What Makes a Sentence a Masterpiece?

A great sentence makes you want to chew it over slowly in your mouth the first time you read it. A great sentence compels you to rehearse it again in your mind's ear, and then again later on. A sentence must have a certain distinction of style – the words come in an order that couldn't have been assembled by any other writer. Here's an elaborate, Latinate favourite, from Samuel Johnson's preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). We have to train ourselves to read complex sentences like this one, but if it's read properly out loud by an actor or someone else who understands the way the subordination of clauses works, it may well be taken in more easily through the ear:

> *When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, and clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation.*

The sentence is elevated in its diction, but it is also motivated by an ironic sense of the vanity of human wishes. It is propelled forward by the momentum of clauses piling on top of one another.

Edward Gibbon is one of 18th century Britain's other great prose stylists. The sentences of Gibbon that I love most come from his memoirs, which exist in a host of drafts braided

together for publication after his death. As a young man, Gibbon fell in love and asked permission of his father to marry. But his spendthrift father had depleted the family's resources so much that he told Gibbon not to. 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son,' Gibbon wrote. The aphoristic parallelism in that lovely sentence does some work of emotional self-protection. Also from Gibbon's memoirs: 'It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind.' The precision of the place and time setting, the startling contrast effected by the juxtaposition of barefooted friars and the pagan temple, the fact that there is an exterior soundscape as well as an internal thoughtscape, the way the sentence builds to the magnitude of the project to come – all work to make the sentence great.

The first sentence of any novel works as an invitation into a new world. Sometimes that invitation is so powerful that the sentence itself takes on a life of its own. One example: the opening sentence of Orwell's *1984*: 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' The sentence is initially unassuming, simply descriptive, but in the startling final detail Orwell achieves estrangement, establishing the alternate nature of the novel's historical reality with economy and force. Another opening line from near-future speculative fiction is that of William Gibson's debut novel *Neuromancer*: 'The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.' The startling metaphor seemed to speak with remarkable directness to a world in which new forms of media and mediation had come to define human consciousness. The passage of time has raised questions, however. Today, to a generation of readers who barely watch TV on 'channels' and don't really know what a 'dead' one would look like, the metaphor will be nearly inscrutable.

Hasn't the sentence become dated? Gibson himself commented on Twitter recently, about his 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*, that it 'was written with the assumption that the reader could and *would* Google unfamiliar terms and references'. It matters to Gibson that his fiction should be highly topical in ways that can also be inscrutable or dated, and that will provoke in the reader not simple incomprehension but rather an awareness of the layering of past and present in palimpsests of language and literature.

Some literary stylists bestow greatness on every sentence without tiring their readers. Many readers feel this way about Joyce, but I have always preferred the subtler beauty of the sentences in *Dubliners* to the obtrusive, slightly show-offy ingenuity that afflicts every sentence in *Ulysses*: individually each of those sentences may be small masterpieces, but an unrelenting sequence of such sentences is wearisome. Great minimalist sentences – those of the short-story writer Lydia Davis, for instance – may have a longer shelf life.

Over a lifetime of reading, people form their own individual canon of great sentences. My canon is full of Jane Austen, whose balance of aphoristic wit, psychological insight and narrative pacing is unique. The first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is probably her best-known line: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' However, I have always preferred the opening line of *Emma* written two years later: 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.' It has the cadence almost of a fairytale, only the verb 'seemed' and the ostentatiously positive sequence of traits ('handsome, clever, and rich') hint that the novel will go on to undermine its opening assertion.

If we think of a library as a city and a book as an individual house in that city, each sentence becomes one tiny component of that house. Some are mostly functional – the load-bearing wall, the grout between the bathroom tiles – while others are the details we remember and take away, perhaps recalling their texture and colour when we assemble our own verbal dwelling-place.

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