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Cliché: An Introduction

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Before writing the call for papers for this issue, I conducted an online search for "cliché in writing." Predictably, the search produced dozens of pages with tips for writers: "12 Clichés all Writers Should Avoid" (Klems), "Avoiding Clichés in Writing" (Writer's Web), and one article brewing dangerously close to a perfect meta-cliché storm: "681 Clichés to Avoid in Your Creative Writing" (Luke). Cautions about clichés extend to both creative and academic communities. On the *Compact Oxford Thesaurus for Students Companion Website* there is a brief article, "Avoiding Clichés," that recommends replacements for the twenty most "popular (or unpopular!)" clichés appearing throughout the Oxford English Corpus. These articles warn that resorting to the cliché is the vice of a lazy writer. Clichés are phrases that are so common and so easily recognized that they require little effort to recall and even less effort for the reader to dismiss. The writer, then, must reap the fields of language, weeding out these hardy but damnable turns of phrase in search for something of substance.

Critical readers are quick to point out clichés; yet there are no criteria for qualifying a cliché. Unlike most literary devices, there are no clear boxes to tick in order to recognize a cliché. Definitions of cliché read something to the effect of a "metaphor characterized by its overuse" (Friedman), but how often must a phrase appear before it is considered overused? At what point did it become a cliché "to be or not to be?" One generation thought "cool" things were "groovy" but soon (overnight? in the blink of an eye?) the term was met with derision and social pity. How does this happen; and is iteration the most important characteristic of cliché?

In his memoir *On Writing*, Stephen King analyses a sample of his own writing, and in a footnote he suggests that the phrase "dark as a cave" is "not quite a cliché but certainly in the neighbourhood" (178). This brief offering reveals the slippery slope on which cliché rests. First, at the risk of appearing pedantic, I wonder whether King uses the idiom "in the neighbourhood" with intentional cheek or if this cliché snuck in undetected. But more importantly, why is the simile "dark as a cave" not *quite* a cliché? Is it "in the neighbourhood" because it is approaching the place where all phrases come to cliché? Literary criticism has established no parameters to fence off a cliché from its neighbour; yet, critical readers generally agree when one exists. In order to ponder this notion further, I will briefly attempt to locate the image "dark as a cave" on the cliché spectrum.

First, I offer a control: "at the end of the day." This cliché is listed in three out of the four above-mentioned articles on avoiding clichés. The expression appears in the idioms section of the *Free Dictionary*; *Thesaurus.com* offers alternatives to the phrase; and cliché's primary entry in the *Urban Dictionary* denotes a "Rubbish phrase used by many annoying people." It also appears in the *OED* as a "hackneyed" phrase. In fact, the first page of search results on *Google* contains an equal number of links defining "at the end of the day" as an idiom, and pages devoted to the ensemble anthem of the same name from *Les Miserables*. A database search reveals 12,543 appearances on *JSTOR*; however, the phrase only appears in five articles in the *MLA International Bibliography*. The cliché is overused, but its scarcity in the final search might also suggest that it is being avoided.

In contrast, the phrase "dark as a cave" is far less prevalent. A *Google* search for the exact phrase produces no results. There are numerous references to a *dark cave*, but they are not metaphors. The phrase is not mentioned in any of the noted articles listing clichés to avoid. Neither is the term listed in the *Free Dictionary* or *Thesaurus.com*. *JSTOR* reveals twelve articles that contain the phrase "dark as a cave" and the *MLA International*

Bibliography contains none—although the search term "dark" AND "cave" produced three results. The phrase "dark as a cave" is not overused; in fact, it's hardly used at all.

Yet King states, perhaps instinctually, that the simile "dark as a cave" is near to cliché. Perhaps a cliché exists with enough commonality to stimulate King's critical response. "Dark as a cave" resembles the title to the 1946 Merle Travis folksong "Dark as a Dungeon," about an Appalachian coal mine. A search on *JSTOR* reveals fifty hits containing the phrase. Additionally, the clichés "dark as coal," and "dark as pitch," follow a similar pattern to the phrase "dark as a cave" and also conjure mining images. An industrial, laborious, dirty, and dangerous working-class environment such as a coalmine illustrates a bitter truth and might appeal to the writing community with a frequency reaching overuse. However, I question whether a dark cave commands enough resemblance to a mine to solicit a comparison.

Stylistically, the phrase "dark as a cave" follows a similar pattern of many outworn clichés: "black as night," "clear as a bell," "good as gold," "slippery as an eel." These basic similes and simple constructions create clear comparisons that are easy to digest. Yet, not all constructs that follow this pattern become cliché. Consider Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." The title is well known and easy to quote, but "lonely as a cloud" is not, as far as I'm concerned, a cliché.

Jakob Norberg argues in the following article "The Cliché as Complaint and Critique" that, while clichés are easy to define, the simplicity of this definition (an overused phrase) reveals that we have little to say about them. "All there is to do," he explains "is gather more examples." In an attempt to investigate a possible cliché, I have done the same. All I can do is compare the phrase "dark as a cave" to other clichés and determine where among them it falls. It seems, perhaps, that cliché is measured less by its overuse and more by aesthetic. Although "dark as a cave" is not necessarily overused, its familiar construct and style perhaps renders it too common. Cliché is thereby recognized by quality as well as

quantity. In his article, Norberg goes on to eloquently argue that although cliché is often relegated to the periphery of literary terminology, it in fact breaks down communication by detracting the voice of the author. I would add that clichés develop by instinct. There is something about these phrases that echo in the vocabulary of writers and cause their overuse; likewise, they stick out like bumps in a path and the reader learns to step over them.

The articles in this issue explore the use of cliché across genres and media. They examine their agency, their effect, and their reputation. Rather than skipping over these overused phrases, these articles linger there; and by delving below the surface of these clichés they ponder their faculty as a literary device. This issue of FORUM declares what we, as writers and readers, all fear—you can't keep a good cliché down.

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