

Postmodern Narrative Techniques in Robert Coover's Story Collection; Pricksongs & Descants

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Abstract: The modes of narration in postmodernist fiction are not identical with those of modernists and realists. They contravene readers' expectations, making them most often astounded and baffled. This study sets out to discuss some of the techniques used by the American writer Robert Coover in his story collection; *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969) which are associated with postmodernist fiction. These strategies including metafictional techniques, fragmentation, ontological concern, and temporal distortion, will in the subsequent sections of this paper be explicated and elucidated. In this regard, the term postmodernism will be first defined and elaborated, and then some of the salient features of Coover's selected work stated above, will be examined in order to demonstrate the title-mentioned claim. Not all the stories of the collection will in this study be provided an analysis of, but those which are of greater significance and are noticeable in incorporating postmodern strategies. Coover, it is argued, in the above-mentioned work, depicts events and situations most of which at odds with what readers are used to being provided with. Readers in Coover's are thus no longer passive recipients of the created world of the author, but active during the narratives and are invited to make things out and come to a conclusion about the plausible outcome of events.

Keywords: Metafictional Techniques, Fragmentation, Ontological Concern, Temporal Distortion, Coover, Postmodernism

1. Introduction

To begin with, it might be helpful to provide a succinct account of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a controversial and problematic term. It defies definition. It is not clear whether it should be deemed a positive or negative movement. Diverse attitudes both favorable and hostile have been taken towards it. For John Barth, for example, the term is "awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anti-climatic, feebly following a very hard act to follow" (qtd. in Mchale, 1987, p. 3). Baudrillard characterizes postmodernism as the replacement of simulacra for real objects believing that postmodernism is distinguished in its end of the real; that is, the differentiation between objects and their representations is becoming increasingly blurred. Baudrillard's most influential and controversial book has in recent years been *simulacra and simulation* (1995) in which he claims reality has given way to its representations. It has, according to him, been superseded by signs and images. What we experience in today's world is,

he asserts, a *simulation* of reality. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) is widely acknowledged as the foremost theoretical expression of postmodernism. Lyotard maintains that "meta-narratives" (universal theories) are barely credible any longer. Postmodernism, Lyotard points out, prefers "mini-narratives" instead. This incredulity appears to "sum up the ethos of postmodernism, with its disdain in all its many guises." Marxism, for example, due to its lack of pertinence to our lives, is refuted. It seems that "skepticism" is the best way whereby postmodernism can be described. Skepticism about "authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms." Thought of as a "negative form of philosophy," skepticism intends to undermine theories claiming to speak of "ultimate truth..." (Sim, 2001, p. 3). *Postmodernism*, as Hutcheon (1988) puts it is a "contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionally and, and of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past" (p. 23). The name is generally given to the era after world war II (1939-45) to designate the literature and art,

which was seen as a reaction to the tenets of modernism, which was itself a reaction against the tenets of nineteenth century and before. It is also considered the continuation of modernism (Galens, 2002, p. 246). Postmodernism was widely used in America by some critics to "describe a new sensibility" in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them" (Nicol, 2008, p. 1). The term has in recent years been used in other domains outside literature and criticism as well; media, history, philosophy, and visual arts. Sometimes modernism and postmodernism appear to make us bewildered, since they are not easily distinguished. Both schools, however, came about as "dissatisfaction with nineteenth century realism" (Nicol, 2008, p. 18).

Realism being a mode in literature denotes a technique used by some writers especially in the nineteenth century who recorded the actual events of life, providing us with "a slice of life" (Nicol, 2008, p. 18). It is mainly used in novel in which a novelist maintains that s/he is portraying the events and characters that are tangible and identifiable due to their frequency in real life. It can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century where writers attempted to narrate their works objectively, from an "unbiased perspective" (Glens, 2002, p. 246), trying to depict as precisely as they could their settings and dialogues in accordance to real life.

Modernism, however, in literature came to prominence after World War I (1914-18) as an opposition to the realism of the nineteenth century, which tried to present "the unadorned facts of the world around." This is not possible, modernists believe, since "the psyche of the narrator will always be affected by unknown forces and thus is never able to capture reality without any kind of bias or alteration" (Galens, 2002, p. 181). Hence, the thoughts of a character, say modernists, should be recorded. They, for this reason, made use of "stream of consciousness," or "interior monologue" technique in which the focus of narration is on the minds and psyche of the characters without being interrupted by the narrator. "It is typical of modernism," Nicol(2008) writes, "in that it limits the traditional (realist) narrator's role as "mediator," whose job is to present the fictional world to the reader by framing it and shaping our responses to it. Instead it plunges the reader directly to the fictional world with only limited guidance or bearings" (p. 19).

The role the novel used to play, however, has in the twentieth century altered. While the realists thought of their novels as a tool for providing us with reality, the novel is today not meant to inform us of reality, but to "constitute reality", to create "an aesthetic world" existing independently of the one we live in. It need not be identical with that of readers (Nicol, 2008, p. 21). *Postmodernism* in literature and particularly in fiction is characterized, as Aldridge says:

In the fiction of (postmodernist writers)...virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they

may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behavior becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement (qtd. In Sim, p. 123).

Below some techniques associated with postmodernism, which are conspicuous in the US writer Robert Coover's the aforementioned story collection are discussed. These strategies are first succinctly elaborated and then some extracts from the work are stated as instances of that particular technique

1.1. *Metafictional Techniques*

The term metafiction was first coined in an essay by William H. Grass (1970) to designate a quality of fiction to reflect on its own genesis and nature, accentuating the role the author plays in creating the work. "Metafiction," Waugh (1984) writes, "is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." Not only does this sort of writing examine the basic structure of fiction, but also raises the question on "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (p. 2). In contrast with realists, whose purpose was to depict events and characters from an objective perspective, forcing us to believe they are exactly what existed in the real world, postmodernists highlight the fictionality of a text before the reader, as being the brainchild of the author.

Postmodernist writes today, says William Gass, "resumes the guise of God" (qtd. in McHale, 1987, p. 210). They flaunt their omnipotence throughout their narratives, somehow claiming the same powers and abilities we often ascribe to gods. They are thus inclined to manifest their authority over the fictional world they create. Kurt Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), for instance, displays conspicuous claims to the above-mentioned fact:

I WAS ON A PAR with the creator of the Universe here in the dark in the cocktail lounge. I shrunk the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again. Ask me a question, any question. How old is the Universe? It is one half-second old, but that half-second has lasted one quintillion years so far. Who created it? Nobody created it. It has always been here...what was the apple which Eve and Adam ate? It was the creator of the Universe. (p. 124)

Coover too, lays bare his role as a "puppet-master" (McHale, 1987, p. 210) in *Magic Poker*, flaunting his godlike power, omnipotence, and authority over his characters, and offers as well several metafictional instances. He begins the story with, "I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees-pines and birch and dogwood and firs-and cause the water to lap the pebbles of its abandoned shores. This, and more; I deposit shadows and dampness, spin webs, and scatter ruins...I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and

heavy stillness. But anything can happen (p. 10). Throughout the narrative the author proceeds to accentuate that He is the creator of the island. There are numerous occasions in which the reader's attention is drawn to this fact, "bedded deep in the grass...lies a wrought-iron poker...I put it there" (p. 10)... "I arrange the guest cabin... I rot the porch and tatter the screen door and infest the walls... I have placed a green piano. I have pulled out its wires, chipped and yellowed its ivory keys, and cracked its green paint" (p. 12)...I have brought two sisters on this invented island, and shall, in time, send them home again. I have dressed them and may well choose to undress them. I have given one three marriages, the other none at all, nor is that the end of my beneficence and cruelty" (p. 14)...it is indeed I who burdens them with curiosity and history..." (p. 21). As the story progresses the author's overt presence continues to interrupt the narrative to raise the question of the relationship of fiction to life, "at times I forget that this arrangement is my own invention. I begin to think of this island as somehow real, its objects solid and intractable, its condition of ruin not so much an aesthetic design as an historical denouement... (p. 21) Coover dramatizes as well the way he loses control of some objects in his own story, "wait a minute, this is getting out of hand! What happened to the poker...? (p. 10). Where is the caretaker's son? I don't know. He was here, shrinking into the shadows, when Karen's sister entered. Didn't I invent him myself, along with the girls...? The girls yes...but the caretaker's son? To tell the truth, I sometimes wonder if it was not he who invented me" (p. 15). Towards the end of the story, he finds out that, he is vanishing from sight and that his invented island has been converted into something real, "I am disappearing. You have no doubt noticed...listen: it's just as I feared, my invented island is really taking its place in world geography" (p. 28). What Coover does here, says Evenson, is the idea that "as the place become real, the creator of the place evaporates. It is almost as if either he or the island can be real, but not both" (p. 57).

1.2. Fragmentation

Most readers have grown accustomed to the traditional mode of portraying events in a narrative. Possessing a chronological order of recording events and situations have been an indispensable part of realistic narratives so that the readers are in full conscious of what s/he is dealing with. This technique is but distrusted by postmodernists who prefer other ways rather than pursuing the traditional modes. They depart from the realistic depictions of events and characters in their narratives. One way is multiple ending in which instead of offering only one outcome for their work, they opt to offer two or even more, leaving much for the reader to decide which would be the best and plausible outcome. Another way of allowing the text for an open ending narrative is by "breaking up the text into short fragments or sections, separating by space, titles, numbers or symbols" (Sim, 2001, p. 127). Robert Coover's selected work offers several stories of both kinds. The Babysitter a story from this collection is, for example, narrated in fragments, with

numerous paragraphs being set off by spaces. Coover presents many possible situations and sequences. These fragments, as Evenson(2003) suggests, are skillfully juxtaposed in order to contradict one another in order to scrutinize "the relation of fantasy to reality without giving one primacy over the other" (p. 91).

The story concerns a babysitter arriving at the Tucker's house to babysit when Mr. and Mrs. Tucker are about to leave for a party. The story is narrated in 106 fragmentary paragraphs, some of which contradictory, given no priority or primacy of one over the other by the author. Coover presents various versions of several situations both at the Tuckers' and at the party. As the story progresses two of the babysitter's boyfriends drop by and rape her. Mr. Tucker then arrives and he too rapes the babysitter. The babysitter is at the end drowned by Mark and Jack (her boyfriends), but in its following section he does the dishes, sends the babies into bed and falls asleep. Coover offers two contradictory endings, in the first ending, he writes:

She wakes, startled to find Mr. Tucker hovering over her. "I must have dozed off". She exclaims. "Did you hear the news about the babysitter?" Mrs. Tucker asks. "Part of it", she says, rising. "Too bad, wasn't it?" Mr. Tucker is watching the report of the ball scores and golf tournaments. "I'll drive you home in just a minute, dear", he says. "Why, how nice!". Mr. Tucker exclaims from the kitchen". The dishes are all done!". (p. 208)

In the second one, the reader is told of a different version: "What can I say, dolly?" The host says with a sigh, twisting the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers. "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, corpse in your bath tub, and your house wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV the news is over, and they're selling aspirin. "Hell. I don't know", she says. "Let's see what's on the late late movie" (p. 208).

1.3. Ontological Concern

Modernist fiction is not identical with Postmodernist fiction due to their disparate obsessions. There is a "shift of dominant, as McHale says, from "problems of knowing" to "problems of modes of being." The dominant, Roman Jakobson defines it as "the focusing component of a work of art..." (qtd. in McHale, 1987, p. 6). The former probes "ontological" issues:

Modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as... "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? Other typical modernist questions might be added: what is there to be know?; who knows it?; how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?... (McHale, 1987, p. 9)

The latter, by contrast, concerns "epistemological" ones: Postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? Other typical questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for

instance: what is a world?; what kinds of world are there, or how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?..(McHale, 1987, p. 10)

A multiplicity of disparate, possible worlds are juxtaposed and depicted, and then the tensions and contradictions between them are explored. No particular world is given priority over others. A plurality of worlds is thus presented and confronted so that most often they contradict each other.

Coover in his selected collection portrays several self-contradictory narrative sequences, "worlds under erasure, as McHale(1987) puts it, "that realize the possibilities inherent in Beckett's trilogy or in Borges's the garden of forking paths, in the process laying bare the ontological structure of the fictional text" (pp. 20-1). The Elevator, for instance, concerns a man named Martin who takes a self-service elevator every day to the fourteenth floor where he works. The writer presents us with fifteen fragmentary sections centering on the experience of riding the elevator. In the first one, Martin takes the elevator and impulsively he presses the "B" button to visit the basement. In section 2, he is alone with the girl who operates the elevator. In its following part, being again with the girl he fantasizes about having a sexual experience with her. Martin in section 5 "is early, but only by a few minutes. Five others join him, greeting exchanged. Though tempted, he is notable to risk the B, but presses the "14"instead" (p. 109). The final fragment, however, recounts a different version. Martin does not take the elevator to the fourteenth floor, but prefers to take the stairs. "Halfway up, he hears the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash from below. He hesitates, poised on the stair" (p. 117).

In *The Magic Poker* as well, Coover as to finding a magic poker, depicts five both plausible and contradictory situations. In the first one, the girl in gold pants comes upon a poker, picks it up and kisses it, and encounters a handsome man. In the second one, she "drops the thing, shudders, stands, wipes her hand several times on her pants, shudders again" (p. 14). In the third time, the girl kisses the handle of the poker and then the man appears and kisses her, and takes her hand. In the fourth one, it comes as belonging to a legend, which was left behind on the island and found by a beautiful girl who after kissing it "something quite extraordinary happened..." (p. 29). In the fifth one, Karen picks up the poker, washes it in the lake, dries it on her dress, "Karen holds it between them before tossing it into the boat..." (p. 32).

Which of the above-mentioned versions should be deemed correct? None or maybe all of them. It may be true, as Evenson(2003) maintains that Coover "is not interested in allowing the reader to puzzle out what really happened. Rather it is the aggregate of what might have happened, the exhaustion of possibilities, that is important: the story is left deliberately open-ended" (p. 58). In *Quenby and Ola*, Swede and Carl, Coover once again brings the four eponymous characters on an island and then presents several fragmentary narratives that appear to violate readers' expectations of storytelling. Carl sleeps with either Swede's wife or daughter,

or just fantasizes it. Swede either knows it or not. If he knows he either exacts revenge on it or not. These possibilities, therefore, are realized in the story: Nothing between Carl and Swede's wife or daughter has happened. Carl has slept with one of them and Swede is unaware of. Swede knows and decides to avenge it. Swede finds out about it but remains passive. No resolution is by the writer offered.

1.4. *Temporal Distortion*

Another component of postmodernism is "the relaxation of strict time lines", sometimes called discontinuous time". In preference to constructing a narrative in accordance to time sequence, the author's mode of expression is of another kind. There is no clear border between several events occurring simultaneously. It is left to the reader to "create a time line" which might be disrupted later by the author. This technique is referred to by Jameson as schizophrenia (Galens, 2002, p. 254). In realist novels, events and happenings are presented in a way that is completely in accordance to a time sequence. They follow a chronological order, so that readers are fully conscious of the concept of time. In postmodernist texts, by contrast, this time line is shattered by depicting several overlapping, contradictory situations. This condition makes readers, more often than not, baffled and unable to perceive what they are presented with, making demand on readers to look for meaning.

In *The Babysitter*, several both plausible and contradictory events transpire simultaneously, and none is favored over others. The babysitter, for instance, in one section of the story is murdered, but in another part, it seems that nothing has transpired, "dishes done, children to bed, her books read, she watches the news on television" (p. 207). Similarly, in another fragment Mark (one of the babysitter's boyfriends) sleeps with her, whereas in another section he along with his friend Jack are still waiting outside, "I got an idea, mark whispers. One of us goes and calls her on the phone, and the other watches when she comes out" (p. 196).

2. Conclusion

As seen above, in the preceding sections, an attempt was made to examine some of the distinctive qualities preferred by Coover in his story collection to provide proof of demonstrating the selected work to be shelved among the works associated with postmodernist texts. Today's readers are no longer passive receivers of an author's constructed world. They are instead supposed to participate and take an active role in ascertaining a text's meaning before them, to ruminate on the plausible interpretations of a given narrative so as to work things out for themselves. This is the case with Coover's, expecting its readers to be active participants, to cooperate with him during the reading process in creating the narratives' meanings. As observed, the modes of narration opted for, and employed by, Coover depart from realistic and modernist texts. The author has made use of strategies and techniques that both violate readers' expectations, and simultaneously invite them not to sit passively before the text.

Pricksongs & Descants is by and large representative of postmodern fiction in its preoccupation with the nature of writing a narrative and departing from usual modes of narration. The author, by employing techniques and strategies which are associated with postmodern fiction seeks to present different contradictory outcomes for events on the one hand, and to accentuate the role he plays in portraying them on the other. The selected collection is thus one of the key works in postmodern narratives in that it incorporates modes of narration which at once departs from traditional ways of depicting events and suggests the unreality of them.

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