

Vertical Context in Speech Portrayals as an Index of Social Identity (British-American Parallels)

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Abstract—Vertical context defined as information of historical, philological and cultural character implicitly conveys information about the personage/speaker, which should be inferred by the reader/listener to grasp the author's ideas. In our earlier publications, it has been revealed that literary vertical context in the upper classes of Great Britain (XIX-XX centuries British literature) has endured through time and comprises a certain list of literary works which serve as social identifiers. The comparative study of two novels of the XX1 century – *The Past Imperfect* by a British writer Julian Fellowes and *Rules of Civility* by an American writer Amor Towles – enables us to find common literary core made up of British writers and poets, on the one hand, and the literary allusions underlying historical and cultural differences and separateness of the Anglo-Saxon world. The paper is aimed at analyzing the most frequent literary allusions in speech portrayals, making parallels and inferring the most valuable information that underpins upper class culture.

Index Terms—American novel, British novel, XX1 century, cultural code, implication, social standing, speech portrayals, upper classes, vertical context.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper is part of a global comparative study aimed at establishing parallels between the upper classes of Great Britain and the USA. Sociolinguistic approach to the upper class representation in British fiction of different historical periods allowed us to reveal different speech parameters or features, which unambiguously serve as social markers and hence cannot be ignored and lost upon the reader. One of them is vertical context, defined as information of historical, philological and cultural character essential for a speaker/reader to infer in the process of either direct or indirect communication. As readers, we always almost immediately identify a character as a representative of a certain social group or class on the basis of his/her background knowledge, that is the allusions and references to literary works and writers, historical events and people, use of idioms, which all together implicitly translate education, social status, aesthetic views and cultural values of a personage/speaker.

Vertical context has been in the focus of scholarly interest since the XX century. The study of vertical context has been especially fruitful at the English Department of Moscow State University, where several theses have been written on the role and implications of vertical context in different literary works of the XX-th century British writers [1]-[3].

Vertical context, according to Irina Gubbenet, comprises information of a socio-historical character (different realia,

toponyms, and proper names) and of a philological character (allusions, quotations, and deformed idioms) [4]. Being a complex multilayered phenomenon, it requires adequate background knowledge of the reader/speaker to decode the information and the ideas put in a literary/oral text. The role of vertical context cannot be underestimated in the educational process of students learning English as a foreign language as they often fail to share it and as a result to grasp the author's ideas. It would be part of the problem if it concerned only foreign students, however, native speakers of English sometimes demonstrate the lack of knowledge either, which only highlights the significance of this aspect of speech.

II. ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The paper is focused on the study of vertical context, philological vertical context (literary allusions only) in a British novel *The Past Imperfect* written by Julian Fellowes and the novel *Rules of Civility* by the American writer Amor Towles, in order to reveal similarities and differences in literary and cultural background of the characters belonging to two different cultures [5], [6]. The selection of the novels for comparison is dictated by a similar plot of the novels – there are two characters (Damian in the British novel, Katey Kontent in the American one) who set their minds to propel themselves to the top of society, the first, being introduced into the aristocratic society and becoming part of it, successfully acquires the best qualities a British aristocrat embodies, the second is motivated to become one of the upper echelons of New York society due to her acquaintance with a banker. For a social lift there is a guide – Young George Washington's *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, consisting of 110 postulates [7]. The title of the novel *Rules of Civility* is the allusion to George Washington's 110 Rules attached in Appendix of the novel, which allows the American reader to receive definite steps and recommendations in order to succeed, the very fact presupposing socially marked features in speech and behavior generally recognized and accepted. It is also worth remarking that in American society these speech and behavioural characteristics are at any one's disposal, as it were. The society seems to challenge anyone: "if you want it, it's up to you, take it, it is the country of opportunities and success", which also differentiates the USA from Great Britain. This paper is aimed at comparing background knowledge of the characters in two cultures and finding commonly shared literary vertical context, on the one hand, and revealing differences, on the other, thus proving/ or disproving the common background core of the British and American upper class representatives/characters.

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III. THE MATERIAL AND ANALYSIS

It was stated in our previous papers [8], [9] that upper class culture rests on a very solid background of proper names, realia, literature, works of art, theater performances that over time acquired socially marked meanings and turned into signs of social identity. This culturally and historically laden information is passed on from generation to generation, and sharing it means belonging to the in-group; it means good upbringing and education. While reading a book about or with the characters representing the upper classes you cannot ignore the fact that this information is recurrent and can be found in novels of various time periods. The comparative study of modern fiction of British-American writers allows us to make some parallels and find upper class literary background core.

A. Allusions to British Literature

William Shakespeare in the XX c. British literature used to be the most frequently quoted and cited writer. However, in the XXI century allusions to Shakespeare’s works are sparse, but still, his plays and characters create parallels and convey additional layers of information about situations and emotions of personages thus continuing the dialogues started by the great and unsurpassed playwright. The significance of Shakespeare’s literary activity for both British and American cultures is emphasized by the fact that he is studied thoroughly at schools and universities there. In the following table there are some examples from both novels under analysis.

a) William Shakespeare

British Julian Fellowes’ <i>The Past Imperfect</i>	American Amor Towles’s <i>The Rules of Civility</i>
1. It is still an offence to me that, of all people on earth, she should have married Andrew Summersby. How could my goddess have married this clottish beast of burden willingly? At least Shakespeare’s Titania chose Bottom when she was on drugs. My Titania picked her Bottom when stone-cold sober and with her eyes wide open (p.232-233).	It was <i>A Day at the Races</i> . In typical Marx Brothers fashion, the stiff and sophisticated made early appearances, establishing a sense of decorum, which the audience politely abided. But at the entrance of Groucho, the crowd sat up in their seats and applauded – like he was a Shakespearean giant returning to the stage after a premature retirement (p.29).
2. ‘Damian.’ I hesitated, praying for inspiration. ‘You know he’s ill –’ ‘And like to die.’ It almost amused me he should quote Richard 111 in this context. ‘Precisely. And he finds he’s interested in hearing about how his friends from those days...’ (p.298).	

Shakespeare’s *Titania*, a character from the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is the queen of fairies, in this meaning of a fairy queen she is referred to in fiction thus rendering soaring in the clouds and being torn from reality. In example 2 (Br.), allusion to Richard 111, to which Kieran resorts to, is used ironically rather than with any other meaning, that’s why it amused the narrator because Kieran was often looked at as an outsider, not quite fitting high society.

In the episode from *Rules of Civility* there is drawn a

contrast between two audiences – one at the presentation of the fifth studio record *A Day at The Races* by rock band Queen, where “the stiff and sophisticated established a sense of decorum” which suggests that a significant society event was taking place, with the audience standing apart from the “stiff”. For the reader to fully understand this divide it is necessary to know that this recording got gold certification in the US, and in the national poll of 2006 it was voted the 67th greatest album. The audience at the entrance of Groucho is compared with a “Shakespearean giant”; the comparison becomes clear if one knows that Julius Henry “Grouch” Marx was one of the greatest American comedians, a writer, a stage and TV star. The “giant” of Groucho in the US is comparable with that of Shakespeare. So, along with reference to British authors one comes across American cultural events and celebrities too.

b) Medieval literature

Allusions to medieval literature are found in the British novel. In example 1 ‘...since Chaucer first sharpened his pen’ we find allusions to Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages, the author of *The Canterbury Tales* (XIVc.). It is used as a periphrasis and hyperbole at the same time to render the meaning of an ‘age-old question’.

British
1. But he couldn’t take this very seriously. ‘Don’t you think people have been asking themselves that since Chaucer first sharpened his pencil?’ (p.195).
3. Damian had given the impression of a one-night stand, but, for Dagmar it was <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> . How often it seems a pair of lovers can be engaged in two entirely different relationships (p.167).

The relationship between two main characters – Damian and Dagmar was compared in case of Damian with ‘one-night stand’, which speaks for itself, it means not serious or lasting, and for Dagmar it was elevated to the level of the love described in *Tristan and Isolde*, Thomas Malory’s knightly novel *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485). It was tragic, so was the relationship between two characters, central to Julian Fellowes’s novel.

c) Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte and Charles Dickens

Allusions to Jane Austen and her novels can be found almost in any modern book directly or indirectly describing the upper classes of British society. Jane Austen, a famous British writer of the XIX century who belonged to the classes in question and had masterfully represented them in her novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, managed to picture fine details and delicate nuances in the demeanor of her characters, society talk, and pastimes of the gentry. References to Jane Austen and her literary works create cultural background and serve as social signs, which remain relevant and meaningful these days.

British Julian Fellowes’ <i>The Past Imperfect</i>	American Amor Towles’s <i>The Rules of Civility</i>
1. There is a moment in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> when Elizabeth Bennet catches sight of her sister who has	1. She eyed the bedside table. –Look at this, she groaned. <i>Charlotte Brontë Emily Brontë</i>

<p>returned with the dastardly Wickham, rescued from disgrace by the efforts of Mr. Darcy. 'Lydia was Lydia still', she comments. Well, Damian Baxter was Damian still. That is, while the broad and handsome young man with the thick curls and the easy smile had vanished and been replaced by a hunched figure resembling no one but so much as Doctor Manette, I could detect that distinctive, diffident stutter masking a deep and honed sense of superiority, and I recognized at once the old, patronizing arrogance in the flourish with which he held out his bony hand. I smiled. 'How very nice of you,' I said (p.12-13).</p> <p>2. 'What have you come as?' Lucy was dressed in a Jane Austen, white frock, high-waisted and pure, with a ribbon round her throat and her artificial ringlets sewn with tiny, white silk roses. She looked artful rather than innocent, but charming nonetheless (p.132).</p>	<p><i>Jane Austen.</i> Tinker rehabilitation plan. But didn't they all die spinsters? – I think Austen did. – Well, the rest of them might as well have. The remark caught me so off guard that I burst out laughing. Eve laughed too. She laughed so hard that her hair fell over her face. It was the first good laugh the two of us had had since the first week of the year (p.73-74).</p> <p>2. In retrospect, my cup of coffee has been the works of Charles Dickens. Admittedly, there's something a little annoying about all those plucky underprivileged kids and the aptly named agents of villainy. But I've come to realize that however blue my circumstances, if after finishing a chapter of a Dickens novel I feel a miss-my-stop-on-the-train sort of compulsion to read on, then everything is probably going to be just fine (p.128).</p> <p>3. As if on cue, a bowl of vichyssoise was put on the table. I looked down at the soup and gave it my best Oliver Twist (p.151).</p> <p>4. – Dickens. Remember that day in June when you spying on me at the Plaza? You had one of these novels in your bag and it triggered some fond memories. So I dug up an old copy of <i>Great Expectations</i>. I hadn't opened the book in thirty years. I read it cover to cover in three days. –What did you think? –It was great fun, of course. The characters, the language, the turns of events. But I must admit that this time around, the book struck me as a little Miss Havisham's dining room: a festive chamber which has been sealed off from time. It's as if Dickens's world was left at the altar (p.285).</p>
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In J. Fellowes's novel the reference to Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* carries a lot of information about upper class culture. Pride and arrogance, the key social characteristics highlighted by the author, shine through the decaying figure of the main character, Damian. Once acquired, these characteristics are impossible to kill, even Damian's disfigured appearance and nearing death cannot turn him into a pitiful and disgraceful man. The parallel between Damian and Elizabeth Bennet serves to bring this typically aristocratic feature to the fore. This trait of character is socially marked and assimilated by those aspiring to ascend a social ladder. In *Rules of Civility*, we find similar characteristics in the following lines about Anny Grandyn: "She had just that combination of style and confidence that one needed in order to bring modern design into high society" (p.123); and "her purchase of a young man's favors was perfectly in keeping with the unapologetic

self-possession that made her so impressive" (p. 284).

We find another allusion to the main character from Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, Doctor Manette. Damian is compared with Doctor Manette in order to show the same position of an outcast they had found themselves in which ruined both of them despite their stoicism. Of significance is the French origin of the doctor, which also adds information about two cultures being historically interconnected and French being part and parcel of upper class culture and code.

Metonymy used in example 2 (Br.), *dressed in a Jane Austen*, is aimed at showing Lucy's pretence to come as an innocent young lady, which she was not. This metonymy can be decoded if you are familiar with Jane Austen's life and work and obviously implies morals of Jane Austen's times and her characters' purity and chastity.

Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens are in the list of the top writers mentioned and referred to in modern British literature, and not only British but American literature too. Charles Dickens, though not being part of upper class culture, got extraordinary popularity having portrayed the desperate and the needy against the background of the privileged, the popularity that has not faded in time. His *Pickwick Papers*, published in a Victorian cheap newspaper in parts, gave him unprecedented fame due to his talent, wit and humour, and, undoubtedly, his talent of a social observer. As example 3 (Am.) shows, the title of Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* is humourously played upon in the American novel. Example 4 leads the reader to the description of Miss Havisham's dining room in *Great Expectations* and evokes feelings of decay and complete destruction as if time had halted for ever, from hence "It's as if Dickens's world was left at the altar" which found response in the feelings of the protagonist. We see how literature, by means of allusions to literary personages of different epochs, continues dialogues started centuries ago and endows modern personages with additional characteristics, thus allowing a reader to penetrate deeper into the author's ideas.

It is noteworthy, however, that implications sometimes reflect different depth of interconnections as the examples from Amor Towles's novel demonstrate, in which references to Charlotte Brontë Emily Brontë and Jane Austen are superficial and attributional rather than evoking cultural and literary parallels or presupposing in-depth dialogue with all connotative meanings they bear for a modern reader. They are used as "signs" of upper class culture, necessary to adapt for a social elevation.

The cultural core of both British and American upper class culture includes literary works of William Shakespeare, George Gordon Byron, W.M. Thackeray, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf and Agatha Christie.

d) XIX century British poets

British poets of the XIX century inspired a lot of writers, painters and musicians. George Gordon Byron, an aristocrat and one of the brightest representatives of Romanticism, has retained his glory up to now. He embodies the upper classes in his appearance, style of life and literary work to the best advantage that is why Damian is compared to Lord Byron, aristocrat to the bone.

British	American
He was not an officer, as most of the men in the room had chosen to be, but a dandy, Beau Brummell or Byron or someone similar, with a tightly fitting tailcoat hugging his torso, and buckskin breeches and high polished boots to show off his legs. A dazzling cravat of white silk was wound round his neck and tucked into the brocade waistcoat beneath. Lucy nodded at me. 'He had to go out to Windsor rep and that was what they came up with' (p.140).	By the summer that Val and I had begun seeing each other, we were in our thirties and had missed little more than a decade of each other's adult lives; but that was time enough. It was time enough for whole lives to have been led and misled. It was time enough, as the poet said, to murder and create – or at least, to have warranted the dropping of a question on one's plate (p.5-6).

The description of his dress is the characterization of an upper class person wearing obviously hand-made tailcoat and a waistcoat beneath, a silk white cravat, buckskin breeches and high polished boots. The allusion to T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is of a more subtle character, as it is indirect and based on the quotation from his work:

*There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea. (lines – 26-34) [10]*

Using the technique of consciousness, developed by Modernists, the poet epitomizes frustration, lost opportunities and someone dear to him, inactivity and awareness of mortality. T.S. Eliot was an extensively well-read poet, which gives reason to believe he was greatly influenced by different literary works. In the novel this allusion is aimed at showing the reverse – it's time at the age of thirty to be decisive and take actions.

e) Agatha christie

Agatha Christie (Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie, Lady Mallowan), Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (the order she got for her contribution to literature), is the best-selling novelist of all times, famous for her fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She is also a bright representative of the upper classes of Great Britain.

British	American
...I found myself approached by a uniform chauffeur – or rather someone who looked like an actor playing a chauffeur in an episode of <i>Hercule Poirot</i> – who replaced his peaked cap after introducing himself in low and humble tones, and led the way outside to a new Bentley... (p. 9).	1. And I had bought a little Christmas tree too and set it up by the window. Without decorations it looked a little forlorn, so I pulled the mayor's golden star off the ham and propped it on the highest branch. Then I got myself comfortable and opened <i>Hercule's Poirot's Christmas</i> , Mrs. Christie's latest (p. 306). 2. But there are certain times when chance suddenly provides the justice that Agatha Christies promise. We look around at the characters cast in our lives

	– our heiresses and gardeners, our vicars and nannies, our late-arriving guests who are not exactly what they seem – and discover that before the end of the weekend all assembled will get their just deserts (p.252).
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The allusion to Hercule Poirot creates a visual image of a chauffeur, who looked like the detective and had a similar low voice. Agatha Christie's books intrigue readers by their cliffhanger endings and skillfully designed plots that even the most savvy in detectives cannot predict. In the end all turn out to be different from what they seem at first. That is what translated in the episode from Amor Towles's novel by antonomasia 'Agatha Christies'. We often have a wrong perception of people.

f) Virginia woolf

The allusions to Virginia Woolf lead the reader to Virginia Woolf's life and literary works. Being part of upper class culture, she came down to history as a writer famous for her stream of consciousness style, getting into the heads of her characters and showing their emotional truths. "Her work often criticized and peeled back the layers of pretension that masked her social peers. The fact that Woolf was all about truth and layer peeling, leads some to think that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is just another way of asking, "Who's afraid to live without illusion?" [11].

British	American
I'm sure the newcomers, an army general with a nice wife and a nearby landowning couple, had no idea that their dear friends, Peter and Billie, had been playing out a touring version of <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf</i> until just before they broke up to have their baths (p.365).	I picked up the book on top. None of the pages were dog-eared, so I started at the beginning. "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with lark," she added. To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail –Oh, stop, Eve said. It's dreadful. What is it? –Virginia Woolf. –Ugh. Tinker brought home all these novels by women as if that's what I needed to get me back on my feet. He's surrounded my bed with them. It's as if he's planning to brick me in (p.68).

In the American novel the protagonist reads a passage from Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* obviously suggesting "the expedition were bound to take place", the expedition toward the upper echelons of New York society, all the books are a necessary part of this journey.

B. Allusions to American Literature

Allusions to American literature are what immediately immerse the reader into American culture and historical background underlying it.

Among them are Mark Twain and his works:

American

– I remember Mark Twain writing about an old woman who piloted a barge – the kind that ferried people from a landing on one side of the river to a landing on the other.
 – In *Life on the Mississippi*?
 – I don't know. Maybe. Anyway – over thirty years, Twain figured this man had shuttled back and forth so often that he'd traveled the length of the river twenty times over, without leaving his county. Tinker smiled and shook his head.
 – That's what I feel like sometimes. Like half my clients are on their way to Alaska while the other half are on their way to the everglades – and I'm the one going from riverbank to riverbank (p. 41)

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), a symbol of American culture, worked as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi river in his youth; the profession was lost after the Civil war. When he returned to the river many years after, he saw all the changed the Mississippi and its shores had undergone and committed to paper his recollections and observations in his memoirs *Life on the Mississippi*. The allusion to his memoirs creates a metaphor: people's life is compared with the Mississippi river, and the changes in their lives are similar to the currents of the river, whether for the better or worse, they are natural. Shuttling from one shore to another symbolizes stagnation, and indecision.

Ernest Hemingway, Walt Whitman and his poems *Leaves of Grass* elevating the human form and mind, the body and the material world, James Fennimore Cooper with his *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Deerslayer*, Henry David Thoreau and his *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* underlie American culture and reveal the foundation on which it rests. These allusions are found in the American novel *Rules of Civility*. To this list should be added a list of instructions for the careerists issued in the US, such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, for example, and George Washington's *110 Rules of Civility*.

C. Allusions to World Literature

Globalization processes are manifested in every aspect of people's life, first and foremost in a wide range of citations and allusions to world literary works. It is the trend hard to ignore; it reveals itself in both British and American fiction of the XXI century, but in different ways. It is generally assumed that American culture, being initially founded as a multicultural society, would reflect literary background knowledge of the peoples forming American society (Germans, French, Irish, Dutch, Italians, Russians and others), and it does. In the British novel under analysis, immigration processes find their reflection mostly in allusions to cuisine, art, architecture, historical events and proper names, which are excluded at this stage of our research. Allusions to world literature are more characteristic of American literature, which is illustrated in the following table. However, it should be noted that it cannot suffice to make generalizations on the basis of one novel, because the origin of a writer also matters, for that reason the study will be continued and further investigation will shed more light on the question.

American

1. I think his letter could have stymied Don Juan (p.72).
 2. The one thing for certain at Belmont was that on Wednesday at 5:00 A.M. there was no place for the common man. This was like the circles of Dante's *Inferno* – populated with men of varied sins,

but also with the shrewdness and devotion of the damned. It was a living reminder of why no one bothers to read *Paradiso* (p.107).

3. With a pitch-perfect ear for the nineteenth-century narrative sentence and a religious conviction that the novel should illuminate, he had been an early champion of the Russians and originated authoritative translations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky into English. Some say that he traveled all the way to Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's country homestead, just to discuss an ambiguous sentence in the closing paragraph of *Anna Karenina*. Parish had been a correspondent of Chekhov's, a mentor of Wharton's, a friend to Santayana and James (p.149).

4. That's when I approached him, a copy of *Vishniovy Sad* in hand (p.150).

5. You can make what claims you will about the psychological nuance of Proust or the narrative scope of Tolstoy, but you can't argue that Mrs. Christie fails to please. Her books are tremendously satisfying (p.251).

6. – Who, Bryce? I suppose so. But he's quite capable, and really more of a prot é g é
 – A prot é g é Vow. In what? Faustian bargains? (p.255)

In the adduced examples the names of Don Juan, Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, Tolstoy's *Vishnyovy Sad* and *Anna Karenina*, Chekhov's plays, Proust and Santayana, Goethe's Faust are the best examples of Spanish, Italian, Russian, French and German cultures, a kaleidoscopic representation of the cultures populating the US and world famous.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of vertical context, philological vertical context (allusions to literature), in British and American novels has showed that there is a commonly shared literary background core. It is based on the works by William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens, British poets of the XIX century, Agatha Christie and Virginia Woolf. All of them, excluding Charles Dickens, are brilliant representatives of upper class culture. Relying on two novels, it can be concluded that allusions are aimed at singling out or highlighting some traits of characters, their emotional states or situations in which they found themselves, and serve as social identifiers. Despite similarities, allusions to British authors in the American novel have an attributional character, which means that novels referred to are a must to read for the aspiring social climbers.

American upper class identity is revealed in the novel in the allusions to American literature underlying American national character and culture. American signs of identity are also traced in its multiculturalism, which finds its reflection in allusions to world literature, which cannot be said about the British novel under analysis. Sweeping processes of globalizations in Great Britain are mirrored more in allusions to national cuisines, historical places and people, etc., which were not in the focus of our research in this paper.

Interestingly, almost all literary allusions in the novels are italicized, which catches the reader's eyes and compels the reader to ask a question 'Why this comparison? What is it for?' For sure, making every one read more slowly and thoughtfully and making readers more knowledgeable in the end!

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