

# Semiotics of Generic Titles in Sue Townsend's Adrian Mole Diary Series

Anna V. Tsepkova

Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University, Russia

[tsepkovaav@gmail.com](mailto:tsepkovaav@gmail.com)

*Abstract:* The paper aims to analyze the generic titles of three books selected from Sue Townsend's Adrian Mole diary series (*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>* [1982], *The True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend* [1989] and *The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001* [2008]). The paper takes a semiotic approach to titles as proper names, performing indexical, iconic and symbolic functions, the latter two being central to understanding the conflicts, motifs and the author's message in the three books. As icons, Sue Townsend's generic titles connote the secret diaries' narrative modes of parody and pastiche, which are integral to the author's satirical description. The symbolic connotations of the titles can be synthesized from the symbolic implications of their constituent elements: 1) the eponymous character as the voice of Generation X, of working class intellectuals, of the East Midlands and of England in general; 2) the main motifs of the generic elements: secrecy → publicity → loss; and 3) the temporal referents to a certain age or period of time, associated with a range of psychological, social and political issues.

*Keywords:* literary title, generic title, rhematic title, eponymous character, index, icon, symbol.

## Semiòtica dels títols genèrics a la sèrie de diaris d'Adrian Mole, de Sue Townsend

*Resum:* El treball pretén analitzar tres títols genèrics de llibres seleccionats de la sèrie de diaris d'Adrian Mole, de Sue Townsend (*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>* [1982], *The True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend* [1989] i *The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001* [2008]). La interpretació es basa en l'enfocament semiòtic dels títols entesos com a noms propis, en el sentit de realitzar tant funcions d'índex, com icòniques i simbòliques; aquestes dues últimes, en particular, fonamentals per a entendre els conflictes, els motius i el missatge de l'autor. Com a icones, els títols genèrics de Sue Townsend connoten els modes narratius de paròdia i pastitx dels diaris secrets, en línia amb la descripció satírica de l'autor. Les connotacions simbòliques associades als títols, al seu torn, les sintetitzem a partir de les implicacions simbòliques dels seus elements constitutius: en primer lloc, el personatge homònim com a veu de la Generació X, representatiu dels intel·lectuals de la classe treballadora, de les East Midlands i d'Anglaterra en general; en segon lloc, ens fixem en els motius principals dels elements genèrics: secret → publicitat → pèrdua;

i en tercer lloc, finalment, considerem els referents temporals a una determinada edat o període de temps, associats a qüestions psicològiques, socials i polítiques.

*Paraules clau:* títol literari, títol genèric, títol remàtic, personatge homònim, índex, icona, símbol.

## 1. INTRODUCTION. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The phenomenon of a literary title is characterized by its unique status in the structure of a literary work. As an element of paratext, it can function independently, but at the same time it is inseparable from the text as its referent (Wilsmore, 1987, p. 404; Veselova, 1998, p. 12; Turlachova, 2010). Thus, issues of interpretation are central to studies of this type of proper name. Scholars approach a literary title as a *code*, encapsulating the contents of a literary text (the author's perspective), and as a *clue* to decoding this text (the reader's perspective) (Smorodina, 2009b, p. 83), highlighting "the density of its nominal and hermeneutic properties" (Symes, 1992, p. 17) and characterizing it as an implicit, pithy nomination, which, being concise, tends to unfold (Galperin, 2006, p. 134).

The title, furthermore, is defined as the dominant meaningful element of the text, determining the main trajectory of its interpretation (Symes, 1998, p. 23; Wilsmore, 1987, p. 403). Besides, this property of the title makes it a significant organizing element of the text (Bogdanova, 2006, p. 105), integral to creating and sustaining coherence not only within the text but also among books comprising a series (Room, 1992).

The aim of the present research is to analyze generic literary titles of the fictional diaries in the Adrian Mole series of books, written by Sue Townsend (1946-2014), the British novelist and playwright. By the term 'generic', I refer to so-called rhematic as opposed to thematic titles, based on the functional classification proposed by Genette and Crampé (1988). According to these scholars, thematic titles indicate the 'content' of the text, while rhematic titles, "qualified as *formal*, and very often as *generic*" (*ibid.*, p. 709), highlight the narrative mode of the text.

Among the diaries of Adrian Mole, there are three texts which bear generic titles: *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾* (1982), *The True*

*Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend* (1989), and *The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001* (2008)<sup>1</sup>.

The semiotic analysis of the literary titles under consideration is aimed at identifying their indexical, iconic, and symbolic references.

The indexical function is inherent in titles due to their *properhood*. Even though identification and designation are considered mandatory functions of a title as an index, scholars admit the predominant hermeneutic purpose of titles as “guides to interpretation” (Fisher, 1984, p. 288), which can be achieved by decoding their iconic and symbolic meanings.

An icon “is a sign that represents something else on the basis of similarity, as a photo or map” (Smith, 2018b, p. 10). Dealing with the patterns according to which titles are built, scholars highlight the interdependence between the form and semantics of the title, on the one hand, and the genre of the text, on the other: “Different genres usually call for different conventions of titling” (Levin, 1977, p. xxxvi). This property of titles is one of the ways to express iconicity. The iconicity of titles can be connected with their connotative function as interpreted by Genette and Crampé (1988, pp. 716-717). These scholars argue that the connotative value of some titles is expressed in a certain mode of *intitulation*, imitating the patterns characteristic of a certain genre (generic connotations), a literary or historical period (historical connotations), another author’s style, etc. or it can be part of the author’s own individual paradigm of titles. It should be noted that imitation can reflect the canon or run against it (in the case of parody and pastiche).

The symbolic value of a title is revealed in its connection with the thematic aspects of the text:

A name in literature has *symbolic* meaning insofar as it reflects a thematic interpretation of that literature. That is to say, any name in literature will have greater importance insofar as it is seen to have relevance to other *symbolic* references. To the extent that a work of literature has a unified meaning, we should expect that its names evoke thematically related references. In fact, a literary theme may be often seen as a cluster of *symbolically* related references (Smith, 2015, p. 990).

1 Note, the paper includes extracts from the other Adrian Mole diaries for illustrative purposes.

Hence, a symbolic title functions as an explicit or implicit representation of the central theme and the array of by-themes and conflicts that the book develops. Besides, the title can become symbolic due to its ability to generalize, typify, headline a certain phenomenon or situation reflecting real-life cultural, social, historical and political issues.

The interpretation of the generic titles under consideration here is conducted at the following levels:

- 1) the micro-context of the title as an autonomous entity: the analysis of the elements constituting the title in relation to each other;
- 2) the title as part of the text: the intratextual analysis of the contexts that echo the title and which may directly explain the motivation behind it;
- 3) the title as part of literary discourse: in this case, the cross-references within the diary series; and
- 4) the title as part of reality: extratextual analysis of allusions to real life phenomena which may be relevant to the narratives in focus.

In the following interpretational analysis, I refer to literary research on Sue Townsend's fiction (De Mingo, 2017), interviews and reviews (O'Reilly, 2009; Singh, 2014; Brunger, 2015), and analyses of specific aspects of the author's individual style (Sousa, 2009; Matveyeva, 2011; Tsepkova, 2018).

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Structure of generic titles

Structurally, the three titles under analysis follow a common pattern with the headword, indicating the generic reference and accompanied by the attribute in pre-position, specifying the genre, and the attribute in post-position, stating authorship (see Table 1). The optional component is either an apposition stating the status of the diarist or a detachment indicating the temporal reference, which, in the case of Adrian Mole's diaries, is either relative (the age of the diarist) or absolute (the dates when the diary is written). Thus, such titles cannot be considered purely generic as they include the exponents of the thematic characteristics of the text.

The main peculiarity of these titles is their iconic character, as they explicate the author's intention of parodying the longstanding literary tradition of fictional and documentary diary writing, including sensational secret confessions of celebrities and ordinary people. However, since the titles are not purely generic, they have complex semiotics.

**Table 1.** Structure of titles with the generic nomination as the headword

Attribute to the generic reference	Headword: generic reference	Attribute: genetic reference of-phrase, stating authorship	Temporal details
<i>Secret</i>	<i>Diary</i>	<i>of Adrian Mole</i>	<i>aged 13 and ¾</i>
<i>True</i>	<i>Confessions</i>	<i>of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend</i>	
<i>Lost</i>	<i>Diaries</i>	<i>of Adrian Mole</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>
rhematic constituent		thematic constituent	

## 2.2 Semiotics of the eponymous character

From both a functional and semiotic perspective, proper names in titles are viewed as indicators of authors' individual categorizations of their creative work (Smorodina, 2009a, pp. 12-13), that is, when certain patterns of *intitulation* provide signals about genre characteristics, allowing the outcome of the plot to be predicted. Besides, eponyms are able to acquire certain fixed associations with the protagonist as a representative of a certain social type, or the embodiment of certain ideas, ideals, attitudes and values (Veselova, 1998, p. 6), which can be the case of their symbolic use.

The proper name of the eponymous character, Adrian Mole, functions as an integral component, a cohesive device, uniting all the books in the series. Besides, by making Adrian Mole an eponymous character the author highlights his dominant role not only as the leading character but also as the sole narrator and witness of contemporary events (Matveyeva, 2011, p. 204). Thus, besides performing its indexical function, the name of the eponymous character is used iconically and symbolically.

Iconicity of the proper name 'Adrian Mole' integrated in the title is determined by the iconicity of the whole title, when the latter follows, copies or parodies title patterns, connotative of a certain genre, literary trend, etc.

At this point in the discussion, I propose interpreting the iconicity of the proper name 'Adrian Mole' as an element of diary titles in terms of the opposition between the static and the dynamic. When considering the eponymous character and his role in the series, the following analogy can be observed. Just as the proper name of the eponymous character is used as an invariable component of the titles, as opposed to variable components alluding to the changing circumstances around him, so the character himself remains the stable component of the narrative not only literally but also essentially: within the time span of 26 years his personality evolves very little: "On many occasions a grown-up Adrian behaves just like his teenage self, therefore the passing of time he experiences does not alter many aspects of his character or some circumstances around him" (De Mingo, 2017, p. 289).

The roots of Adrian Mole's static character lie in the outer circumstances of the book's creation, which was not meant to unfold into one or more sequels. When the Adrian Mole character was 'born', it already embraced, in a self-sufficient manner, all the features necessary for a personage to become a recognizable tragi-comic personality as well as a social type. Adrian Mole as an eccentric type with an array of contradictory qualities functions as the source of humour as well as its target: his opinion of himself as an underestimated intellectual, his judgements and interpretations (or, rather, misjudgments and misinterpretations) of events and other people's actions mimic real-life attitudes and patterns of behaviour based on such qualities and feelings as naivety, ignorance, jealousy, snobbery, stubbornness, intolerance and bias. As a result, all the characters, situations and conflicts become comically charged no matter how tragic they may be outside Adrian Mole's narrative discourse. Adrian Mole as a social barometer remains unchanged, giving the author the opportunity to criticize her fellow countrymen of different ranks and social strata throughout the periods of Thatcherism and New Labour.

In criticizing political leaders, Townsend again refers to the concept of the static, illustrating the stagnation in the political sphere by describing

how little the country changes under opposing parties, from Thatcher's rule to the New Labour epoch, and how unchangeably blind and gullible the citizens remain, allowing themselves to be misled by the leaders' promises. As a result, nothing changes in the lives of the common people, whom Adrian Mole represents and symbolizes.

When analyzing the symbolic meaning that the proper name of the eponymous character develops as the nomination of the central thematic element of the text, I adhere to the following algorithm: 1) analysis of the name itself, its motivation, etymology, possible cultural and historical references; 2) juxtaposition of the revealed connotations with the character's qualities; and 3) connection of these qualities to the main themes of the narrative and the author's message.

In the previous research (Tsepikova, 2018), I focused on the first two steps in the algorithm, proceeding from the approach to interpreting literary names as symbols, as proposed by G.W. Smith (2015, 2018a, 2018b). According to this scholar, names as signs function symbolically when they evoke multiple referents at the same time (Smith, 2018a, p. 105); hence, the goal of literary onomastic analysis is "to trace the variety of attributes that might be suggested by such other uses in addition to their immediate reference at hand" (*ibid.*, p. 97). In a nutshell, this analysis shows that the eponymous character's name, Adrian Albert Mole, encapsulates at least the following qualities, which, in different circumstances, either correspond to or deliberately contrast with his personality, creating an effect of (bitter) irony: famous, noble, intelligent, bright, ambitious, blind/short-sighted, stubborn, insecure, snobbish, conformist, provincial and a loser. As Adrian Mole's narrative unfolds into a series, these qualities acquire a thematic linkage, which is key to the symbolic interpretation of the name:

1) Adrian Mole as a symbol of the so-called Generation X. De Mingo analyzes the character as the representative of this cohort, describing it in the following terms:

The Generation X grew up in the hard times of Thatcherism, with one or both parents unemployed, lived through the different armed conflicts in which Britain was immersed, from the Falklands war to the Iraqi war, put their hopes in Tony Blair and his spirit of Newness and modernization, only to be disappointed, and witnessed (and still do) the process of remodelling

the welfare state which their grandparents created and their parents benefited from, knowing that the times of “from the cradle to the grave” were fading away. In addition, they were seduced by the “dark side” of the economic mirage of the Millennium and some of them launched into living beyond their means (De Mingo, 2017, p. 243).

Financial and psychological instability in the family, often caused by social and political crises determines Adrian Mole’s values linked to his search for independence, a glamorous and lucrative career, a private space, security and a traditional family. At certain points, he seems to be achieving his aspirations (success and happiness), but most of them prove to be delusions.

2) Adrian Mole as a symbol of the East Midlands, a young man from a working-class family, acutely sensitive to being identified as a dull provincial, dissatisfied with his boring uneventful life, envying successful people (though not openly admitting it) and dreaming about the bright city lights with better prospects for success:

(1) ‘You’re the voice of middle England,’ she snapped. ‘You’re a perfect barometer of public opinion.’ I resented her implication that I was a dull provincial, but at the same time was pleased and flattered that my opinion was being sought (Townsend, 2008, p. 134).

(2) [Brett] said, ‘Yes, but I will make another fortune. That’s the difference between us, Adrian. You’ve never made any money and you never will – you’re a provincial loser!’ (Townsend, 2010, p. 307).

3) Adrian Mole as a symbol of a self-proclaimed and self-taught intellectual, “a working class runaway” (De Mingo, 2017, p. 155), neglected by his parents in his early years, escaping to the world of literature, arrogant, lonely, underestimated, self-pitying, unpractical, idealistic, naïve, awkward and short-sighted:

(3) Nobody has ever been able to explain where I get my talent for creative writing and cookery from. My mother’s family (Norfolk) were practically illiterate, and seemed to live on boiled potatoes with HP sauce, and my father’s family (Leicester) viewed books with deep suspicion, unless they had pictures which ‘broke up the pages’ (Townsend, 2000, p. 14).

E. O’Reilly notes that Adrian Mole “embodies the image of the classic British underdog, continually disappointed and frustrated, and feeling

that others do not appreciate his unique and special qualities” (O’Reilly, 2009).

4) Adrian Mole as a symbol of “the ‘Everyman’ of modern Britain” (O’Reilly, 2009), or, at least, England, embodying the controversial qualities and behaviour patterns of the English. Based on the results of Kate Fox’s anthropological study of the English character (Fox, 2004), Adrian Mole might be said to share the following most obvious features with his fellow-countrymen: awkwardness, reserve, obsession with privacy, moderation (conservatism, conformity, fear of change, apathy, focus on security, ordinariness, tendency to compromise), stoicism and class-consciousness. As for Adrian’s sense of humour, it provokes a contradictory impression: on the one hand, his narration is full of witty remarks, especially in his judgements of other people and situations; yet, on the other, the character himself sometimes fails to understand the humour of the situation or jokes directed at him (e.g. the April Fools’ Day pranks played on Adrian Mole aimed at mocking his literary talent). However, what Adrian does not seem to possess is pragmatism and manners as regards the sensitive issues of race, religion, class, gender, and physical disabilities. Some other features which Townsend pinpoints in Adrian Mole are snobbery, hypocrisy, patriotism and national pride.

Besides, Adrian Mole’s multiple identities include that of Townsend herself, who confessed in an interview: “Adrian Mole and I share the same birthday and I think that one of the ... clues [laughs]. And I think I’m quite an Adrian Mole character you see... I think I am... He’s a secret writer... His views are often my views” (BBC Scotland, 2019).

Thus, the symbolic interpretation of the eponym can be linked to the idea of giving voice to a group of people representing a certain generation, region, social class, profession and the country as a whole.

The semiotics of the eponymous character is fossilized in his name and impacts the semiotics of each individual title and all the titles taken collectively.

### 2.3 The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾ (1982)

*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾* is the title of the first Adrian Mole book, and serves to highlight its three, matter-of-fact, indexical

characteristics: its genre, the name of the main character/narrator (implicative of his gender as well) and his age.

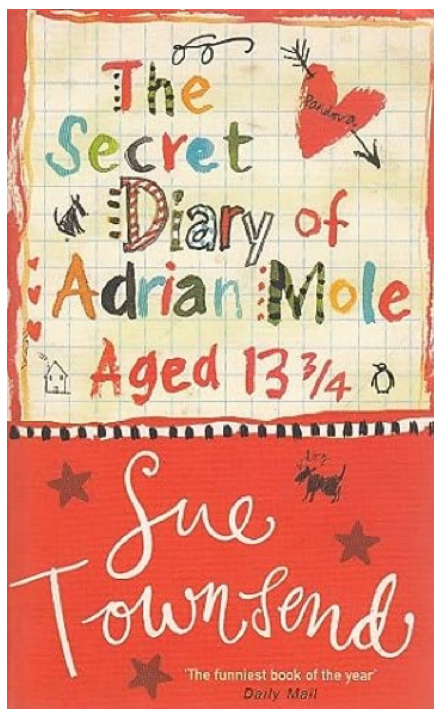


Figure 1. Cover book of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>*. Penguin Books, 2002.

As an exponent of iconicity, the title 'secret diary' is essentially ironic, because it parodies the diary genre, involving the reader in the privacy-breaking game, insofar as:

- a) it is a published book available to a wide readership;
- b) it mocks the reader who assumes the role of an intruder into other people's private lives, capable of performing a morally inappropriate act, led by idle curiosity, eager to know something sensational, scandalous or even disgraceful. Townsend ironizes at this human weakness several times in Adrian Mole's diaries as well as in other books:

(4) I am shocked to discover that my son, Glenn, is keeping what he calls a top secret dairy. He has also written on the cover in barbed-wire writing 'Open This Dairy At Your'e Perul'. I was very tempted to find out what the boy had written about me, and had I been able to prise the lock off without it being detected I may well have found out (Townsend, 2000, p. 157).

c) it mocks the fictive secret diarist, who cherishes his dream of becoming a celebrity and anticipates the sensation his diary will produce if made public:

(5) Perhaps when I am famous and my diary is discovered people will understand the torment of being a 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-year-old undiscovered intellectual. 6 p.m. Pandora! My lost love! (Townsend, 2002b, p. 20).

The symbolism of a secret diary relates to the loneliness of its teenage author, serving as a substitute for and the personification of a bosom friend, a trusted confidant, a 'sole consolation' (De Mingo, 2007, p. 285).

Besides the name of the eponymous character, the thematic complement to the generic title includes meticulous details about his age, 13 and <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. According to Jake Brunger, "Sue first wrote Adrian as 14<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, however her radio editor John Tydeman suggested that greater physical changes occur a year earlier, hence the change in age" (Brunger, 2015). Thus, this element of the title not only places the character/narrator in a certain age group, it also hints at the psychological issues of growing up and entering the age of early adolescence, which, being titular, is the central theme and conflict of the book and, metafictionally speaking, the starting point of Adrian's life as a literary character. Symbolically, it is the threshold to (fictional) reality, the borderline between his 'silent' formative years, and the moment when he is granted the right and freedom to speak, if not by the adults, at least by the author herself. Summing up the symbolic implications of the three components in the title at this stage of the discussion, the following conclusions may be drawn.

First of all, as the genre of the secret diary echoes Townsend's own literary career, which began with her writing in secret, one of these interpretations connects with the author herself: that is, with Adrian Mole's voice symbolizing the end of her 'silent years'. The same analogy of 'giving voice' may also be applied to the other symbolic identities of Adrian Mole as a social and cultural type discussed earlier in this paper. In each case, Adrian starts his long, drawn-out monologue of self-expression and confessions, explaining the circumstances that were to determine the life of an English teenager from an East Midlands working class family during Margaret Thatcher's early years as Prime Minister.

## 2.4 True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend (1989)

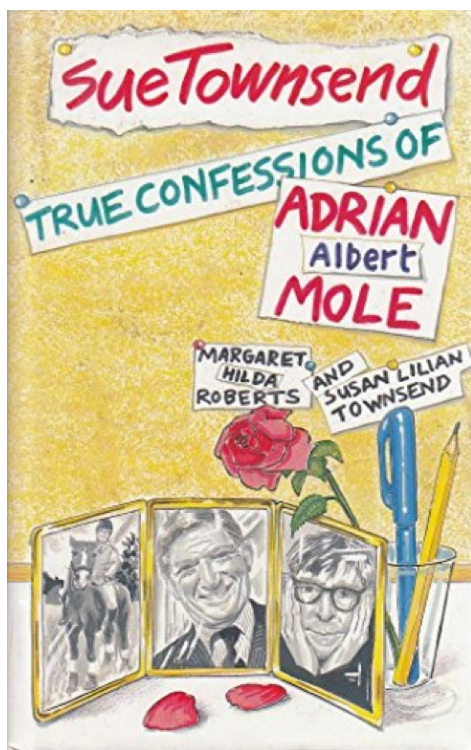
*True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> book in the series, is unlike the other books in several respects:

a) it constitutes a ‘collected’ volume containing the ‘confessions’ of three contributors both fictional and real – a technique De Mingo characterizes as a ‘metafictional game’ (De Mingo, 2017, pp. 293-312);

b) Adrian’s contribution here does not conform to a pure diary style but is a combination of miscellaneous genres: diary, epistolary genre, essay, poetry, 1<sup>st</sup> person non-diary narrative, radio transcripts;

c) being the shortest of the Adrian Mole books, it covers the longest time span, from 1985 to 1989;

d) it is characterized by the meticulous recording of daily events, the narrative in this case adopting a somewhat sporadic, ‘patchwork’ manner.



**Figure 2.** Cover book of *True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend*. Methuen, 1989.

These inconsistencies perhaps reflect the fact that the Adrian Mole narrative was still in a process of formation and Townsend was experimenting with different forms and modes of Adrian Mole's voice. At the same time, the author showed a concern for a number of other issues, namely, the critical depiction of the Thatcherite period.

Indexically the eponymous referents, besides Adrian Mole, include the author herself and a certain Margaret Hilda Roberts, whose identity as Margaret Thatcher would be clear for the reader. However, Townsend, who was a severe critic of the PM, uses her maiden name to create the effect of failed identification, as emerges in the introductory *Notes on the Contributors*:

(6) Margaret Hilda Roberts. These diary entries were found between the pages of *The Be-Ro Cook Book for Girls* at a car boot sale in Grantham on a Bank Holiday Monday in 1988.

Nothing (unfortunately) is known about Margaret Hilda Roberts or what became of her. The diary is believed to have been written in the nineteen thirties (Townsend, 2003, p. xi).

By failing to define the present identity of Margaret Hilda Roberts, Townsend 'puts on' Adrian Mole's mask of ignorant intellectual to humorous effect and to parody the genre of sensational revelations that teases the readers' curiosity and allows the author to denounce Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric and actions.

The iconicity of the title is reflected at the level of its form, that is, as regards its similarity with other titles in the series as well as the similarity between the elements constituting this particular title.

First of all, the previous and the present generic title are, at the same time, connected by relations of contrast and similarity: unlike the 'secret diary', the 'true confessions' imply a mode of narration that is diametrically opposed, in which their authors reveal at will sensational, provocative facts about their private lives. However, the subtitle of Margaret Hilda Roberts's contribution (*The Secret Diary of Margaret Hilda Roberts Aged 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>*) implies private confessions and is a clear imitation of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>*, and, as such, functions iconically, encouraging a comparison between the two diarists of approximately the same age. However, what strikes the reader first is the differences rather than similarities between the eponymous characters, symbolizing

a fundamental, multilayered clash, involving not only objective aspects of gender and date of birth, but also the lifestyles, achievements, values and attitudes of the middle class (Margaret Hilda Roberts) *vs* those of the working class (Adrian Mole, Sue Townsend). Eventually, when Margaret Hilda Roberts is revealed to be Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, an antagonistic relationship emerges between the successful and powerful ruling circles, whose philosophy of pragmatism proved right, and the failed working classes who fell victims to this philosophy.

The ‘metafictional game’ manifests itself in the juxtaposition of the contributors’ names within the collective title of the book. At the structural level, copulative coordination and the same nomination pattern (first name, middle name, last name) imply the homogeneity (equality, similarity) of the referents. However, the only similarity of relevance is arguably the fact that all three eventually became celebrities in their particular spheres, though the circumstances by which they gained this status differed. Other differences between the three characters can be demonstrated in the following binary oppositions, related to the themes of this narration and which reflect the mismatch or incompatibility of the referents: fictional – real, male – female, working class – middle class, literature – politics, miserable (failed) – successful (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Adrian Albert Mole, Susan Lilian Townsend, Margaret Hilda Roberts (Thatcher): shared and contrasting aspects

Adrian Albert Mole	Susan Lilian Townsend	Margaret Hilda Roberts
FICTIONAL	REAL	
MALE	FEMALE	
WORKING CLASS	MIDDLE CLASS	
LITERATURE		TRADE, POLITICS
MISERABLE/FAILED	SUCCESSFUL	

The table visualizes the fact that the author permeates both of her characters, occupying an intermediary, borderline, buffer position in this threefold relationship, appearing as ‘a meta-character’ (De Mingo, 2017, p. 297).

Besides, the table illustrates the idea that the worlds of Adrian Mole and Margaret Hilda Roberts stand in stark opposition to each other, which is symbolic of the antagonistic nature of their relationship:

a) Margaret Hilda Roberts *vs* working class:

(7) Walking to school I was almost knocked down by a horrid working-class man on a bicycle. I castigated him severely. He feebly explained that he had momentarily lost concentration due to tiredness after cycling 60 miles looking for work. I pointed out that he had absolutely no excuse for not keeping to the straight and narrow path and took his name. < ... > His sort ought to be forbidden to breed (Townsend, 2003, pp. 148-149).

b) working class *vs* Margaret Thatcher:

(8) *Mrs Thatcher* by A. Mole

Do you weep, Mrs Thatcher, do you weep?

Do you wake, Mrs Thatcher, in your sleep?

< ... > Do you wake with 'Three million' on your brain?

Are you sorry that they'll never work again?

When you're dressing in your blue, do you see the waiting queue? (Townsend, 2002a, pp. 145-146).

However, the iconic connotations of similarity have their impact on the eponymous characters, when the characteristics of one referent are projected onto the characteristics of the others, producing a humorous effect aimed at (self-)ridicule:

### 1) Leadership qualities, interest in politics:

*Margaret Hilda Roberts (Thatcher) → Adrian Mole*. Adrian Mole's ambitions for a political career are mocked by his drawing of comparisons between himself and the then incumbent Prime Minister:

(9) <Mole about his party> It is called the Mole Movement. As yet we are small, but one day our influence will be felt throughout our land. Who knows, one day our party could be the party of government. I could end up as Prime Minister. Is it so inconceivable? Not in my opinion. Mrs Thatcher was once a humble housewife and mother. So, if she can do it, why can't I? (Townsend, 2003, p. 24).

The author uses the same device to satirize Margaret Hilda Roberts's teenage ambitions, encouraged by a fortune-teller's predictions that she will be "the mightiest in the land one day" (Townsend, 2003, p. 145):

(10) The crown kept slipping down over my head and I had to stop twice and stitch the cotton wool back onto the ermine robe, but I think I have almost perfected the regal wave.

I am now certain that I am of royal birth. I'm grateful that I have been adopted by simple, kindly grocer-folk, but the life of a commoner is not for me. I need to know my true lineage (Townsend, 2003, p. 154).

The characters' claims and ambitions are accompanied by other shared qualities, namely, the self-importance and snobbery of their self-proclaimed genius (examples 11, 12), and their contempt for the working classes (examples 13, 14):

(11) [Margaret Hilda Roberts] Father's hand trembled as he bagged the walnut fancies. He said, 'Geniuses are never recognized in their own land.' (Townsend, 2003, p. 144).

(12) [Adrian Albert Mole] Under my training shoes I am wearing a pair of odd socks. One sock is white, one sock is black. No, think not that I am an absent-minded genius who doesn't notice what he puts on his feet. Perhaps I am a genius, but not an absent-minded one. No, my choice of hosiery is completely calculated. Indeed it is symbolic (Townsend, 2003, pp. 47-48).

(13) [Margaret Hilda Roberts] The fairground was full of smelly, working-class oiks enjoying themselves (Townsend, 2003, p. 144).

(14) [Adrian Albert Mole] On my feet I carry the problems of the world. Naturally the hoi polloi do not recognize this salient fact. They cry out, 'Eh ... yer wearin' odd socks!' To these crude rejoinders I simply reply, in my modulated tones, 'No, 'tis you who is wearing the odd socks, my friend.' Some of them walk away marvelling, although some of them, to be quite honest, don't (Townsend, 2003, p. 48).

## 2) Gender roles:

a) *Adrian Mole* → *Margaret Hilda Roberts (Thatcher)*. Townsend constantly emphasizes Margaret Hilda Roberts's masculinity, mocking her qualities (sensibility, emotional restraint), her duties as a community leader (Chairwoman of the Methodist Youth Club, ink, milk and register monitor; Class, sports and house captain), and her male attitude to female duties and aspirations:

(15) Father and I hastily split the firewood into toffee apple sticks and Mother was sent into the kitchen to make three hundred toffee apples. Dear diary, I'm rather worried about Mother. She looks more timid and nervous every day.

I simply can't think why: she has her baking, her duties in the shop and a full social life with the church, so I don't understand why, whenever I address a remark to her, she twitches and stutters and backs away from me (Townsend, 2003, pp. 150-151).

Regarding this aspect of Margaret Thatcher's image, De Mingo remarks: "This calculated blend of feminine delicacy and male strength confounded public opinion and a wide sector of it retaliated with mockery, on many occasions focused on her alleged 'gender switch'" (De Mingo, 2017, p. 77).

Example 16 echoes Adrian Mole's traditionalist views on gender roles: (16) <...> she said that for some women marriage was like being in prison. Then she went out. Marriage is nothing like being in prison! Women are let out every day to go to the shops and stuff, and quite a lot go to work. I think my mother is being a bit melodramatic (Townsend, 2002b, pp. 44-45).

b) *Sue Townsend* → *Adrian Mole*: Townsend is highly sensitive to the topic of gender roles and women's rights. Thus, while presenting Adrian Mole as a traditionalist, she exploits this opportunity to mock his masculinity as well:

(17) After measuring my chest and shoulders I had a thorough wash in cold water. I read somewhere (I think it was one of Mr Paul Johnson's articles) that 'cold water makes a man of you'. I've been a bit worried about my maleness lately, somewhere along the line I seem to have picked up too many female hormones (Townsend 2003: 32);

3) **Obscurity, fame and infamy.** One more effect of the 'metafictional game' played by Townsend concerns the way she is able to shift the status of the three contributors on the 'unknown – famous – infamous' scale, while again blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality.

By means of bitter irony, the author shifts the status of Margaret Thatcher, the notorious Prime Minister, to one of obscurity (see example 6 above). In *Notes on the Contributors*, the author makes an acid remark about her antagonist in the style of pseudo-mystification reminiscent of W. Irving's Diedrich Knickerbocker technique.

By means of mock-confessions about her plagiarism, Townsend herself fosters Adrian Mole's transformation from unpublished, unknown writer to real-life celebrity, simultaneously shifting the imaginary Susan Lilian Townsend from fame to notoriety, which she sarcastically defines as a shift from notoriety to obscurity (see Figure 3):

(18) Adrian Mole lives in Leicester with his dog. In 1986 he won record damages against the failed novelist Sue Townsend after she published his diaries claiming that they were her own works of fiction (Townsend, 2003, p. *xi*);

(19) Susan Lilian Townsend. Enjoyed notoriety at one time but has sunk into obscurity since her involvement in the ‘five dwarves in a bed’ scandal in 1989 for which she received a suspended prison sentence of two years. < ... > Since the scandal she has lived in isolation in a bleak moorland cottage near to Buxton (Townsend, 2003, p. *xii*).

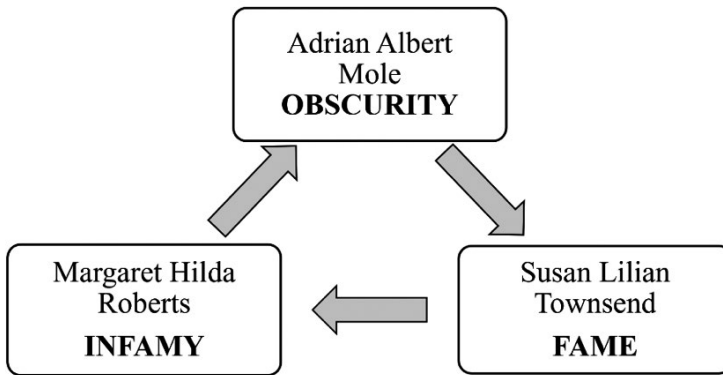


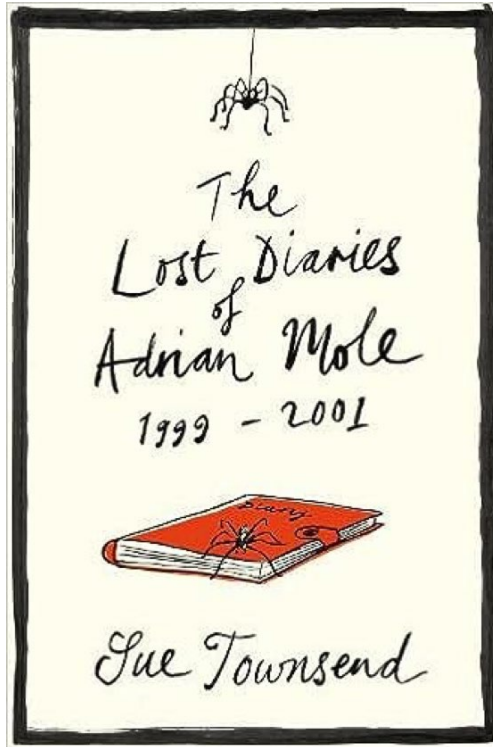
Figure 3. Shifts in the eponymous characters’ status on the ‘unknown – famous – infamous’ scale.

Thus, though the eponymous characters united within one title may at first strike the reader as incompatible, their narratives demonstrate iconicity of style as well as similarities in their personal qualities, aspirations, attitudes and behaviour, resulting in self-mockery in the depiction of the national character and its flaws regardless of social class, gender, background, education, etc. Paradoxically, the objective differences between the characters, symbolizing opposing worlds, strengthens the similarities between them.

### 2.5 The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001

*The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001* is the 7<sup>th</sup> book in the series by date of publication, and the 6<sup>th</sup> based on the chronology of the plot. Written as a *midquel*, the book was intended to fill the gap in Adrian Mole’s

life between 1999 and 2001, after the house he inherits and occupies with his two sons burns down in 1998 (*Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*) and before his elder son, Glenn, joins up and is sent to Iraq in 2002-2003 (*Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*).



**Figure 4.** Cover book of *The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole, 1999-2001*.  
Michael Joseph, 2008.

In this book, the author again resorts to the technique of discovering the lost diaries, which in their iconic meaning provoke expectations of sensation and reaffirm Adrian Mole's metafictional status as a celebrity, even though at the intratextual level the character remains unpublished and unsuccessful because of the fictional Sue Townsend:

(20) These diary entries have appeared in the *Guardian* previously, having been hi-jacked by a woman fraudster called Sue Townsend. She has made quite a lucrative living passing herself off as me <...> She has been a parasite on my literary career for too long (Townsend, 2008, p. xii).

Thus, the author continues her 'metafictional game' by introducing herself into the plot, but in this case through Adrian's own narrative, thereby fictionalizing herself in the context by debating her authorship and denouncing her attempts to persuade the readers of Adrian's fictitiousness:

(21) <... > an old hack called Sue Townsend had been trying for years to publish the secret diaries of Adrian Mole, claiming that they were fiction. She showed me a piece of the manuscript. I read with increasing astonishment as details of my private life were revealed. How does this woman know so much about me? Is she tapping my phone? Has she bugged my house? (Townsend, 2008, p. 195).

Besides, the title highlights the concept of loss which can be interpreted directly and symbolically as the clue to major themes and the general tone of this narrative.

The circumstances under which the diaries were lost, or, in fact, confiscated, raise the controversial issues of fighting against terrorism, tightening security, the loss of privacy and even the loss of freedom, when Adrian is arrested under Blunkett's anti-terrorist bill: "Historians will mark this as the moment at which Britain trembled on the verge of becoming a police state. If Adrian Mole can be thrown in prison on suspicion of terrorism, who is safe?" (Lacey, 2008).

The eponymous time indicators contribute to the symbolism of the title as well. The years 1999-2001 recall world-wide and, more specifically, British events and issues that were to have a major impact domestically and internationally:

a) a threshold, a border between two millennia, the beginning of the new era, which raised both pessimistic and optimistic expectations:

(22) As I wrote the numbers 2001, I was transported back to a classroom at the Neil Armstrong comprehensive, and a lesson on 'the future' given by Miss Elf, the humanities teacher. By 2001, according to Miss Elf, the world would be one, big, happy, cappuccino-coloured family. I remember her drawing this frontier-less world. <... > Miss Elf envisaged that, by 2001, there would be no hunger in the world and that everybody would have access to clean water and a flushing toilet. <... > (Townsend, 2008, p. 178).

b) the tragedy of 11 September 2001, which caused great human loss and led to the war on terror. For an average 'Adrian Mole' citizen it resulted

in new anxieties and the fear of becoming either a victim of terrorism or a victim of the global war on terrorism:

(23) Imran <...> came to tell me that his brother has been detained on 'suspicion of terrorism'. Apparently, an anonymous caller had informed the security forces that Mohammed had taken a flying lesson at Leicester airport. Imran said, 'It's all my fault: I brought him a flying lesson gift voucher last Christmas' (Townsend, 2008, p. 282).

c) the last two years of Tony Blair's first term in office and New Labour's second landslide victory at the 2001 general elections. The book was published in 2008, a year after Tony Blair's resignation from the post of Prime Minister. Thus, Townsend takes the opportunity to reflect on this pressing subject, looking back on the early years of Blair's rule and estimating the value of his promises. Back in *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*, Adrian Mole, in common with many of his fellow countrymen, was inspired and blinded by New Labour rhetoric:

(24) Ms Clough was excited by the prospect of a Labour victory. She thought that Tony Blair would 'support single mothers'. She had heard him say so on the Jimmy Young programme, so she knew it must be true. I assured Ms Clough that Mr Blair was a trustworthy, caring man who had dedicated his life to righting the wrongs of our inequitable society (Townsend, 2000, p. 43).

However, the next period in Adrian's life, depicted in *The Lost Diaries*, describes his losses rather than his gains. In the aftermath of the loss of his home in the previous book, he is now a homeless, jobless, single father. Symbolically, the lost diaries can be associated with the lost years – i.e. wasted years, hard times – covering one of the most miserable and humiliating periods in his life, when he had to move to the council estate with his two sons:

(25) It has to be faced: we are living among what sociologists call 'the underclass', and what my father, reluctantly driving the box van containing my few sticks of furniture, called 'Satan's spawn' (Townsend, 2008, p. 31).

Thus, the book presents an 'insider's' look at living conditions on council estates during the years of the New Labour government and shows that nothing has changed since Thatcher's times.

Moreover, the council housing debate is an uncomfortable topic for discussion, one that is silenced and sidelined as "not conducive to the national interest at this time" (Townsend, 2008, p. 274):

(26) Wednesday, October 24

Brett's documentary, *Weep, England! Weep!*, which was meant to expose the wasted lives of sink council estate tenants, has been cancelled by the commissioning editor (Townsend, 2008, p. 274).

Sarcastically, the title of the new book Adrian Mole is working on while living in his council house is *Sty!* with a pig as its main character:

(27) Peter sighed and walked around the sty. The filth and mud oozed between his trotters. It was disgusting, the condition he had to live in, he thought. Why should farmer Hogg and his wife, Pamela, enjoy the comfort of carpets and vinyl tiles under foot while he and his fellow pigs be condemned to wading through their own excrement (Townsend, 2008, pp. 90-91).

Besides the metaphorical implications of life on a council estate, *Sty!* alludes to the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom, which "plunged the agricultural industry into its worst crisis for decades", causing huge financial losses (BBC News, 2011). To save the animals from the epidemic, a mass slaughter was ordered. Preceding the 11 September terrorist attack, the epidemic was redolent with symbolic associations with the epidemic of terror and the extreme measures taken to stop terrorism.

To sum up this motif of failure, the author in unison with her character writes the artist's manifesto:

(28) Its main thrust is that society should support its artists. Its concluding paragraph states: 'How tragic would be the loss to the nation if a great work of mine were to remain unwritten due to the banal necessity of clocking on as an assistant warehouseman, e.g.' (Townsend, 2008, p. 125).

Thus, the motif of failure becomes eponymous in this book, affecting the characters, places, events and the period highlighted in the title. For Adrian Mole as the representative of Generation X, a provincial man from a working-class family, an intellectual, and, finally, of every Englishman, it is the period of minor and major losses in the personal, professional, economic and political spheres.

### 3. CONCLUSION

By taking a semiotic approach to the study of generic titles, the latter have been interpreted here both as textual elements and as referents to

extratextual phenomena. However, the three titles under analysis are not purely generic, as they include elements that serve as clues to thematic aspects of the narrative. The combinatory form of the titles results precisely in the combination of indexical, iconic and symbolic meanings. Thus, besides being indicative of factual information (i.e. the genre, main character/fictional diarist and temporal characteristics), the titles also:

- a) signal the narrative mode of parody and pastiche (iconic function), that is, by imitating the diary genre, the author plays with fiction and reality, secrecy and publicity (secret diary – confessions – lost diaries); and
- b) allude to social, political and cultural issues associated with the indicated periods of time, eponymous personalities, psychological issues associated with a certain age, gender and social background (symbolic function).

Central to the semiotics of the titles is the image of the eponymous character, whose name is the most stable component in all the diaries of the series, thus serving the indexical function of a cohesive device. However, this stability is not only nominal but also iconic, linked as it is with Adrian Mole's unchanging outlook, (mis)judgements about other people and (mis)interpretations of events, which produce the effect of a trap in time and even in space. In its turn, the iconic stability of the eponymous character fosters the symbolic interpretation of the name, which personifies Generation X, working class intellectuals, the East Midlands, England in general and indicates unresolved personal, social and political conflicts.

In the micro-context of the title, all the implications of Adrian Mole's name and personality are specified according to the leading motif of the generic element.

*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾* explicates the motifs of secrecy, privacy, intimacy, introversion and loneliness, representing in itself a paradoxical form: though the diary is not meant to be made public, it is eventually published both in fiction and reality. Thus, by means of Adrian Mole's symbolic identities Townsend reveals the conflicts and gives voice to the people he personifies.

*True Confessions of Adrian Albert Mole, Margaret Hilda Roberts and Susan Lilian Townsend* explicates the motifs of uncovering the secret,

anticipating sensational revelations, publicity, popularity or infamy. By juxtaposing Adrian Mole with the future Prime Minister and herself, Townsend highlights not only the differences, but also the similarities, between the three eponymous diarists, thus extending Adrian Mole's identities. Besides, the game she plays in combining fiction and reality (the 'metafictional game' to cite De Mingo, 2017) results in the creation of a unique antithetic character who can be described in terms of binary oppositions: an unknown celebrity, an unreliable reliable narrator, an unsuccessful successful author and an unpublished published author of a secret public diary.

*The Lost Diaries of Adrian Mole 1999-2001* explicates the motifs of loss and failure, which are further revealed with regard to personal misfortunes, social, economic and political crises on the threshold of the XXI century.

To sum up, the first book in the series can be regarded as providing both the setting and a springboard for Adrian Mole's 26-year-long story, whereas the other two books, bearing generic titles, perform the function of filling in the gap between more substantial periods in the life of Adrian Mole, labelled in the thematic titles of the remaining diaries, the latter being the subject of an ongoing line of research.

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