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21. Narratology: Tracing the Transition from Modernism to Post-Modernism

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a movement developed in the latter half of twentieth century which generally describes a historical era said to follow after modernity. It primarily deals with the ironic play in styles, citations and narratives, skepticism towards "grand narrative" of Western culture and preference for the virtual experience to the real. There has been widespread interest in narrative in history in fields of legal systems, psychoanalysis, scientific analysis, economics and philosophy. Narrative is pivotal to post modernism due to a perceived crisis of representation. It is absolutely crucial in understanding postmodernism. Postmodernism co-exists with the phenomenon, 'modernity' or 'postmodernity', of which the latter is important for understanding postmodernist narrative, especially in its relation to history. Postmodern narratives break away from modernism in many ways due to the space-time compression, as the world is witnessing change in its multiple domains. The process of Americanisation, a product of globalization, which was viewed in terms of grand narrative, ceased to be understood as a linear narrative of progress towards homogenization. As Lyotard terms it, postmodernity is often characterized as the conquest of difference over the narrative of standardization. Narratives are constantly under erasure vesting the final power with the reader or the viewer. My paper probe into the various transitions in narrative as it shifts from modern to postmodern age.

Key Words Metanarrative, Modernism, Narrative, Postmodernism, Technology

A significant landmark in the history of postmodernism was marked with the paper, 'Modernity - an Incomplete Project' delivered by the contemporary German theorist Jurgen Habermas in 1980. The term 'postmodernism' was first used in the 1930s and acquired its current sense in the essay, 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge' by Jean Francois Lyotard. Hyperreality which is 'the loss of the real' was proposed by the Jean Baudrillard in the essay 'Simulacra and Simulations'. The modern period begins with the Enlightenment era, in the ideas expressed by Kant, Voltaire, Locke and Hume. It laments for a

lost sense of purpose, a lost sense coherence, a lost system of values which was attacked by Derrida and Foucault later.

Narrative is the showing or the telling of story events from a beginning to an end, with digressions, diversions and detours which involves. It is a *re*-presentation of events, time and space. It is everywhere and it is not confined to literature. Narratology is the discipline which draws attention to the building blocks of narrative. It explores the combinations that appear in narrative texts and devices that readers adopt as narrative levels. The movement gained momentum after the 1960s, yet it is seen as continuation of works by analysts such as Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, Claude Levis Strauss and Northrop Frye. Narrative is pivotal to post modernism due to a perceived crisis of representation. It is absolutely crucial in understanding postmodernism. Postmodernism co-exists with the phenomenon, 'modernity' or 'postmodernity', of which the latter is important for understanding postmodernist narrative, especially in its relation to history.

John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Published in the year 1969 deals mainly with the story events that took place in 1867 yet the style of narration is very conventional in third-person, past tense and realistic. But there is an unseemly interruption of events by the narrator who offers first-hand information about Sarah's life. Such comments from the narrator constitute an example of 'rupturing' effect in fiction where the narrating agency reveals itself and which is frequently called 'postmodernist'. It is accompanied by a straightforward realist narrative supplemented by a voice that sometimes overwhelms it or even underwhelms it. The rupturing effect, Linda Hutcheon suggests, is "the simultaneous inscribing and subverting of the conventions of narrative" is undoubtedly a part of postmodern cultural logic. Yet such devices are not new and they were present in eighteenth century narratives and early films. Italo Calvino's *If On A winter's Night A Traveller* consists of twelve chapters, nearly all of which are preceded and followed by a chapter devoted to commentary on reading the main narrative. Similarly, Tom Stoppard's play, *The Real Inspector Hound*(1968), feature two critics watching and commenting on the performance of a 'whodunit' drama which is itself enacted on the stage. Similar situation appears in an episode of the final series of the British television comedy, *One Foot In The Grave*. All these suggest that there is an entire body of narrative characterized by rupturing which is known as 'metafiction'. 'Meta' refers to levels of narrative which lie 'after', 'behind' or 'outside' the supposedly main narrative. Such 'meta' levels of

discourse is partly a consequence of increased social and cultural consciousness. It also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday reality. Language no longer represent a coherent, meaningful and objective world instead it is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own meaning. The 'meta' terms aims to explore the relationship between an arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers.

The French linguist Emile Benveniste identified two orders of language use such as 'histoire' and 'discours' which bear directly on narrative and metanarrative. The historical utterance features past events, without the speaker's intervention in impersonal form, excluding the present moment of the utterance. It lays out the objects on a table by a character without mentioning that one is narrating by creating a situation where the events seem to narrate themselves. In 'discours', the presence of a speaker and hearer is assumed, and, the speaker's intention is to influence the hearer in some way. Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*(1945) and Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*(1989) are examples. The distinction between both does not ultimately enable a definitive understanding of how narrative is received. However, narrative is woven into history and associated with poetic exposition entails the blurring of the common-sense distinction of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. During 1980s, postmodernist writers like Truman Capote, E. L. Doctorow, William Styron and Norman Mailer Challenged the notions concerned with 'non-fiction'. They dealt with documentary subjects in innovative ways by treating real events or people within imaginary situations or imaginary people in historical situations. The line between biography and novel narrows in Irving stone's books and Alex Haley's *Roots*(1976)

The protagonist's motivations becomes conspicuous in postmodern 'non-fiction novels' or 'faction' narratives as in John Lukacs' novel, *The Duel*(1990), where the motivating factors in the minds of Hitler and Churchill are expressed. Psychology therefore adds to the 'motivation' of the character and the narrative. David Lodge identifies four techniques of the 'non-fiction novel' 1. telling the stories through scenes rather than summary; 2. Preferring dialogue to reported speech; 3. Presenting the events from the point of view of a participant rather than some impersonal perspective; 4. detailing on people's appearance, clothes, possessions, body language etc which reveals their class, character, status and social milieu in the realistic novel.

The Decline of the Grand Narrative

In the late twentieth century, grand narratives ceased to be 'grand' any longer. History was no longer sustainable by traditional historical discourse. Aforementioned, in (post)modernity, there exists a new set of material conditions arising from a decline in mass production favoring flexible specialization; information and service industries turning sovereign over traditional products of manufacture; consumption dominating production; traditional, class-based politics succumbing to politics centered on identities; development of communication technologies serve in making representations much more accessible. These features has been so important for narrative in postmodernity, and has made postmodernity so important for narrative. The styles of representation and characteristics of critical thinking which co-exists with the material conditions of postmodernity has dubbed it "the cultural logic of late capitalism", as observed by Fredric Jameson.

The idea knowledge, originating from ancient oral cultures, defines the postmodern condition to a great extent. Lyotard asserts that, "narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge". He identifies four aspects of a narrative which indicate its knowledge function. First, the actions of a hero such as recurrent failure or success. Second, narrative lends itself to a great variety of 'language games'. Third, the rules of the "pragmatics of transmission" in the narrative, implying a speaker or narrator, a protagonist and a listener. Fourth, narrative is bound up with human perception of time. For Lyotard, narratives pass on knowledge without the receivers of the knowledge being aware of it. With regard to scientific knowledge, he sees two grand narratives at work. One is associated with the Enlightenment, concerned with human emancipation from bondage and oppression. The other is, the philosophical narrative associated with the development of a more self-conscious human being or an evolved 'spirit'. In short, scientific knowledge justifies by placing itself within a narrative of progression to a greater human good. Based on the changes in the last fifty years of the twentieth century, he reported that, "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal". He adds, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, whether it is a speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation". But he is vague about the causes of the decline of grand narratives resulting in a plethora of assumptions from commentators.

The elevation of the fragmentary little narrative as a counter-politics of the local has deconstructed the grand narrative. Klaus Bruhn Jensen, echoing Marshall McLuhan comments, "postmodernism is itself a grand narrative, announcing the death of another narrative in its rearview mirror".

New Technologies

Diverse narratives were made more familiar and frequent with the rapid development of narrative signs in the twentieth century. In the West, number of lucrative industries focus on narrative, and it proliferate as never before. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels prove this. Radio is an example where messages are transmitted as electromagnetic waves through an invisible or sightless medium. It developed its own version of a narrative format previously associated with the novel: the serial. Radio serials had the advantage to be communicated without restriction of time, space and money. It encouraged the listener's creation of images similar to the printed words on a page. The narrative device of Orson Welle's adaptation of H. G. Well's *War of the Worlds* was so powerful that it actually caused some panic among listeners. But the visual gap between 'world' and 'home' was bridged with the onset of television. It is different from cinema in its contemporaneity and its concerns with live events. It became an affordable domestic commodity in the 1950s and 1960s. The domestic sphere entailed that its narratives were less heroic in the grand sense. Television has been responsible for a huge amount of narratives in diverse forms. The serial and series narratives have been integral to television narrative as they conform to a certain length. The property of continuity of television was interrupted with the uptake of VCRs.

With the advent of computer technology and internet, the 'hypertext' in written computer narratives allows degree of choice for the reader to construct narratives, delineating the reader as 'agency'. Websites have enabled unknown producers of narratives to find an audience. Camcorders have allowed the broadcast of personal narratives such as 'video diaries', and, desktop publishing continues the tactile traditions of books. Janet Murray states that the computer is in an "*incunabula*", a technology which is still to find its forte in narrative; on the other hand, it offers a number of possibilities in narrative. Technological advancements have lead to the demise of traditional narrative authority to formulate new identities, as it enhances the capacity for participation in narrative. Nevertheless, the developments in visual and digital narratives emphasis one crucial factor in the development of narrative: the power of the reader.

The possibility of participating in the production and circulation of narrative has increased manifold today. It cannot be looked upon as a paradigm for critical practice alone as it represents features of the world, leaving some out in favour of others. It offers us the opportunity to partake of the unlimited potential of signs. It does so according to the specificities of the technologies in which it is embedded. The very nature of narrative is to have an end, however its potential for openness is omnipresent.

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