

Examen ou concours :

Série* :

Spécialité/option :

Repère de l'épreuve :

Épreuve/sous-épreuve :

(Préciser, s'il y a lieu, le sujet choisi)

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Traduction

Comment était-elle censée bien réfléchir ?

Elle laissa sa main glisser sur les quelques dizaines de centimètres de son histoire personnelle, sa brève chronique de goût vestimentaire - Il y avait là les robes flottantes de son adolescence, ridicules, informes, qui ressemblaient maintenant à des choux exotiques, et bien que'une ait traîné des tâches de vin et une autre un trou causé par la brûlure de sa première cigarette, elle ne se résolvait pas à s'en débarrasser. Il y avait ici une robe aux premiers signes timides d'épaulettes, et d'autres robes plus assurées avaient soulevé, des grandes sœurs, musclées j'tant aux subjettés ; - les années sans-pompes, redécouvrant ^{plus} les lignes de la taille et les courbes du corps, faisant tomber leur ouïe avec un dédain effronté envers les espoirs des hommes. Sa dernière et meilleure pièce vestimentaire, achetée pour fêter la fin des examens, avant qu'elle n'apprenne sa misérable troisième position, était la robe de soirée vers foncé moulante fendue et des nu au col montant. Trop habillée pour faire sa première apparition

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à la maison. Elle laissa sa main glisser
encore plus loin et sortit une robe en soie
noirée au bustier plissé et à l'ovale évasé.
un choix sage étant donné que le rose était pâle
et intemporel comme il faut pour être porté en
soirée. Le triple miroir se fit également la
même réflexion. Elle mit d'autres chaussures, échangea
sa pierre d'oeux pour les perles, retoucha son maquillage,
réarrangea sa coiffure, mit un peu de parfum au creux de sa
gorge, laquelle était maintenant en grande partie exposée,
et était de retour dans le couloir à l'extérieur
en moins de quinze minutes.

Commentaire

The moment after World War One, often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties", is known for his fashionable boyish creases and short haircuts freeing the women and the minds after several years of suffering. Tom McEwan pays a discreet tribute to these years early in the 20th century when making his character Cecilia going through her teenage dreams in his work titled Atonement published in 2001. The extract written at the third person in an internal point of view follows Cecilia's choice making of a dress for a gathering taking place "downstairs" in her parents' house. She wants her dress to fit the image she wants to give, but it also has to reflect her inner self.

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Thus, though the three dresses she tries on, marking the three parts the text falls into, it is a many images and personality she tries to give herself. The chronometrical introspection of this young and quiet confident woman works like a portrayal of her state of mind, measure of her future and looking towards her past.

One will wonder how the text develops a dialectic between the showing and the hidden, the social appearance and the private, and in general the exterior and the interior toward an atonement, a reconciliation, between the two.

Cecilia is portrayed first as a strong person knowing what appearance she wants and getting it with the last dress. However, she experiences moments of anguish making her look into the past and questioning her future self. Finally, she learns to compose with social premises by making peace with her mirror.

* * *

The text delineates Cecilia as someone in search of control given the omnipresent mentions of time and space. The first sentence opens with a precise time « half an hour » framing the extract. Between the first and the last line, Cecilia took a total of thirty minutes. She tried on two dresses, the two occasions, the first one is a « black cape de Chine dress » p. 3 and

completely at the opposite the second one is a ^{pink} safe choice → l. 34. Added to these numbers are measures of all sorts are mentioned, from the "few feet" l. 44 to the "distance of forty feet" l. 61 ending with the few "inches" l. 61; as well as the different ages, from the "eight-year-old" l. 62, through "teenage years" and Cecilia as a "child of fifteen years before", to "her future self at eighty-five" l. 11. These numbers show the character's accurate perception of time, she only has thirty minutes to dress up here, but also all the time given her personality. It goes the same for the perception of space divided by the "stairs" between Cecilia's "bedroom" and "wardrobe", a private space where she is alone, and "downstairs" l. 15 that makes her think of her "brother", her "mother", "Paul Marshall" and "Robbie", all the guests of the social gathering she is dressing up for.

The omnipresence of the mirror as well as the come in an out in the "corridor", the space between the interior and the exterior, show how uncertain Cecilia is about which dress to choose, which one to give. However the retract abounds in thoughts on how determined the character is: she is "immediately dissatisfied" (stress on the adverb of time) and often "reconsider[s]" l. 3 without "linger[ing]" l. 11. The gesture following, "she turned on her heel", offers

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a dynamic move embodying the dynamic character. Moreover, when only dressed "in her heels and underwear", she does not appear vulnerable but on the contrary "surveys" her wardrobe and is "mindful" of the time passing by. The more it passes by, less "confused" is "her mind" (l. 50). Against her mirror that distorts her, she "knows" the tricks the mind could play: she recognizes that she is in a abnormal state, the way "she had been seeing and feeling all day" (l. 52) but still "knew what she had to do and she had known it all along" the extract (l. 54). She thus recognizes that she kept pushing back the decision she knew she had to take and she dress she had to put.

Indeed, at first her dark green dress is "too dreamy to have its first outing at home": the same way the character is too strong and confident? Indeed the different dresses embody the different self: the first black dress seduced at first Cecilia for its "air of invulnerability" that matches "the darkness of her eyes". The last remark made by the narrator could be one of Cecilia's thought since it gives her "a moment's inspiration".

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However the "rarity of form" turned out to "reveal" the image of an "austere, pygmy woman" l.9 that makes her reconsider the way she wants to appear: "relaxed" and "as though she had not given the matter a moment's thought", consequently the image of someone freed of time pressure and people's judgment, precisely the two things the character is obsessed with. The second dress is also a disillusion since it brings her back to childhood, when the first dress made her look like an "eighty-five" years old. The last dress is the good one, meaning it makes her look like a woman pretending to be a woman or "mermaid". This last remark can be linked to the sensuality evoked by the "figure-hugging [I] bias-cut backless" dress "with a halter neck" l.32.

Consequently at first glance the extract ends on a satisfying solution to the problem the character faced. However, it cannot be reduced to a mere mirror problem about how to look. The text deals with social pressure affecting the character.

* * *

As the phrase "the public gaze of the stairway mirror" suggests, the different mirrors are as many eyes ready to judge Cecilia. One could wonder why she does not feel as comfortable as she could

in her parents' home, "familiar" home where she keeps all her past dresses. During "all day" she knows she has experienced "too-vivid untrusty-workey impressions" and "self-doubt" as symptoms of anguish of the upcoming event. It is illustrated in the last sentences of paragraph three, in which the repeated use of the modal "would" shows how Cecilia anticipates on the future events by imagining them, which resorts in the climax, the last question not answered: "How was she to think straight?" when all the mirrors decided to trick her for the first time? "She had never had this difficulty with the mirror there before" & No: this house was a refuge before from society.

The immediate paragraph after opens on Cecilia "[pinning] a hand along the few feet of personal history". Precisely in the middle of a rush, it is time to go back to a past self and connect with him. The sense of the touch is in sharp contrast with the vivid mental activity of the character at first sight. However the juxtaposition of "personal history" and the "Brief chronicle of her" & 24 indicates that the dresses in the next sentences will embody her past self in the 1920s. Touching, caressing them is recollecting memories, like taking a walk inside one's brain and saying "Here were" this, "Here was" that. The first dress

are the "flapper ones" of her "teenage years", "sexton" as the teenage was still innocent and had activities "wine" or "cigarettes". The next ones are the ones of the experiences, in particular the ones of the "men's" looks and "hops". Both "rediscover" waistlines and curves, until dresses and teenagers

the "lastest and best piece" of the wardrobe is however associated to a negative memory, the "miserable third" place she had during the "finals". The paragraph ends on the need to find a dress, a "safe choice" + better than nothing and the remark on the minutes chronometry the introspection.

However, the remembering of things past turn into a confrontation ("confronted" l. 44) of the past in order to find back her reflect in the mirror. The character admits to herself, she had preferred to avoid thinking about it: "^{But} feeling but not thinking". One could add touching given the detailed descriptions of the dresses and of their garment: "viper de Chine", "moiré", "silk", a "pleated bodice and scalloped hem" with on top of that a "mura" and "musty" "pink" are ways to avoid to think about "the difficulty with the mirror". This mirror is also difficult to apprehend because just like the character putting on different appearances, he takes several shapes: a "jeilt-framed mirror", a "dumy-table mirror", back to the "stairway mirror", then the "triple mirror", the "same"

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one later on, 'the surface of the ancient glass' and finally its appropriation making it "her own full-light mirror" l. 59. These mirrors are also personified: first it reflects a "public gaze", then it "thought" l. 35 and even "foreshortens" the character, "not going to let her pass" with the "dress flared like an eight-year-old's party frock". Indeed, the character is not attending such party, no more than "another friend's afternoon birthday bash" but one definitely more important for her this time, resulting with a fight with her mirror "in every sense".

Fortunately, the two make peace and the character finds her reflect back when "approving" of the firm carers" of her dark green dress and feeling the way she had wanted to. Did she overcome the social pressure or did she obey to it by her choice?

* * *

When collecting memories from her dresses, the character was also reminded

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on how she built her confidence: from her first "timid" garment to the "muscular older sisters" whose confidence lie in their femininity. The character makes finally the choice of showing "overly" her femininity and "the pink bra full[er] on top of the back" very symbolically, same for the character "contemptuously" slipping aside to "reach for the gown", the only one that makes her "kinky impregnable, slippery and secure". The alliteration in "s" goes with the feeling that in fact, this gown offers an escape to social pressure not an answer to it. She wants now to look evasive and unpredictable, like the mythological figure of the "mermaid", and not "classical" anymore, which did not correspond to her dynamic inner self. Finally it seems that she found the reconciliation between her male and herself.

However, this interior / exterior conflict was all along the extract taken lightly, with a humorous tone emerging at certain points. Indeed, the situation ^{here,} a woman having the worst troubles to choose a dress, is one involving many jokes about women's futility. The extract plays on the clichés it could evoke without falling into them. It does so through the internal point of view of the female character making jokes on her own situation, reminding us that

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it is not a question of life and death. She uses self-decision when comparing herself to a "stag beetle", the punctuation emphasizing on the ridiculous aspect of the dress's "black cascade" having "apophies" (a sort of understratment) with "some sort of matchbox-crawling insect" l. 10. The same goes for little remarks all over the extract adding fun to her despair, like the use of dash in "-in every sense-", or the one about the pink dress: "all it needed was rabbit buttons" which would make her at the end look like "Sherley Temple". The opposition between the black and the pink dresses is thus a source of many jokes. It is also true about her timing when humorously saying l. 13 that looking "as though she had not given the matter a moment's thought" would "take time". It is a remark on a every day life problem that anyone could relate too.

The narrator also makes fun of his character, but not using irony, only gently mocking her. When he qualifies her jewel try as a "moment's inspiration", remarking that her heel were also "black" l. 11 or mentions her "chronicle of task", he makes fun of her experiments in the fashion field, but again she is not worst than any-body else. The curious use of the adverb

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"experimentally" l. 45 seems to go in this direction, "gripp[ing]" one's "hair in bushes" being a sign of exasperation, as if Cecilia was exasperated by her bad taste. She also makes fun of her old dresses, looking down at them for their fantasy, maybe all women wearing them in the 1920s did it in the 1930s? Finally the narrator puts in place a comic of repetition by the parallel between the last lines of paragraph four and the end of the extract. The "shoes", jewels, "make-up" and "hair" are "changed" and retouched from a previous time in paragraph four; then "once more retouched", "mother" time, technically the third time. The first sentence had warned the reader that Cecilia would perpetually come and go during the extract, between different dresses, personalities, in front of different mirrors.

* * *

To conclude, the tone is humorous and the text portrays a young woman making her first steps in society, in truth in her parents' house, as an adult. It could be seen as an extract from a "bildungsroman" since it describes the introspection and doubts of a young person just before an event that seems very

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important to her. She has to build an image that has to reflect her inner self - or hide it, something which she seems very attached to; paradoxically she cannot stop questioning her mirrors but "has to be at ease with herself". To counterbalance this anguish, humor, especially in the last two surprising sentences, is here to help her keeping calm and keeping a measure of things, and of course keeping the reading pleasant.

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