Constructing the postmodern short story

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Abstract

This extract explores the definitions and constraints of postmodernism, and how the term can be applied to the short story. Finally, it discusses how the short story is constructed, and why it is unique from other storytelling mediums. It is based on opinions from professionals and theorists in the fields of postmodern art, literature, film and history; primary and secondary analysis of published works (some commercially successful, some not); creative experimentation with the form, and considerations and opinions of peers and colleagues. The research showed the difficulties of arriving at a precise definition of the postmodern short story, and this extract gives an account as to why this is so.

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Introduction

“This postmodern stuff leaves me cold. Always a mish-mash of styles rolled into one,” whines one of Jonathan Santlofer’s characters in his novel The Killing Art (2006, p48). Postmodernism, in whichever medium, brings together a host of qualities and entwines them to express certain aspects that could not have been told in the style of a movement that preceded it. Perhaps if postmodernism leaves one feeling cold, that is what was intended.

Initially, the word can be examined in terms of its literal meaning, as in ‘after modernism’: an artistic, socially progressive movement prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which was, broadly, concerned with expression and representation through realism. However, O’Donnel (2003, p6) proposes that ‘postmodernism is concerned with non-linear, expressive and supra-rational discourse,’ essentially seeing postmodernism as not ‘after now’ but instead as ‘anything but now’ in almost every possible way. Therefore, postmodernism could be applied to anything that followed modernism chronologically, or contrastingly, that which rejects its defined conventions.
In this article, I explore a number of key elements surrounding the theoretical process of creating a postmodern short story. I begin by examining what precisely entitles a particular work of fiction to define itself as postmodern, and whether such a classification is even possible or accurate. I then proceed to discuss areas of ‘Voice’ in terms of narration, dialogue and speech. Following this, I investigate a multitude of different approaches to discuss whether writing itself has a distinct process, before finally debating the definition and distinguishing features of ‘the short story’.

Postmodernism in Literature

Speaking of postmodern fiction, Webster (1996, p122) claims that, “it is difficult to define a clear boundary in chronological, aesthetic or political terms... they transcend any strong... identification; they embrace a wide range of creative activity.” Snipp-Walmsley (2006, p405) states that, “any attempt to define postmodernism immediately undermines and betrays its values, principles, and practices. Postmodernism is loose, flexible, and contingent.” If this is true, how then is it possible to write from a postmodern perspective? Barry (2002) offers a brief outline as to what themes and styles postmodern fiction is likely to contain. These ‘postmodern indicators’, which are by no means ‘concrete’ nor are they exhaustive, include; a disappearance of the real, intertextual elements, denaturalised content, a rejection of any number of genre conventions, a rejection of stability (conventional time and space primarily) and differing points of view.

With these particular rules and constraints in place, many ‘good stories’ have a relatable character or at least a relatable character trait at their hearts, and are concerned with exploring the progression of character and the changes in their personality. Bell (2001, p95) writes that, “It is impossible to write without a really clear sense of how your character views the world and her place in it.” Bradbury (2001, p116) supports this view by stating that “…character is at the heart of all fictional writing...plot is itself often the product of a character... in their processes of development, growing self knowledge or interaction with others.” Perabo (2001, p101) summarises by explaining that it is not enough to have characters “do what we want them to do, say what we want them to say” instead “we must believe in our characters as living, breathing humans.” Take The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1951) for example, with the highly contradictory, alienated, and troubled Holden Caulfield, or Life of Pi (Martel, 2001) where young, inquisitive Pi is forced to sacrifice his innocence for survival. Both are concerned with character, and are voyages of self-discovery. As Bickham (1994, p15) states, “Self-discovery is on-going. We do not remain the same. Our feelings change, as do our thoughts and activities,” which is what we, as readers, engage with in stories: how the characters change, and how they change us.

According to Moskowitz (1998, p35) “creative writing is almost always fuelled by personal experience and so... inherent in the process is the power to
transform, and make positive use of, some of life’s most perplexing and painful issues.” Neale (2006, p45) points out; “How many times do you read about meals, or other daily routines like dressing, looking in the mirror, going out, coming in?” It is the way that these seemingly insignificant, daily routines are carried out by a character, that lets the reader know who they really are. For example, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2003, p29) the lead character tells how; “I wanted a glass of orange squash before I brushed my teeth and got into bed so I went downstairs to the kitchen.” Neale goes on to state that these details help build the character and world they inhabit; “the world is believable because it appears to have existed before the reader started reading about it and will continue on afterwards.”

**Voice**

Concerning characters, one of the most important aspects is their voice; what they say, how they say it, when they say it. With voice in fiction it is important to distinguish between authorial voice (the way in which the author’s attitudes are revealed using language outside of character’s thoughts and dialogue (Lepionka, 2008)), and the narrative voice. First-person narrative is a technique employed by a writer to become a character, and tell the story through their eyes. This allows for a greater sense of discovery within the reader, as because they do not have the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of the onlooker, they experience the novel simultaneously as the narrator. Boehmer (2001) however, identifies a pitfall that many aspiring writers fall into when attempting to write in first person; that the constant writing of ‘I’ and of self stops the work from developing externally; outside of the character’s mind. Third-person narrative then, deviates from first in that, the narrator plays more of an onlooker’s role. Third-person narrators can be present within the story themselves to give a more realistic account; though Harvey (1966) argues this makes the narrator, “unreliable because he is a fool or a liar or profoundly self-deceived.” They can also be fully removed from the story reporting on people’s thoughts in an omniscient, God-like state. Magrs (2001b, p140) sums this up explaining that the reader is put into a similar position as somebody watching television – they see everything, but are completely independent from that world.

It should be noted that there is also, of course, a second-person narrative whereby the writer makes the reader become the central character in the story. Porter-Abbott (2008, p71) raises an excellent point; that second-person narration is postmodernism’s most desirable narrative approach to storytelling because of its often mysterious and misrepresented nature. For example, is second-person narrative really addressing ‘you?’ Or is it in fact ‘a masked first-person narrative (since a ‘you’ implies an ‘I’ addressing the ‘you.’)’ Further from this, perhaps the ‘you’ being spoken to is another character in the book, who themselves is being watched by another omniscient narrator, allowing the second-person narration to ‘lose its veneer of strangeness…so that we read it as a virtual third-person narration.’ Some theorists, including Bennet & Royle
(1999, p78) in fact argue for “the idea that there may in fact be no such thing as a voice; a single, unified voice (whether that of an author, a narrator, a reader...) Rather there is difference and multiplicity in every voice”. This can be illustrated by fiction that refuses to remain in either first, or third person narrative, by regularly switching between styles. The Book of Dave (Self, 2006) shows this excellently by switching between both whilst simultaneously addressing two postmodern indicators by utilising different points of view, from the all-seeing narrator, and the first-person perspective of Dave, as well as rejecting stability by alternating between past and present whilst ignoring logical chronology.

Another important aspect of voice representation is dialogue. Casterton (1986, p38) argues that, “…speech is one of the most revealing aspects of a person… a person’s accent... tells us where they come from... about their background or which social group they identify with.” An example of this is Trainspotting (Welsh, 1993), which utilises the Edinburgh dialect and accent in full effect to convey the effect of natural speech, rather than rule-bound writing. Bennet & Royle (1999b, p75) define this as ‘the reality effect’ whereby the written dialogue is designed to reflect human conversational language, to instil an air of realism and believability in the reader.

The Writing Process

Surprenant (2006, p200) believes that “literature is fundamentally intertwined with the psyche,” and that this “requires us to question the putative proximity of, or even identity between, unconscious physical and literary processes.” With this in mind, many established authors advise aspiring writers to keep a writer’s notebook or diary with them at all times to jot down thoughts, sights and sounds. Anderson (2006a, p34) maintains that, “The immediate capturing of your first impressions will ensure that you write them when they are hot... automatically putting impressions into words.” In support of this, Robbins (1996, p33) points out that keeping such a notebook can “free you to express important feelings about an idea… that occurred at a particular moment in the day.” Magrs (2001a, p7) even claims that the most fascinating progress lies in constantly noting down “irresistible snatches of dialogue from bus stops and shops.” Some would argue against this social approach to writing however, with Smith (2001, p24) believing that, “the act of writing... is an occupation best done in solitude.”

Jouve (2001, p13) states that being a writer is “like being a dancer or musician. Unless you practice, you don’t develop the muscles... or the nimbleness of fingers.” She admits that there are of course rare occurrences of genius where people write fascinating novels seemingly out of thin air, but that the majority of writers practice, with activities such as ‘freewriting’ and ‘clustering.’ The first, formally introduced by Elbow (1973), describes the process by which we allow ourselves to write freely, the first thoughts that come into our head, unconcerned with structure, grammar or vocabulary;
merely the flow of ideas. Brande (2006 [1934] p424) claims that these sorts of exercises allow “the unconscious to flow into the channel of writing.” The latter, originally developed by Rico (1983), are similar to ‘mind-maps’ and theoretically designed to assist in providing a visual map of thoughts by allowing the writer to record ideas “organically rather than sequentially” (Anderson, 2006b, p25).

Kleiser (2004, p1) argues that the writer must not think of a short story as a “novel in little”, instead, as Wolff (2007, p23) points out, short story is concerned with “a moment in time, or one part of a character’s life.” It is therefore vital that every piece of information conveyed to the reader is pivotal, and none more so than the opening. Newman (2000, p46) suggests that, “any first paragraph that engages your reader is a success. Any other is a failure.” This is enhanced by Sage (2001) who implies that the engagement of the reader need not even be positive, just a reaction from them which implores them to continue, concretizes a solid opening. Hall (1989, p81) however warns of the dangers of altering writing style to fit the short story form by saying, “an overly simplistic style gets in the reader’s way by making her overly aware… she is reading a work of imagination instead of experiencing it” but that “an overly elegant style may also block the reader’s voluntary suspension of disbelief.”

Conclusion

A postmodern short story then must contain any number of a fairly ambiguous, non-exhaustive set of ‘guidelines’ as opposed to rules. For example, it could include at least one, or all of Barry’s ‘Postmodern indicators,’ though these not necessarily be present in the content of the story, but perhaps in the style within which it is constructed. The majority of writers and theorists alike agree that a short story is such because it has no need to any longer. It is not a succinct, scaled down novel, or an abridged simple version, but its original length because that is exactly what it required. Voice figures hugely in postmodern fiction due to its ability to transcend narrative styles. The points made above, are perhaps contradictions to themselves, however. Perhaps a postmodern short story should not switch narrative, deny genre conventions or reject stability. After all, to define something as postmodern, and assign it values by which it must abide, devalues precisely what it means to be postmodern. Should we call it Post-postmodernism, New Puritanism, Neo-Modernism, or Avant-Gardism? Then again, perhaps it should instead become nameless.

References


