implies he is a paedophile (Smith 78); Sophia calls Lux “the Croatian woman” (Smith 248); Brittany refers to detainees with “deets”. These are examples of othering, which is “the projection of properties the self does not wish to acknowledge”, the attribution of negative

values to a group of people (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 344). The effect of othering is that the group who does the othering, comes across as the superior group (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 346). In the Brexit referendum, for example, the Leave campaign associated immigrants with “‘terrorism’, violence, fanaticism, barbarism and so on” (Mondal 87), and used othering as a strategy to advocate for English independency.

In the *Seasonal Quartet*, however, Somak Ghoshal notices that these “so-called ‘foreigners’ appear comfortingly familiar, [whereas] nativists come across as awkward misfits” (7). The Others in Smith’s quartet are indeed different than the native British characters, but in a positive way. They do not fit in, which actually enables them to cure the detachment earlier described by Smith. For example, the dialogue between Iris and Sophia cited above, ends with Sophia turning her chair so it faces the wall, which effectively detaches her from the discussion:

Is that you taking back control, there, Soph? Iris says.

The most, eh, amazing dream, Art says. Believe it or not I was –

Take back control of your teeth, Lux says. I saw it on TV on a commercial.

And another: take back control of your heating bills [...] (Smith 211)

When the discussion derails, Art tries to change the subject to a safe but irrelevant subject, whereas Lux picks up the conversation where it is left off. In comparison to Lux’ reaction, Art’s awkwardness and Sophia’s and Iris’ childishness indeed depicts them as “awkward misfits”. Near the end of the novel, Iris’ and Sophia’s differences have not disappeared, but their discussions have turned into good-natured bickering (Smith 301-2). Additionally, Lux is even able to convince Art to try to connect with his mother: “Just talk to her, she says. Talk to her. Nothing in common, he says. Everything in common, Lux says. She’s your history”

(Smith 311-2). In this passage, Lux tries to get the Cleves family to connect again, which works out in the end: even when Lux disappears from the scene, Art keeps connecting Iris and Sophia by forwarding their texts to him to one another.

### 3 Brexit as Multidirectional Memory

Smith draws comparisons between past and present throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*. For example, Smith refers to the Second World War, the Profumo Scandal of 1963, and the Battle of Culloden in 1746. By describing these past events, Smith creates an “enormous collage of scenes and images about our moment” (Rau 41). This interconnectedness of past and present fits into Michael Rothberg’s definition of multidirectional memory. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) Rothberg argues for a new model of defining memory, and against the model of competitive memory.

Competitive memory is the model of remembering in which conflicting views on the past fight “for collective articulation and recognition” (5). Instead, Rothberg views memory as multidirectional, “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (3). Multidirectional memory allows for a dynamic transfer “between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance” (11), it is a faceted way of looking at the memory of a past event. Rothberg takes the memory of the Holocaust as example and argues that multiple memories of it coexist simultaneously. Additionally, memories of other histories of violence coexist and interact with the memory of the Holocaust, such as the histories of slavery, colonialism, and racism. This works both ways, the memory of the Holocaust can be used as a model through which to articulate other histories (Rothberg 3), which Smith does in the quartet when she refers to the Second World War.

Besides references to the past, Smith also uses intertextual references to various media, literature, visual arts, plays, and films. These references occur within the novels, but also in the peritexts of the quartet, like the covers and epigraphs (Genette, “The publisher’s peritext” 24). The covers are adorned with paintings by David Hockney, the inside covers with artwork by Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti. Additionally, the epigraphs that accompany each novel, cite different literary texts. In

literature, intertextuality is one of the approaches to creating a multidirectional model of memory (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 99). According to Erll and Rigney, literature can create “a ‘memory of its own’ in the form of intertextual relations that give new cultural life to old texts” (113). In a reading of the work of Caryl Phillips, Rothberg indeed notes that his use of intertexts and his fragmented narrative “highlight both similar structured problems within [black and Jewish] histories and missed encounters between them” (137). Thus, intertextual references can be used as a technique to approach an event in a multidirectional manner, since they create a new context from which to understand a single event.

This section will explore how Ali Smith approaches Brexit through a multidirectional model of memory by analysing selected historic and intertextual references.

### 3.1 Time and the seasons

Smith uses a nonlinear narrative in her novels, or in Genette’s terms “narrative anachronies” (35-6). She uses analepses to refer to the past, and on rare occasion prolepses to refer to the future. One of the uses of these flashbacks, is to understand the present. In *Autumn*, for example, Elisabeth thinks about the ineffectiveness of dialogues, especially how the word democracy is used as an argument: “It is like democracy is a bottle someone can threaten to smash and do a bit of damage with” (Smith 112). *Autumn* elaborates on this idea with an analepsis to the Profumo Affair of 1963. This affair surrounded Christine Keeler, who had had sexual relations with both John Profumo, member of the Conservative Party, and Yevgeny Ivanov, a military attaché in London and a spy for the Soviet State. Profumo lied about his relationship to Keeler, but the discovery of his lies ultimately led to the defeat of the Conservative Government by the Labour Party. Scandals like these “steadily discredited politics and weakened democracy itself” a long time before the referendum happened (Rau 41). Thus, this analepsis to the Profumo Scandal creates a context from which to understand

the current politics and the view on democracy in the UK. In an interview with Olivia Laing, Ali Smith mentioned that she was interested in the Profumo Affair because, like Brexit, it was a pivotal event with deep consequences for society. Furthermore, both Brexit and the Profumo affair are “built on a lie” (Smith, “Ali Smith on writing *Autumn*”). This analepsis implies that Brexit might be remembered similarly to the Profumo Affair, “as a lie, told through a narrative of identity and belonging” (Mullen).

Additionally, analepses enable Smith to express subjective opinions on Brexit politics indirectly. In *Spring*, she weaves in references to the Battle of Culloden, before uniting past and present on the same battleground. The Battle of Culloden was the culmination of the Jacobite rising, which wanted to restore the House of Stuart on the British throne. On 16 April 1746, the final conflict between the catholic Jacobite army and the protestant Government’s army took place, which resulted in a quick victory for the Government’s army. A similarity between the Battle of Culloden and present-day politics, is that the Jacobite army fought to claim Scotland as independent country, whereas the government wanted to take back control of Scotland. The division between Scotland and England connects this battle to Brexit, especially because the division grew tense during both the Battle of Culloden and Brexit. Additionally, this brings the slogan of the Leave campaign to mind. As Alda tells Richard, Brittany, and Florence in *Spring*: “Sluagh-gairm. Slogan. It means war cry. Tells you all you need to know about what slogans are about, whether it’s take back control or leave means leave [...] (Smith 243). Alda connects Brexit slogans to war as well, by looking at the etymology of slogan, an originally Gaelic word.

The Battle of Culloden is juxtaposed with the present, after it is described how the Government army viciously won the battle: “Fastforward a blink of history’s eye, 272 years from then, give or take a half year. Here’s today’s battlefield” (Smith 332). The heterodiegetic narrator performs a directing function, they switch from past to present, bringing an abrupt

end to the analepsis. On “today’s battleground”, Smith describes how a child embraces a woman, which turns out to be Florence reuniting with her mother. The battleground of Culloden has become a base for the Auld Alliance network, a rebellion not unlike the Jacobite rebellion, which helps to free refugees from the British detention system. While Florence and her mother embrace each other, the field is flooded by people from SA4A, the fictive security company that is in charge of detainee centres in the UK. This security company is similar to the worldwide security company G4S, which is in charge of detainee centres in the UK as well. SA4A can be read as the Government army of 1746, since both act on government orders. The description of this final battle shows the ridiculousness of the SA4A-people: “From a distance it looks like someone must be making a comedy film, [...] there are so many people running with such fierceness at a woman and a child” (Smith 332). This citation shows the disproportionate measures the government takes against refugees in the UK. This analepsis shows how you can connect the past and present role of the Government, but also how Brexit, the debate around Scottish independence, and the refugee crisis are connected. Through the descriptions of the viciousness of the Government army in 1746, the negative portrayal of SA4A throughout the quartet, and the absurdity of the measures they take against refugees, *Spring* positions itself in favour of the Jacobite rebellion and the Auld Alliance network. Indirectly, this shows support for the independence of Scotland in the Brexit debate, since that was the Jacobite cause in the Battle of Culloden.

## 3.2 Intertextuality in the Seasonal Quartet

### 3.2.1 Remediation of social media

Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*, Smith uses intertextual references to approach post-referendum Britain. For example, Smith draws attention to the interaction between media and individuals by remediating social media. Remediation has as goal “to refashion or rehabilitate

other media” (Bolter and Grusin 56)<sup>1</sup>. In *Spring*, Smith dedicates a chapter to the citation of tweets directed at refugees: “Now for 140 seconds of cutting edge realism: SHUT UP just shut the fUck Up can someone tape her mouth shut she deserve to be relentlessly abused what a Cunt go and die [...]” (Smith 223). The first sentence contains a directing function of the heterodiegetic narrator, after which a series of violent tweets are pasted after each other. Tweets are usually messages that exist individually, but by pasting them after each other, they appear here as a wave of hate. They turn out to be copied by Florence, in her book of *Hot Air*. According to Brittany’s interpretation of this book, these tweets are juxtaposed with “the story of the girl who refuses the people who want her to dance herself to death” (Smith 323), which is the story that follows in *Spring* as well. The effect of this juxtaposition is that it shows the similarity between the tweets and the villagers: both call for death. Thus, the girl’s reaction to the villagers reads as a reaction to the tweets as well:

There are much less bloody ways to hope for spring [...]. And anyway, you’re only doing it because some of you get off on the brutality [...]. And the rest of you are worried that if you don’t do what everybody else is doing then the ones who get off on it might decide to choose you for the next sacrifice. (Smith 228)

This passage treats the villagers’ cruelty, and the tweets in extension, as a response to winter, “the time of the year when everything was dead” (Smith 225). Winter, in this example, reads as a metaphor for hard times. Thus, it does not only refer to the season, but to times of insecurity and hopelessness as well, such as the escalating refugee crisis. The girl draws attention to the ineffectiveness of violence as answer to these hard times: “Do your worst. See

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<sup>1</sup> Remediation is a form of intermediality, which is a concept derived from intertextuality. Although intertextuality and intermediality have similarities, these terms cannot be used interchangeably. The relation between these terms is further discussed in Irina O. Jawensky *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: a Literary Perspective on Intermediality* (2006).



if it makes things better” (Smith 229). A response that is helpful, is presented in the resilient joy of the girl, and in extension, the kindness and openness of Florence. Through the remediation of these tweets, Smith shows the uselessness of online violence as an answer to the situation in post-referendum Britain.

### 3.2.2 Intertextual references

The literary references throughout the quartet are often to famous British writers, such as Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, John Keats, Aldous Huxley, and Virginia Woolf. As Johannes Wally argues, the choice of intertexts throughout the quartet creates “a frame of reference which, arguably, is decipherable specifically for members of a certain social stratum, namely the educated middle class” (82). In contrast, the references to visual arts, are often to lesser-known artists, like Pauline Boty, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti. By referencing these well-known writers alongside these female artists, the intertextual references throughout the quartet propose a broadening of the cultural canon. According to Wally, Smith’s playing with these references mimic “the identity crisis of the liberal, educated middleclass, who perhaps feel that they are no longer the cultural and political backbone of western societies” (82) after Brexit. As Robert Eaglestone argues, “culture is the heart of national identity”, and “political arguments about national identity [...] lie at the heart of Brexit” (1).

One of the ways in which Smith mimics this identity crisis, is by referencing plays by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare is closely connected to British cultural identity, a symbol of British culture. He lived and worked in the Elizabethan or Golden Age of literature, a period which is remembered as a time in which Britain was the cultural backbone of western societies. In retrospect, the British are perceived to be more confident in their identity during this time period. Thus, Shakespeare can serve as an affirmation of the British identity after

Brexit, his work is central to the rosy cultural memory of the Elizabethan age. Each novel of the *Seasonal Quartet* is based on one of Shakespeare's plays: *The Tempest* in *Autumn*; *Cymbeline* in *Winter*; *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*<sup>2</sup> in *Spring*; and *A Winter's Tale* in *Summer*. These plays were all written near the end of Shakespeare's career and are grouped together as the "romances" (Greenblatt 3205). The romances have thematic similarities, such as the division and eventual reunion of family members, "deep suffering", flawed protagonists, and eventual second chances to right wrongdoings (Greenblatt 3121). A few of these themes, especially familial divisions and flawed protagonists, return throughout the quartet as well.

In *Winter*, Smith questions the connection between Shakespeare and national identity when Lux perfectly summarizes *Cymbeline*. Art seems unwilling to believe that Lux, not born in the UK, could know about Shakespeare: "Lux is making up a terrible bland fairytale plot that's nothing like Shakespeare and pretending it's Shakespeare" (Smith 198). Art acts like he has a claim on Shakespeare, by implying that he knows what is and what is not like Shakespeare. The injustice of this claim becomes clear when it turns out that Lux is talking about the play *Cymbeline*: "Ah, Art says. Yes. Of course. Cimmeleen" (Smith 200). This scene shows how cultural icons like Shakespeare, do not belong exclusively to the British. Lux, a young East-European migrant, knows more about Shakespeare than the British Art does. Additionally, the interpretation of *Cymbeline* reads as an allegory for present-day Britain:

A play about a kingdom subsumed in chaos, lies, powermongering, division and a great deal of poisoning and self-poisoning, his mother says.

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<sup>2</sup> The authorship of *Pericles* is problematic, nowadays, editors attribute the first two acts to George Wilkins, and most of the last three acts to Shakespeare (Greenblatt 2866).

Where everybody is pretending to be someone or something else, Lux says. And you can't see for the life of you how any of it will resolve in the end, because it's such a tangled-up messed-up farce of a mess. (Smith 200)

In this summary of *Cymbeline* no proper names are used, “a kingdom” could easily refer to the United Kingdom. Similarly, “chaos, lies, powermongering, [and] division” resonate with Brexit politics. Lux is aware of the similarity between the Cleves family and *Cymbeline* and mentions the play to offer a resolution: “But if they could just step out of themselves [...] they'd see it's the same play they're all in, the same world, that they're all part of the same story” (Smith 201). The intertextual references to *Cymbeline* thus serve as a suggestion to resolve the present-day division. In general, the references to Shakespeare's romances inspire hope since they are characterized by second chances and eventual happy endings. As Lux acknowledges: “if this writer from this place can make this mad and bitter mess into this graceful thing it is at the end [...] then that's the place I'm going, I'll go there, I'll live there” (Smith 200). Intertextual references, like the ones Smith makes to Shakespeare, indeed give “new cultural life to old texts” (Rigney 113): they reclaim Shakespeare, not as a symbol of British exceptionalism, but as a symbol of inclusivity, one that invites people like Lux to the United Kingdom.

## 4 Conclusion

In the analysis of the heteroglossic narrative I distinguished two types of voices used by heterodiegetic narrators on an extradiegetic level, namely the voice of the organizer and the observing voice. The voice of the organizer draws attention to the fictionality of the text through directing functions, which brings out diegesis as the narrative mood. The observing voice approaches Brexit indirectly, it reflects on post-referendum Britain without explicit

judgement. The extradiegetic narration is alternated with intradiegetic narration by homodiegetic narrators of both the Leave and Remain side of the conflict, which together express a myriad of subjective opinions. Through the use of this heteroglossic narrative, Smith creates an objective collage of the different sides in post-referendum Britain.

Furthermore, families in the *Seasonal Quartet* act as microcosms, symbolic of the division throughout the country. The schisms in these families mimic the division caused by Brexit and show that this is not a clear division between two already separate groups, but a cleft right through the UK. In Smith's narrative, the resolution for these conflicts is interaction with the Other, portrayed by characters with an immigration-background. The otherness of these characters work as a cure for the sense of detachment that keeps families from bridging the gap.

Finally, I argued that Smith approaches Brexit through a multidirectional model of memory. By connecting Brexit to past events through analepses, such as the Battle of Culloden, Smith indirectly expresses her support for immigrants in the UK and Scottish independence. Besides analepses, Smith also uses intertextual references in order to approach the multidirectionality of Brexit. She remediates social media to show the ineffectiveness of online violence as a response to the refugee crisis, and advocates for kindness instead. Additionally, she refers to canonised British artists, but also to fairly unknown artists. With these references Smith challenges the concept of British cultural and national identity. Furthermore, Smith uses intertextual references as allegories for post-referendum Britain, which creates a new context to understand Brexit from. This seems to characterize Ali Smith's approach to Brexit, she does not aim to judge or blame either Leave or Remain voters, she aims to understand post-referendum Britain. Smith observes the causes and consequences of Brexit, and cautiously points out how one might begin to bridge the cleft it left behind.

#### 4.1 Recommendations

My approach towards the *Seasonal Quartet* was focussed on understanding the basic narrative mechanism behind Ali Smith's approach to Brexit. However, a limitation of this approach is that my conclusions might be quite general. Thus, for future research, a closer analysis of the quartet focussed on either intertextuality, national identity, or division, might give new insights. Additionally, this thesis focussed solely on Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, but this is far from the only Brexit-themed fiction. Future research on other Brexit novels would be useful to create a clearer view of the emerging literary narrative of Brexit.

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