

# BETWEEN CLICHÉ AND ILLUMINATION: RETHINKING LITERARY TROPES THROUGH THE LENS OF PERCEPTION, A COMPARATIVE INQUIRY INTO LINGUISTIC REPETITION, FRAGMENTED REALITY, AND THE PHYSICS OF LIGHT

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intersection between literary tropes and perceptual theory, with particular emphasis on the function of the cliché as a residual yet dynamic linguistic structure that operates as a conduit for thought. Drawing on analogies from the physics of light, especially the phenomenon of flicker fusion, whereby discontinuous flashes are perceived as continuous illumination, the study proposes a conceptual and analytical framework for re-evaluating literary clichés beyond their conventional dismissal as signs of banality. Rather than inert expressions, clichés are approached here as perceptual stabilisers embedded in cultural memory. To move beyond metaphor, the paper develops a three-step analytical framework (fragment identification, fusing agent, and perceptual continuity) which is systematically applied to sustained close readings of selected literary texts. Through an analysis of works by Virginia Woolf and Albert Camus, the study demonstrates how literary narratives activate, withhold, or destabilise clichés in order to reorganise fragmented experience and interrogate inherited modes of understanding. Rooted in the defamiliarization strategies used by Russian Formalism, refined by poststructuralist understanding of interpretation and cultural saturation, and shaped by affect theory's definition of language as force rather than mere representation, this study places the cliché within a reimagined poetics of perception. It suggests a replacement of clichés within literary criticism as lenses rather than signs of aesthetic exhaustion, enabling access to an expanded spectrum of narrative and perception nuances.

**Keywords:** Cliché; fragmented reality; illumination; literary tropes; perception; physics of light

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## 1. Introduction

Whether in literature or life, meaning is often acquired through repetition rather than novelty. The familiarity of a well-worn phrase, the recognisable arc of a character's fate, or the recurrence of an archetypal image, these are typically labelled *clichés*, dismissed as the residue of creative fatigue. Yet, like the perceptual dynamics that allow humans to experience fractured reality as an unbroken stream, clichés may fulfil a role more foundational than decorative. As Roland Barthes writes, culturally saturated signs possess a paradoxical power: "its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification" (Barthes, 1972, p. 143). Devoid of originality, they nonetheless organise meaning. Similarly, clichés, for all their semantic fatigue, may serve as perceptual scaffolds that guide readers through narrative complexity.

Scientific interpretations of perception, specifically in the physics of light, invoke a strange paradox. What humans experience as continuous illumination, especially in the dark, is actually the result of rapid pulses, sequences of on and off that the human sensory systems can no longer distinguish individually. The phenomenon of *flicker fusion* transforms fragmentation into flow. Neuroscientists such as Francisco Varela and his colleagues originally argued, and as Alva Noë later reaffirmed, that perception is not a passive reception but active construction. As they explain: "we do not see the world as it is, but as a temporally smoothed and spatially organised coherence" (Varela et al., 1991; Noë, 2004). Literature, too, relies on cognitive and aesthetic dynamics that transform fragmented human experience into a unified narrative flow. Clichés, often reduced to hollow or inert, may indeed function as cognitive shortcuts, smoothing the chaos of raw emotion, memory, or event into familiar linguistic and symbolic frames.

This article attempts to explore the structural and perceptual parallels between literary clichés and scientific models of light and perception. It presents the idea that clichés, far from being mere relics of exhausted meaning, function as *perceptual stabilisers* within narrative. They initiate the framework for readers to navigate complexity by offering frames of familiarity that exactly mimic the way human consciousness constructs continuity out of discontinuity. Through this interdisciplinary lens, clichés are reimagined not as failures of imagination but as mechanisms of cognitive and aesthetic coherence. To avoid remaining at the level of metaphor, this study operationalizes the perceptual analogy through a structured analytical model. The framework is applied in detail to selected literary case studies, demonstrating step by step how clichés function as mechanisms of narrative stabilisation or, in some instances, how their absence produces perceptual discontinuity. Having outlined the perceptual and scientific foundations of this study, the discussion now turns to the concept of the cliché itself, its origins, cultural evolution, and philosophical significance with language.

Juxtaposing literary tropes and scientific concepts like optical persistence, flicker fusion, and the observer effect, urges one to re-imagine clichés as a dynamic process instead of a static defect. It further proposes a model of literary perception that challenges the rigid polarity between originality and repetition.

## 2. The Cliché as Concept: Between Thought and Expression

The term *cliché* originated in the printing trades as a technical term for a stereotype plate, a cast made by "letting a matrix fall face downward upon a surface of molten metal" (Etymonline, n.d.). Progressively, the term developed to describe expressive repetition and banality. In literary discourse, clichés are often regarded as carrying negative connotations, connected with mechanical reproduction of meaning, devoid of authenticity, and stagnant in creative language (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Barthes' theory of myth provides a useful perspective on this point, he asserts that myth is not merely ideology but a "form of

signification” that transforms contingency into nature (Barthes, 1972, pp.155–156). This implies that clichés, like myths in Barthes’ theory, participate in the naturalisation of constructed meanings.

However, this reductionist view actually blurs the deeper complexity of the cliché. As beyond redundancy, clichés perform another role acting as cultural condensers, representing shared memory and experience. Terry Eagleton and Italo Calvino, two theorists assert that, literature draws most of its power from an interaction between familiarity and strangeness. Eagleton asserts that literary language can function like a form of estrangement, “making the familiar strange through words” (2007, p. 163). Similarly, Calvino, in his work *Invisible Cities*, also underscores how narrative fiction can draw readers into the uncanny dimensions of everyday experience (Calvino, 1974/1974). In this dynamic, clichés highlight the familiar, providing readers with recognisable emotional or narrative shorthand, on the other hand, literature’s power emerges when that familiarity is made strange, reviving and stimulating perception and meaning.

Critics such as Roland Barthes have emphasised the notion that what is called a cliché is not empty of meaning, but in fact loaded with ideology. In *Mythologies*, Barthes portrayed how everyday expressions, precisely because they are unconsciously repeated, can reveal both the collective assumptions and underlying values of a culture. Reaching the idea that, just as a cliché may obscure originality, it can also signal shared perception, offering a lens to the mechanism of language as a social and cognitive instrument (Barthes, 1972, pp. 109–110).

Philosophically, the cliché raises several concerns mostly with novelty and repetition, originality and recognition. Gilles Deleuze, in his book *Difference and Repetition*, asserts that repetition is a generative power that creates difference through variation rather than being pure sameness. According to Deleuze, the cliché is a trace of collective perception not simply a banal repetition or copy, it is more like a form so deeply rooted and encoded into cultural consciousness that it becomes almost invisible (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 1–5).

To look at clichés from this perspective paves the way for a richer and more dynamic interpretation; meaning that, instead of establishing clichés as merely exhausted redundancies, it allows them to be approached as perceptual devices facilitating experience. They function within a process that smooths irregularities, reduces the cognitive load, and establishes the narrative continuity. As the present study suggests, clichés function more like perceptual filters, operating not only at the level of language but within broader spheres implying perception and thought.

Given the fact that the role of clichés extended beyond the limits of the literary sphere, they rather help in organising thought and meaning by transforming complexity into familiar forms. Upon closer examination, they actually share affinities with cognitive and perceptual processes that are responsible for governing how humans interpret the world around them in general. Just as language uses tropes to convey cultural meaning, the mind reduces sensory chaos into coherent perception. In this regard, Alva Noë (2004) reminds the readers that “*perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do*” (p. 1), and that “*we do not see the world as it is, but as it is useful for us to see*” (p. 9). This analogy goes in perfect alignment with the physics of light, which has proven that the seamless illumination perceived by the human eye is in fact a fragmented, flickering sequence processed and smoothed by the brain into a flow of continuity. Thus, the aesthetic and discrete process of cliché mirrors the neurophysical framework of perception itself.

To understand this analogy, it becomes necessary to examine the physical foundations of perception; specifically, how light and vision construct the very continuity that language later emulates.

### 3. The Ontology of Seeing: Physics, Mind, and Meaning

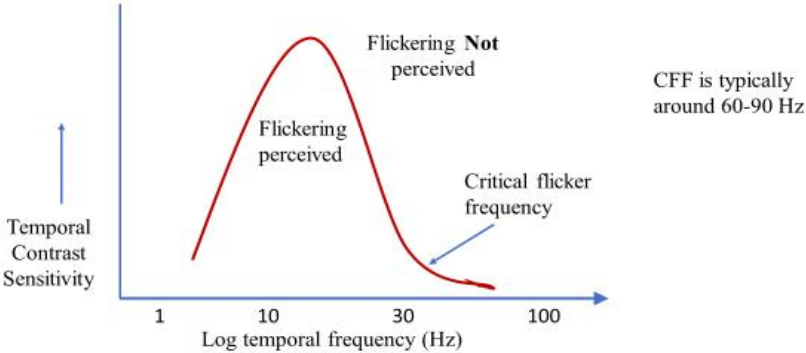
To understand the perceptual mechanisms underlying the function of literary clichés, it is necessary first to analyse the way vision itself constructs continuity. In the realm of physics, light is neither stable nor inherently continuous. It operates in quantised packets known as photons and exhibits wave-particle duality, behaving as wave or particle depending on the observational context (Britannica, 2025; SaskOER, n.d.) This scientific paradox highlights the same process of perception; in the same way as light naturally exists in both forms, wave and particle, perception operates in dual modes: it fragments and integrates simultaneously. And this very oscillation between discontinuity and synthesis lies at the core of the processes through which human consciousness constructs coherence.

What humans perceive as seamless and steady illumination is, at the microscopic level, composed of fragmented vibrations, oscillations, and interruptions, elements imperceptible to the human eye but still processed and smoothed by the brain into the experience of continuous light (SaskOER, n.d.) Thus, this aesthetic operation performed by the cliché can reflect the neurophysical framework of perception per se, compiling fragmentation into coherent experience.

#### Critical Flicker Frequency (CFF)

When perception of intermittent light source changes from flickering to continuous light

- Dependent on brightness of stimulus, wavelength, ....
- Varies by individual



\*Also called "flicker fusion threshold", "temporal contrast sensitivity"

**Figure 1:**

*Diagram of critical flicker fusion (CFF). Based on the definition and mechanisms of CFF described in Mankowska et al. (2021) and Turner (1965), illustrating how rapid visual stimuli merge into perceived continuity.*

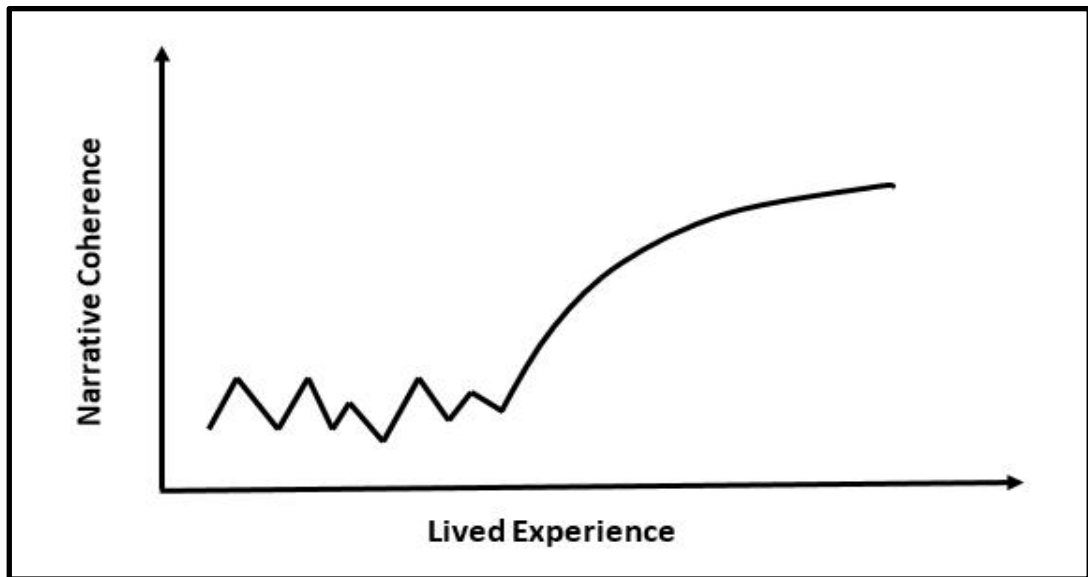
This phenomenon of perceptual flow is partially related to what is known in neuroscience and optics as the flicker fusion threshold. When there are rapid flickers of light, especially at frequencies above ~60 Hz, the human visual system processes and perceives these flashes as fused, resulting in the perception of smooth and constant illumination. This same principle applies to early cinema, where individual frames, when displayed in a sequence of rapid succession, result in producing the illusion of motion. And, the brain, naturally wired for pattern completion and temporal cohesion, favours coherence over

fragmentation. What is perceived as a fluid continuum, is actually a succession of discrete events.

Neuroscientists like Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch have highlighted that perception is an active construction and full embodied process of continuous engagement rather than a mere passive reception of stimuli (Noë, 2004, pp. 1–2; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, pp. 172–174). In their work *The Embodied Mind*, they argue: “Perception is not something that happens to us or in us. It is something we do” (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, pp. 172–174). This sensorimotor approach views perception as a dynamic process shaped by bodily movements and experience. Instead of providing a fixed image of the world, the visual field is a dynamically assembled construction. It is filtered, stabilised, corrected and regulated by patterns such as sensorimotor structures, contextual inputs, and predictive systems. From this perspective, perception emerges as an active cognitive process, with the brain structuring and interpreting sensory information in continuous interaction with the environment.

This act of perceptual integration is similar in structure to what literary clichés perform. In the same way as the brain assembles and edits sensory input to generate a coherent and continuous sense of presence, the cliché works within the narratives to avoid or at least decrease cognitive load, reorganising emotional and experiential patterns into more familiar symbolic frameworks. In cognitive psychology, this act of simplifying is fundamental to processing. Kahneman (2011) suggests that the human mind tends to default to “fast thinking,” relying on heuristics and schemas to minimise effort (p. 40). Very similarly to the narrative understanding, where familiar clichés and tropes play the role of condensed cognitive maps, establishing for the reader the necessary platform to process and interpret complexity with minimal resistance. As Bruner puts it, narrative “is not only a form of describing, but also a form of constructing and understanding reality” (1991, p. 5). Thus, perceptual integration and literary clichés both act as mechanisms of compression and interpretation; the first is responsible for transforming flickering photons or fragmented light into spatial continuity, while the second transforms raw jagged experiential flux into structured and more intelligible language. As Turner (1996) suggests in *The Literary Mind*, narrative structures are not merely artistic devices, but essential cognitive instruments used to make sense of the world: “Narrative imagining -story- is the fundamental instrument of thought” (p. 4).

Another interesting hidden parallel might be uncovered while exploring the way light functions as a sequence of rhythmic impulses and not as a continuous stream: what is perceived as unity is always shaped and channelled by underlying fragmentation. As research in neuroscience confirms, through a report by *Neuroscience News*, the brain transforms rapid flashes into a perception of smooth, continuous motion only after neural suppression at certain frequencies relevant to the Flicker Fusion Frequency (FFF) threshold (2024, p. 1). In a similar vein, evolutionary biology literature describes that the blur of motion in predator-prey interactions results from optical patterns that exceed a species’ FFF—turning patterned stripes into perceptual uniformity (Pough, cited in *Biology Letters*, 2016, p. 2).

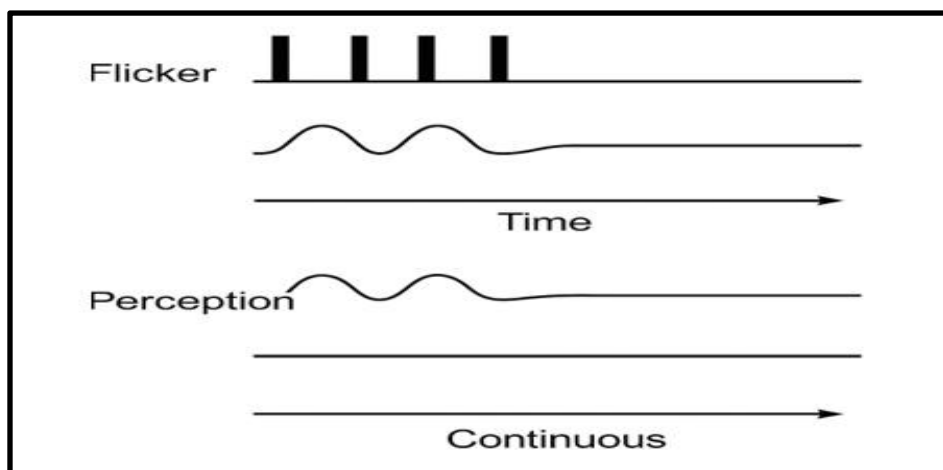


**Figure 2:**

*The function of literary clichés as perceptual shortcuts. The figure visualises the analogy between flicker fusion and linguistic repetition, showing how familiar tropes create continuity in perception. Source: Author’s own elaboration.*

As shown in figure 2, in narration, the cliché operates similarly: not as banality or failed originality but rather as a full framework of perceptual resolution; what may be called *symbolic flicker-fusion*. Figure 2 illustrates that the cliché acts as a perceptual shortcut: it merges fragmented linguistic signals into a coherent flow of meaning, mirroring how flicker fusion integrates discrete flashes of light into continuous illumination. By compressing experience into familiar structures, it succeeds in concealing seams.

As the visual system smooths flickering photons into spatial constancy, narratives use clichés to organise fragmented experiences. If perception transforms flickering light into apparent continuity, literature performs a parallel act at the level of language. Both processes stabilise the chaos of sensory and emotional experience into coherent forms.



**Figure 3:**

*Cognitive integration of fragmented stimuli and linguistic repetition. The above figure demonstrates how the brain fuses discontinuous input into coherence, an analogy for the literary transformation of clichés. Source: Author’s adaptation from empirical schematics illustrating critical flicker fusion and perceptual integration in visual processing.*

As shown in Figure 3, rapid flicker pulses, even if discrete, are smoothed into continuous flow of perception by neural integration, very similar to the way clichés simplify complex experiences into narrative coherence. Figure 3 visually reinforces the central analogy, demonstrating how the perceptual system converts discontinuous data into apparent unity; in the same way as literature reassembles fragmented emotion or thought through familiar tropes. The following section explores how this transformation operates within literature itself, where light becomes metaphor and perception becomes expression.

### 3.1 From Perceptual Analogy to Analytical Method

To ensure that the analogy between flicker fusion and literary cliché does not remain merely conceptual, this study adopts a three-step analytical framework for the literary case studies that follow:

- **Fragment Identification:** isolating the discontinuous experiential, emotional, or temporal elements within the text.
- **Fusing Agent:** identifying the cliché, banal expression, or culturally familiar linguistic structure that organises these fragments.
- **Perceptual Continuity:** examining how this linguistic structure stabilises, compresses, or disrupts narrative coherence for the reader.

In this model, the perceptual analogy does not only function metaphorically, but analytically as well, presenting the way narrative coherence emerges from linguistic repetition in a manner which is structurally comparable to flicker fusion in vision.

## 4. Fractured Light, Framed Language: Clichés in the Optics of Thought

The analogy between literary clichés and perceptual mechanisms is not purely descriptive, it is at the same time structural and ontological. They both perform the same function as thresholds between confusion and comprehension, tools used by the human mind to decode and stabilise the flow of lived experiences and reality. In a similar way as how the nervous system interprets discrete flickers of photons into the illusion of continuous illumination, the cliché enacts the transformation of fragmentary emotional experience into culturally comprehensible expressions. Everything the nervous system does for the senses, the cliché performs for language.

A closer analysis of this parallel calls for consideration to the physics of refraction. When light penetrates through a medium such as water or glass, it curves; it changes its trajectory and this results in changing its perceived position too. As Hecht (2017) explains in *Optics*, “Refraction is the change in direction of propagation of a wave when it passes from one medium to another” (p. 103). This means that humans do not see the object where it is, but where refracted light directs perception.

Equally, when literary experience penetrates the medium of language, particularly language shaped by cultural remnants and convention, it emerges altered. As Barthes (1972) noted in *Mythologies*, “What is grasped is not the reality but the signification of the reality” (p. 118). When a deeply personal or traumatic feeling is expressed in a phrase like “*my heart was shattered*”, it becomes both accessible and flattened, a filtered emotive signal redirected through centuries of linguistic usage.

Nonetheless, refraction does not merely represent distortion, it also symbolises multiplication and revelation, for example, a prism transforms a single ray of light into a rainbow spectrum, unveiling inner complexity. As Hecht (2017) elaborates, “A prism separates white light into its component wavelengths because different wavelengths are refracted by different amounts” (p. 124). Literary clichés operate in the same way if

approached creatively or subversively. They serve as prisms of collective memory, bending emotion and experience through cultural expectation.

When strategically used by writers, clichés can operate on multiple layers of meaning. On the emotional level, they resonate with readers, evoking familiarity, while on the intellectual level, they also engage readers with their long cultural history. Whether across literature, conversation, or culture, every cliché has been countlessly used for centuries, which causes them to carry an accumulated weight, allowing them to be instantly recognisable. Also, when recontextualised in new settings, clichés can not only incite readers to question language itself but also to inquire why certain ideas have become so deeply ingrained. As Eagleton (2007) argues, “Literature transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar, making the ordinary strange and the strange familiar” (p. 16). Repeated clichés carry cultural weight and recognition; when revived, they can illuminate subtle meanings.

Having established the theoretical and perceptual frameworks that underpin the operation of clichés, it is possible now to observe how writers activate, distort, or subvert them within literary texts.

#### *4.1 Case Studies from Literature*

A first example may be taken from *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, where she portrays the way clichés function as a paradoxical tool representing both continuity and fragmentation. The line “She would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf, 1925) at first appears to be ordinary and even negligible, a very simple domestic gesture so familiar as to be considered banal. This opening invokes a sense of continuity, locating the reader’s imagination within a more recognisable cultural frame. However, in Woolf’s novel, the sentence does not remain passive. Using her stream-of-consciousness technique, the concept becomes loaded with psychological depth, highlighting the fragmented inner life of Clarissa as well as the struggle between social norms and performance and private subjectivity. This context leads to Victor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), as Shklovsky (1965) suggests, “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (p. 12). Through its interference into habitual recognition, art not only reveals but also illuminates the hidden strangeness of the ordinary.

In Woolf’s works, this principle is activated, where the cliché, the element which is supposed to erase complexity, is revived in such a way to unveil the fissures of consciousness and the estrangement behind everyday life. This dynamic can be well clarified through the application of the suggested model:

- **Fragment Identification:** the discontinuous shifts between present action and remembered past, between interior doubt and social performance expose the process of unfolding Clarissa’s consciousness. Hence, the narrative becomes defined by temporal fragmentation and psychological layering.
- **Fusing Agent:** The seemingly ordinary sentence “She would buy the flowers herself” attracts attention to the fact that it functions as a culturally legible gesture embedded in everyday routine. While not a conventional proverb, it carries the weight of habitual domestic expression, immediately recognisable to readers.
- **Perceptual Continuity:** This familiar structure stabilises the fragmented field of consciousness. The domestic action anchors memory, anxiety, and reflection within a coherent narrative present. Much like flicker fusion integrates discrete visual pulses into steady light, the banal gesture bundles dispersed experiential fragments into readable continuity. Thus, the line does not erase fragmentation; rather, it renders it perceptible without narrative collapse.

A further example can be found in *The Stranger*, where Albert Camus directly destabilises readers' horizon of expectations regarding how death is supposed to be narrated. The famous opening line: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" (Camus, 1942/1989, p. 3) conveys the protagonist Meursault's announcement of his mother's death but in a cold, flat and mechanical register. While this ought to be a moment filled with emotions, conventionally marked by expressions of grief and solemnity, it has been reduced in style to one that verges on cliché due to its extreme minimalism and simplicity. Camus deliberately draws attention to this very discontinuity between subjective perception and social expectation through a measured control of the culturally predetermined signs of mourning. And, an inverse dynamic arises when applying the same model to Camus

- **Fragment Identification:** The death of a mother represents an event culturally surrounded by systemised expressions of grief. Readers expect/are expected to approach such moments with inherited emotional scripts.
- **Fusing Agent (Withheld):** Meursault's statement: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" shows a clear refusal and resistance to conventional mourning language. The expected clichés of sorrow are absent.
- **Perceptual Discontinuity:** Because the culturally stabilising linguistic framework is withheld, narrative fusion fails to occur and the reader confronts unresolved fragmentation without interpretive scaffolding. Camus thus demonstrates that cliché functions as a stabilising threshold: its absence exposes the precariousness of coherence itself.

Therefore, readers may interpret Meursault's opening statement both as a reduction of grief to mechanical observation and as a deliberate act of defamiliarization. Camus highlights the very instability of linguistic continuity itself by restraining culturally expected expressions of mourning. This tension forces the reader to notice the gap between cultural scripts and lived experience. In this way, the novel reveals how narrative coherence depends on familiar linguistic frameworks even when those frameworks are destabilised.

The oft-quoted line from *Hamlet*, "*To thine own self be true*" (Shakespeare, 1600/1992, I.iii.78) now circulates as a universal maxim of authenticity. In contemporary reception, it functions almost as a cultural cliché, detached from its dramatic context. Yet, Shakespeare engrains this seemingly noble aphorism within a persona mostly defined by superficiality, through the voice of Polonius, a character characterised by verbosity, moral platitude and an eagerness to portray sagacity without depth.

This aphoristic structure discretely settles automatic moral acceptance; however, its dramatic framing introduces irony. The familiarity of the maxim creates the illusion of continuity and inherited authority, but the speaker's questionable credibility destabilises this coherence. In this way, Shakespeare anticipates the dynamic explored in this study: cliché operates as a stabilising cultural form, yet its recontextualization exposes the fragility of linguistic authority.

The table below demonstrates these parallels, presenting the main visual metaphors and their functions in both perception and literature. In the same way as optical devices shape, filter, and refract light, literary clichés, when intentionally recontextualised and revived, can also highlight, destabilise, reflect or refract meaning.

**Table 1:**

*Optical Metaphors and Their Functions in Perception and Literature. Summarises how optical phenomena correspond to literary processes of defamiliarization and meaning formation. Source: Author's own elaboration.*

<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Function in perception</b>	<b>Function in literature</b>
Lens	Focuses on and amplifies light	Draws attention to specific emotions or cultural patterns
Prism	Breaks light into its spectrum	Unveils multiple meanings within familiar expressions
Mirror	Reflects an image back to the viewer	Encourages the embracement of the reader's own assumptions
Filter	Selectively screens wavelengths	Controls the tone, context and emotional perception and interpretation
Refraction	Alters the direction and perception of light	Bends original meaning through cultural sediment

The literary examples above reveal that clichés are not inert relics but dynamic forms of perception. These metaphors primarily aim at reinforcing the central claim: clichés are, in fact, not passive artefacts, but rather active perceptual tools, shaping, interpreting, and emotionally registering human literary experience. To consolidate these insights, the next section reconsiders the cliché not as linguistic residue but as a generative force within modern poetics.

### **5. Rethinking the Cliché: From Dead Metaphor to Generative Mechanism**

Generally, in literary criticism, clichés are often perceived as linguistic fossils, more as expressions so overused to the point that they have almost lost their vitality. Yet, this belief does not rely on solid ground, as they do represent imprints of collective experience, a legacy of cultural memory. And when deliberately used and approached with critical awareness, they do perform significant and impressive work in literature, philosophically and aesthetically.

In this light, clichés are not neutral; linguistically, they are highly charged linguistic forms. Just like photons in quantum mechanics, they function differently according to interaction and context. While they may appear passive and inert, once refracted, whether through a writer's consciousness or a reader's interpretation, they can transform into new patterns of meaning. This characteristic offers them a special effect in literary works that seek to question authenticity, repetition and alienation.

For instance, in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa continually reflects through inherited expressions, borrowed phrases, and passing thoughts. These "clichés of thought", instead of diminishing the emotional depth of the novel, they rather invoke the mental chaos of modern consciousness, framed by habit, class, and time. Woolf does not reject clichés; through her stream-of-consciousness technique, she layers and refracts them, and in doing so, she succeeds in capturing the tension between linguistic automation and inner authenticity.

This reflects T.S. Eliot's assumption that language has always been already mediated, that authentic originality does not reside in escaping inherited form, but in reimagining it.

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot notes that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance ... is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (Eliot, 1919/2000, p. 37). He further highlights that "tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (Eliot, 1919/2000, p. 37), implying that true artistic innovation must use the existing structures rather than ignoring or cancelling them.

This theoretical stance is enacted in *The Waste Land*, where Eliot employed various expressions and fragments from popular culture, scripture, and myth. But throughout his work, these repetitions operate as "cultural palimpsests", reflecting fragmentation and disintegration even as they allude to possible regeneration. His act of layering the cliché-like allusions weaves together a resonance of fragmentation and rebirth, reflecting the poem's thematic quest for both exhaustion and renewal.

To better explain this transformation, a rapid return to optics is necessary. A cliché, just like a mirror, flawlessly reflects cultural heritage. Also, like a lens, it directs attention. Though at greater depth, like a prism, it may transform familiar meanings to new spectrums, provided that the interpretation angle is precise enough. Doubtlessly, a cliché may remain inert if passively consumed, but it can become productive when strategically activated. It does not become an ultimate aim but a threshold, between estrangement and recognition, between the unknown and the expected.

This potential for transformation is not unique to Eliot. Contemporary authors also strategically activate clichés; Ali Smith reveals how clichés can be reframed into devices of critical thinking and flattens idioms such as "time flies" or "lost for words" to reveal their underlying strangeness and develops her narratives by mobilising puns and clichés (Begley, 2025).

Such examples describe how clichés are not avoided but rather mined and re-signified; transformed from the fact of being a dead metaphor to a state of a generative mechanism aiming at providing a renewed perception.

Whether in science, philosophy, or literature, motion is the only constant. Heraclitus says "Everything flows, and nothing stays." (Heraclitus, as cited in *Waterfield*, 2000) and as modern physics demonstrates, natural phenomena are dynamic rather than static. (Greene, 2004) Even language, often mistakenly considered as a neutral container, is in constant motion, history, culture and affect.

This interdisciplinary dialogue exposes a greater literary and philosophical truth, establishing language as kinetic, not static. As Brian Massumi (2002) notes, language is not merely representative; it is affective and energetic, capable of transforming force. He writes that affect, or what he describes as a pre-personal intensity that precedes meaning, moves beneath conscious frameworks (Massumi, 2002, p. 36). As such, language conveys sensation and tension, not just meaning. Rather than being empty, clichés accumulate emotional resonance through repetition. Thus, reconsidering clichés shows that repetition enhances, rather than diminishes, their cultural and emotional impact.

In light of these considerations, the cliché should not be perceived as a linguistic fossil, or rhetorical impasse, but as a threshold, rather a moment of convergence between perception and memory, between individual and collective. In the same way as light, mostly perceived by humans as continuous flow, is in reality, a sequence of imperceptible flickers, clichés create continuity while conveying layers of cultural memory. Engaging with clichés

allows writers to transform cultural residue into art and readers to question perceptual habits in language. Using the lens of perception to rethink literary tropes, implies uncovering the interpretive models of meaning-making and navigating the way language, in its dynamic interaction between repetition and perception, both reveals and obscures, reflects and refracts.

The discussion so far has demonstrated that the cliché, when reimagined through perceptual and optical analogies, acquires renewed vitality. The following conclusion synthesises these findings and reaffirms their implications for both literary theory and interdisciplinary thought.

## 6. Conclusion

In both literature and science, fragmentation is often concealed beneath perceived continuity. The human mind's interpretative faculty stitches the series of flickers into flow. In the same way and following the same process as the human eye transforms intermittent flashes into the seamless beam of light, the literary imagination has long functioned to transform fragmented reality into coherent narrative. The cliché lies at the heart of this transformation: a trope frequently undermined for its predictability, yet it stabilises meaning, connects emotion, and conveys familiar patterns.

The present article has suggested that clichés are in reality structural mediators of meaning. They function as lenses through which the human mind filters perception, as mirrors reflecting collective memory, and as prisms that delineate the white light of cultural heritage into unexpected spectrums of interpretation. Just like photons oscillate at imperceptible speed, clichés oscillate as well when reactivated by context, intention and perspective.

The comparison between the physics of light and the semiotics of literary tropes reveals that clichés are not merely banal contrasts to originality. Clichés, when recontextualised, function as instruments of meaning-making. In the flickering consciousness of Virginia Woolf, the cliché can be repurposed as an instrument of revelation rather than concealment.

Rethinking literary tropes through perception is both an aesthetic and philosophical undertaking, questioning what humans see, speak and feel. It invites a challenge to perceive perception itself, showing that repetition deepens meaning and makes clichés sources of insight.

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