

Stylistic and Thematic Diversity in Contemporary English Narrative Prose: Two Short Stories as a Case Study by: Lauren Groff and Lee Child

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Received: 19 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 14 Aug 2026; Accepted: 18 Aug 2026; Available online: 24 Aug 2026

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Abstract— *This paper tackles two short fictional works of two contemporary novelists both of which categorized as best sellers, and award winners, the two belong to separate schools of writing. Lauren Groff is a realistic, sophisticated, accomplished writer, with a poetic, polished, elegant style. Lee Childs on the other hand is thriller crime fiction writer. His aim is to draw the suspense of the readers. The study deals in depth with the two fictional works and concludes by a comparison between the two styles of fiction which proved to be successful at the present time.*

Keywords— *contemporary fiction, suspense, crime, thriller, mystery, figures of speech.*



I. INTRODUCTION

This paper studies a challenging idea of the diversity found in contemporary fiction thematically and stylistically. Two successful novelists are considered as prototypes for each genre, both are best sellers and award winners.

On the first hand there is Lauren Groff, born in 1978, a novelist and a short story writer. She obtained Masters in Fine Arts from the university of Wisconsin, she is classified by the Times magazine as one of 100 most influential people in 2024. Groff is amongst the finalist in 2018 for the National Book Award for Fiction. The Guardian commented on Groff “a heroic pushback against the way we live now, against waste, against the artificial environments in which we find ourselves maintained by corporations, but equally against the pressures on women to be flawless effortlessly excellent mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, friends within their dire state of affairs.”

Groff has an insight into human’s mind and soul through exploring human’s relationships in their realistic communities. Groff’s narrative style elevated to the rank of poetic style. Her prose is lyrical and figurative depending on figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, personification

and so on. Her fiction is marked by contemporary themes as marriage, climate change, and feminism. Lauren Groff’s themes “focusing on themes of empowerment, resilience, and self-discovery within distinct historical and cultural settings. (Razk, 2024)

On the other hand, there is Lee Childs, the pen name of James Dover Grant, born in 1954. He is best known for thriller novels, and by his Jack Racher’s novel series. Grant’s first novel *The Killing Floor* won the Anthony Award and The Barry Award for Best First Novel. Grant is marked by his commercial style, he said in an interview that many aspects of Racher’s novels are meant to be profitable rather than for literary reasons. Grant’s narrative is straight forward. The development of the plot mainly depends on suspense and fast past action. This style captured the attention of millions of readers, his mastery of this genre is demonstrated in his ability to capture the readers’ interest from the first page. Within this fast tracking narrative Grant demonstrated issues like justice, morality and human condition.

Through this comparative analysis, we aim to illuminate the unique contributions both authors make to literature while

revealing how their differing approaches reflect broader cultural narratives. Ultimately, this exploration will provide insights into how literature can mirror societal norms while also challenging them, enriching our understanding of the human experience in all its complexity.

II. LAUREN GROFF'S 'THE MIDNIGHT ZONE'

Laurene Groff is a contemporary novelist and short story writer she is best known for her lavished language and extreme figurative speech. Her short story published in the New Yorker in 2016 'The Mid night Zone' is exclusively narrated by an anguished mother of two trying her best to prove her ability to handle tough situations without her spouse.

The stories share a sultry Floridian atmosphere, where a dark wilderness poses a threat to emotionally burdened protagonists, often but not always women that happen to be mothers, who find themselves in situations which force them to face themselves. (Brown, 2014)

The story is very familiar to the reader, a family spending their spring vacation in a friend's cottage in the forests of Florida. They are in distress because of racoons, panthers that might attack at any moment and the lack of communication with the rest of the world. The father leaves the mother and the two boys who are seven and five alone to finish some business back at home. The father promises to be back after three days and the mother, the narrator and the hero of the story, tries to prove her accountability to stay in the cottage with the boys without any additional support from the father who seemed to have managed every family affair so far. The mother has an accident trying to fix a bulb, she falls hitting her head and being unconscious for few minutes then she loses her memory because of the head trauma, she is the only narrator everything is told from her own perspective. The story ends happily when the father comes back to rescue the family.

"The Eyes of the Panther" and Lauren Groff's 2016 story "The Midnight Zone." Both stories place women in isolated wilderness spaces to probe the boundaries between nature and culture and to condemn human destruction of the nonhuman world. The stories also include Gothic tropes of entrapment and psychological trauma to expose restrictive cultural ideals that constrain women into passive roles. (Kelly, 2022)

What makes the simple short story worth reading and analyzed is Groff's mastery over language and dictions. And the paper will analyze the figurative language in details and comparing it to other contemporary writers who show the opposite tendency towards language. "Groff's style of writing could be described as dense but captivating, simultaneously conveying humor while offering a detailed portrayal of complex emotional states, rich with phantasmagorical imagery." (Ena, 2022)

The figurative language indulges the use of metaphor, simile, personification, and other literary devices.

III. THE USE OF METAPHOR IN 'THE MIDNIGHT ZONE'

The first-person narrator being the mother draws images for the readers to trigger their imagination to put them in the sphere and surrounding of her personal story this is done through the employment of figurative language. The Italian word "blanched" is metaphorically used to refer to the father's face turning pale delivering the news that one of his tenants died in his apartment. The mother and narrator used the expression "cut to the bone" to metaphorically imply that the lack of the father's reliability on her has reached the final limit. The use of the scientific metaphor, where raising her two sons is similar to growing two specimens of human beings in "petri dishes" this might refer to the experimental and anonymous process of motherhood. The feeling of guilt by the mother's side made her feel in dept because of her unfulfillment for her duties as a mother, this is unpayable "dept". "there had been a weight on us as we played outside" the weight is that of the fear and worry because of the loose panther hovering around the camp.

The climax of the story begins when the mother stood on a spinning stool trying to change the bulb to improve the light in the cottage, the dog caused her to fall on the back of her head.

The mother hitting her head on the floor causing her to "black out" and faint for moments, when she regains her consciousness, she forgets her sons' names so she addresses them as the older and younger "golden" boys accordingly one is as small as a bottle of water "water small" the other is bigger. She compares herself to a chicken and the bulb an egg, she says:

"The older boy bent over me, then lifted an intact light bulb from my armpit, triumphantly; I a chicken, the bulb an egg."

The bulb is smashed as an egg. The dizziness after she falls is compared to fireworks in that she started seeing flashes of light because of the head trauma. "Though fireworks went off in the corner of my eyes."

The mother feels sorry for her hair being very valuable to her when her boy raps it with duct-tape in an attempt to mend the wound on the back of her head. She metaphorically compared her relation and love for her hair as if it has become a pet.

Moreover, the brain concussion caused her confusion of thoughts as if her mind is mixed like "scrambled" eggs. The figurative language continued in all its dimensions not a single line without an implied meaning, a metaphor or other figures of speech. A simple notion of her boys falling asleep is transformed into a sea with waves overwhelming the boys with drowsiness. Metaphorically the writer uses the image of the sea to convey a regular idea as sleep, as follows: "the waves of sleep rushing through their brains". The waves would take whatever bad experience the boys had, the night before, and might bring something worse the next day. The mother continues to use metaphor to show how the sound and noise of the rain would be like a barrier that could block every other sound outside the hut: "the rain's pounding on the roof, as if the noise was a barrier that nothing could enter, a stay against the looming night".

Groff might have been influenced by T.S. Eliot's metaphor in his poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' when he described the smoke and dust of the industrial city like a cat rubbing it back against the window panes trying to come in. Here the mother uses metaphor and personification, the wind is compared and becoming alive as a cat, it "rubbed" it self, it also "played in the corners", and "broke" tree branches from the trees and threw them on the roof which sounded like an animal with claws. "Groff's text makes visible, through a story about a character caught between an obsolescent and an incipient self-narrative, a contest of ontologies in the culture of modernity, one parsimonious and one prolific when it comes to allocating possibilities for selfhood across species lines." (David, 2018)

Time is metaphorically compared to a moving vehicle awaiting no one, as the mother explained, that if someone falls from the time train, it would not wait for him. Time is also personified where it is careless about human's needs and attempt to manage and control. The head ache is compared to thunder in its severity. The final conclusion of the story when the father arrives and sees his wife crowned with duct-tape she compares herself to a queen of chaos.

IV. SIMILE, PERSONIFICATION, AND OTHER RHETORICAL DEVICES

Simile goes hand in hand with metaphor, personification and other rhetorical devices. So, when the husband is metaphorically compared to a giant racoon walking on the roof, they all are "like burglars". The mother is somehow transparent or almost invisible because she has lost so much

weight "as if I'd gone translucent". She used simile to compare her rejection to her husband treating her as incompetent to take responsibility, to an annoying fog that would never go away, "like a sticky fog".

Personification determined the night being "bold" as being so dark while the outside nature is also personified. The narrator's feeling of insecurity and fear to what lies outside is emphasized after her husband has left them. The wind for example is deliberately making an inhuman sound that calls for everything else to wake up at night "the wind was making a low inhuman muttering", the word muttering gives the wind it's animate privilege.

The "head trauma" she got from the fall is personified to be like an old friend, in the sense that she is very familiar with and acquainted to. There is also, the use of hyperbole, it is very clear when she describes her mother, as she was young, to be influential in her life "a person who had blocked out the sun".

The expression "entered" is usually used with animate being, but here it personifies night "night entered". The mother felt fear and insecurity of what might happen if her condition became worse and this idea haunted her with every word she uttered "the unthinkable that I was skirting, like a pit that opened in front of each sentence" she employed simile, in the sense that, the unthinkable is like a pit that she fears to fall in. Anaphora is used to emphasize the upward direction of the swimming fish in the boys' stories of the sea world "way up up up to the birds". The mother after the head trauma fears that if she fell asleep, she might fall into a coma, so she decides to stay awake.

Time has become a living being so unsensitive to others, it's blind to human's urge to save it, thus, time is personified. "The first birds sent their question into the chilly air" the birds have become human since they are asking questions. The last line in the short story comes with a conclusion, the father is back and he takes charge of the situation, the mother is relieved from her watch she lets go knowing that the father has received his duty back, but the fear in his face is "like the wind itself" she sensed fear in his eyes, she uses simile to compare it to the wind and the cold sun.

Rhetorical devices have managed to give volume and richness to this piece, the narrator succeeded in using these devices at various stages of her narration. At the beginning of the story, she used them because she was sinical and sarcastic, after her head trauma when her children were awake, she was rather worried and scared of what is to come so everything was exaggerated and indulged with fear. Finally, when she was all alone her surrounding and being has changed into something ghostly, unrealistic and out of this world. Groff excelled in employing such lavished language to achieve her goal of revealing a woman's mental

and psychological status at certain moments of distress and challenge.

V. IMAGERY IN GROFF'S LANGUAGE

Imagery is basically the painting of images through words and language, the writer could achieve this by the use of various rhetorical devices. The imagery employs the senses as means of taking the reader into the writer's imagination. There are seven types of imagery: visual, auditory, Gustatory, Tactile, olfactory, Kinesthetic, and organic. These images appeal to various senses like sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, movement, and internal senses. Graff's story is a manifestation of these senses to ensure the perfect understanding and indulgence of the interior and the surrounding of the main character. The reader is capable to feel and touch and hear everything with the heroine of the story but never having the chance to know her name or the names of her family members. So, instead of the names there is "my husband, the old boy and the young boy" maybe to generalize or perhaps to specify that it is only her perception that matters. The organic image reveals the chill of the weather "the chill of march seemed to blow through my bones", it provokes the reader to feel or even imagine the same sensations of the main character at that precise moment. The mother as well as the readers heard the father jumping on the roof with the racoons trying to find a mobile signal. "I heard him stepping on the metal roof" the music is specified to the readers to feel free to listen or imagine "the sound of cruise-ship calypso" the collaboration between the senses privilege the reader even to hear the music via the auditory images depending on the sense of hearing. The sound of the wind is heard as well, "The wind was making a low, in human muttering" the reader could almost picture the sound of strong wind as it is familiar to all, a clear auditory image.

While at night the light is dim to the extent that the mother could not see the patterns on the plates she is washing "I couldn't see the patterns on the dishes I was washing" the readers tend to feel the darkness of the setting through the speaker's visual image. To the mother's surprise the bulb she touched was so hot that made her juggle it from one hand to the other the image is Tactile since it employed the sense of touch "The old bulb was hot". The mother sensed the wet towel on her cheeks and smelled the chemicals from the broken bulb which made her feel nauseous. She hears her young boy's singing all her senses are manifested in a way to draw a sensation or a multi-dimension image that places the reader in the spire of that particular moment. Then she goes further to describe the hot hands of her child, thus, it is a tactile image as well. The readers hear the howling of the dog as well since the mother is experiencing the it. The sole

narrator employing the facilities of the dramatic monologue technique enables the readers to see deep into her senses, ideas, and thoughts. The sense of cold beer can, which the old boy placed on his mother's wound, is a tactile image again.

The story takes a new curve in the narrative style, the readers are now experiencing a sort of 'stream of consciousness technique' when the two boys fell asleep leaving the mother alone to her own wonderings. She goes back in time to remember all the dangers which lie outside their safe shelter. Throughout that lonesome and critical hour, the hole sensation talks the reader inside the speaker's mind and soul the pain she feels, the passion towards her sleeping children, and her desires to calm herself through counting her breaths. Then, she enters into a state of separation her body from her conscious and senses. She leaves her aching body in the hut and wonders alone outside, every thing seemed to fit the picture of an after-rain forest. Multiple portraits are drawn by the flying spirit of the mother, first there is the racoons fiddling with the trash, then the image of the red-shouldered hawk and the nesting chicks. The image is never complete without the employment of sense of smell. The smell of the pine blossom. The sense of touch is mentioned also where the "palmetto's nails" scratched her body. Finally, dizziness took over her mind, it started spinning in circles, then her son's awakening brought her back gradually to her senses, and body.

VI. LEE CHILD 'THE PICTURE OF THE LONELY DINER'

Lee child born in 1954 in England. He finished law school in Sheffield England. His interest in Arts started in the theater, he began his writing career after being fired from his job as Television director. Lee's first work is *The Killing Floor*, the first of Jack Reacher's thriller series. Jack Reacher, a fictional character created by Lee Child, embodies leadership and adaptability in complex situations, showcasing a unique approach to problem-solving and personal growth. (Bathurst & Chrystall, 2019) Lee Child's is the pen name of James Dover Grant, the name is inspired after a mispronunciation of the name "Lee Care".

'The Picture of the Lonely Diner' is a short story written in 2015 and publisher in in Child's Anthology *No Middle Name* the book is a collection of Jack Reacher's short stories. It includes 12 short stories published in 2017.

The title 'The picture of the Lonely Diner' is a name of an actual famous painting by the Artist Edward Hopper with same name. The painting as was described by Racher in the story is a scene of a diner's glass front showing the lonely people sitting at night at a counter of a diner a man wearing a hat sitting alone and a red headed women sitting beside

another man. The man behind the counter is bending forward to get something from underneath.

"I think I know that picture. Three people isn't it?"

"Plus the counter man. He is kind of bent over, doing something in the well. There are two coffee urns behind him."

"First there's a couple, close but not touching, and then one lonely guy all by himself. With his back to us. In a hat."

"All the men wear hats."

"The woman is a redhead. She looks sad. It's the loneliest picture I've ever seen." (Childs, P. 13)

The glass front of the Flatiron building resembles the scene in Hopper's painting. Where loneliness is the prevailing tone. The setting of the story is a realistic one, at evening time in New York city. Reacher describes the scene being out of the usual.

He stepped up one stair and turned around and looked across Broadway's humped blacktop at the Flatiron Building. His destination. He looked left and right. He saw nothing. He saw less than nothing.

No cars. No taxis. No buses, no trucks, no scurrying panel vans, with their business names hastily handwritten on their doors. No motorbikes, no Vespa scooters in pastel colors. No deliveryman on bikes, from restaurants or messenger services. No skateboarders, no rollerbladers. (Child, p.10)

The setting of the story starts in the underground in New York where Reacher finds himself in total isolation surrounded by police duct tape with the sign of don't enter. The setting shows various angles of famous landmarks in New York, but to Reacher's astonishment the whole landscape was void of people. There were only the police with their blue and red lights, Reacher headed towards on police woman. She started interrogating him about his German passport. He explained that he and his father were in the Navy, but he has retired.

The plot of the story is revealed through the conversation with the police officer, she elaborated that there was a trap

for a corrupted officer waiting for his complicit who seemed to be killed.

Reacher finally decides to walk to the criminal informing him of the trap and he walks away continuing his way. The plot is rather simple and short lacking action and suspense although the short story is classified as a crime thriller story.

The language on the other hand is that of a contemporary fiction fragmented, mundane and colloquial. the narrator is the third omniscient narrator.

He should have seen a hundred people. Or a thousand. Or ten thousand. Guys in canvas shoes and T-shirts, girls in short summer dresses, some of them strolling, some of them hustling, to clubs about to open their doors, or bars with the latest vodka, or midnight movies, (Childs, P.11)

The sentences are "Or a thousand." is a hole sentence ill-structured and wrong in grammar, again the same sentence "Or ten thousand.". The reader might contemplate whether such mistakes are made on purpose or whether they convey the negligence of the writer. The suspense in the story springs from the mystery in the picturesque scenery where everything seems out of context and out of the usual. The figures of speech do not add any complication to the story. Child employed simple figures of speech such as simile as he resembles the Flatiron building to a piece of cake or to a prow of a ship.

Sharp at the front. Like a thin wedge, or a modest slice of cake. But to him it looked most like the prow of a ship. Like an immense ocean liner moving slowly towards him. Not an original thought. He knew many people felt the same way. Even with the cow-catcher glasshouse on the front ground floor, (Childs, P.12)

He continues describing the empty setting "It was like walking through a ghost town." (P.12) "The cowcatcher had a triangular iron frame, a miniature version of the shape it was backing up against, like a tiny sailboat trying to outrun the liner chasing it. The frame was painted green, like moose," (p.12) again Child used simile to resemble the triangular building to a ship sharp edge.

The story concludes by the heroic gesture of Reacher trying to save the man entrapped from an eminent death "Reacher said, " So here's my good deed of the day. If you want to turn yourself in to her, I'll walk with you. Every step of the way." "Similar to the ethical explorations in superhero narratives, Child's stories often grapple with themes of

justice, reflecting societal values and personal ethics.” (Consani et al., 2020).

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the literary works of Lauren Groff and Lee Child, two prominent authors known for their distinct narrative styles and thematic explorations. While Groff is celebrated for her intricate character development and poetic prose, Child is renowned for his fast-paced thrillers featuring the iconic character Jack Reacher. This juxtaposition of styles offers a rich ground for examining how each author engages with their respective genres and the broader cultural contexts that inform their writing. In concluding the comparative analysis of the short stories by Groff and Childs, it becomes evident that both narratives, while distinct in their cultural and thematic contexts, share underlying motifs that resonate with the human experience. This comparison not only highlights the unique storytelling techniques employed by each author but also emphasizes the broader implications of their narratives within the framework of local history and identity.

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