



The Mechanics of Recursive Narrative in Selected Postmodern American Texts

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Abstract

This paper explores the mechanics of recursive narratives, focusing on the Möbius narrative (complex cyclical narrative) as their primary geometric model and entropy (chaotic- deconstructive narrative) as their inevitable thematic consequence. By examining the tension between the infinite desire of the recursive loop and the degrading force of entropy, this research seeks to demonstrate how recursive fiction mirrors the modern struggle to find closure in an increasingly fragmented reality. In this paper, three postmodern American short stories are tackled according to deconstructionism (how does the recursive narrative is deconstructed the reality). They are "The Circular Valley" (1950) by Paul Bowles, "The Swimmer" (1964) by John Cheever, and "The School" (1974) by Donald Barthelme. In each text, the researcher tries to shed light upon the narrative of each, and what mechanics of narrative are used. The researcher tries to discover how and why those authors used such mechanics and what is the aim behind their employment of such mechanics.

Key words: Recursive Narrative, Möbius, loop, entropy, "The Circular Valley", "The Swimmer", "The School".

اليات السرد العودي في نصوص اميركية مختارة من زمن مابعد الحداثة
م. دجلة كطان شنان

ملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث آليات السرد العودي، مع التركيز على الية السرد الموبوس (السرد اللولبي المعقد) كنموذج هندسي أساسي له، وعلى الية الانتروبيا (الفوضوي المفكك) كنتيجة موضوعية حتمية له. ومن خلال دراسة التوتر بين الرغبة اللانهائية للحلقة التكرارية وقوة الانتروبيا المهلكة، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار كيف تعكس الرواية التكرارية الصراع المعاصر من أجل إيجاد خاتمة في واقع يتزايد تفتته. في هذا البحث يتم تحليل ثلاث قصص أمريكية قصيرة من زمن مابعد الحداثة: "الوادي الدائري" (1950) لبول بولز، و"السباح" (1964) لجون تشيفر، و"المدرسة" (1974) لدونالد بارثيلم. طبقاً إلى الطريقة التفكيكية (كيفية السرد العودي فكك الواقع). في كل نص، يحاول الباحث إلقاء الضوء على البنية السردية والتقنيات السردية المستخدمة. ويسعى الباحث إلى الكشف عن كيفية وسبب استخدام هؤلاء المؤلفين لهذه التقنيات وما كان الغرض الأساسي من توظيف هكذا اليات.

Introduction

It is good to start this paper with definition of narrative and narrator since we have so many theories dealing with such items. Most of critics agree on an idea that narrative is everywhere. This means the meaning of this word is not only



associated with literary types (for example, novel or short story), rather it is connected with act of narrating which is found everywhere and in deferent texts (for example, class room communication, report journal, most of T.V programs, the everyday communication, ... etc.). So, in one way or in another, we are all narrator (Fludernik: 2009, P. 1).

In *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1978), Gerald Prince defined narrative as: "Narrative: The recounting [. . .] of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES" (Prince, 1987, P. 58).

Simply, narrative is derived from the word 'narrate' and associated with narration activity which is widely used. Narrative is closely connected with speech act narrating which is giving by narrator. Accordingly, it is everything said or described by narrator (Fludernik: 2009, P. 2).

Gerard Genette discusses this item and produced three levels of narrative, they are; 1) narration which is the act of narrator, 2) discourse (recit) which means narrative as text or utterance, finally 3) histoire which means the story the narrator tells in the course of the events. Accordingly, the first two levels stablished what is known as narrative discourse while the third one is the story. These divisions enable the reader to observe that the story could be narrated in more than one way and affect its meaning or the purpose behind its narration (Fludernik: 2009, P. 2).

Moreover, narrative might be analyzed according to two approaches: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal approach (syntagmatic axis), as its name suggests, focuses on linguistic side. While the horizontal one is called "hermeneutic", according to it, the focus of analysis is not on length rather on depth. This is because the narrative is not only a sequences of events but also it is the events with their subsequences and representations. So, the concentration is not on the structure of language, rather on its interpretation (Onega, 1996, P. 5).

A good question might rise here which enrich this topic is that, to what degree there is similarity or agreement between the events and their interpretations. This pushes other critics to make four or three levels of analysis. Mieke Bal talks about three levels, they are fabula, story, and text. The text is the linguistic structure of the novel, while fabula is the chronological order of the events. The events appear in the novel according to the cause and effect. Finally, the story means how the story is told, or the way in which the action is conveyed (Onega, 1996, P. 6).

The emergence of recursive narrative (circular narrative) is not happened all of a sudden. Also it does not appear as a direct reaction to linear narrative which is 19th century hall mark. In fact, with the aid of many 20th century experimental techniques and with development of realism and naturalism as major trends movements of 20th century fiction, the recursive narrative born. The postmodern writers find that the linear narrative is unsatisfied and unnatural or un realistic. At



the beginning, this shift is neither conscious by its writers nor recognized by the critics. Later on, it became one of the important trend in fiction and the pioneers of this fiction are August Strindberg, Gertrude Stein, Jose Augusto and Trinidad Martinez Ruiz (Toribio Vazquez, 2018, P. 88).

Recursive Narrative

A recursive narrative is a narrative that contains a self-referential literary structure. Always there are references or allusions to the story itself, this makes "strange loop" which is endless regress. Where the story line of the events moves not chronologically rather hierarchically that makes the reader unexpectedly returning back to the beginning. Steven Pinker and Jackendoff define re-cursion as "a procedure that calls itself, or...a constituent that contains a constituent of the same kind.". Recursive narrative is different from linear narrative. In such narrative (recursion) the inside becomes outside, where the characters and the story becomes structure framework (Hofstadter, 1979, P.P. 10, 491); (Pinker and Jackendoff, 2005, P. 203).

This by itself is known as the 'Möbius strip' which is a topological one side surface. This item deals with structure of the text where the reader hardly distinguishes if not confused concerning the narrator's identity, whether the narrator is fictional or real (the writer himself). The 'Möbius strip' is similar to infinite circle, with a lot of self- references, traps and repetitions, it is difficult to apply any logical analysis on the events since it is difficult to distinguish between cause and effect. That is why ' Möbius strip' is considered as the structural backbone of recursive narrative (Pickover, 2006, P. 152); (Hayles, 1990, P. 115).

A clear example of 'Möbius strip' is John Barth's "Frame-Tale." (1988). When the writer (John Barth) gives the reader instructions (how to read this story) On one side is the words "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE" and on the other, "WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN." In this case a Möbius strip is constructed. when the reader reads Barth's sentences he will discover they are infinite loops. He is going to twist the strip once and fasten the ends together: "...ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN..." (Barth: 5) Despite it is only ten words, this quotation indicates that the structure of narration is more important than its content. How to narrate is better than what do you narrate since Barth's short story is frame without story (Walkiewicz, 1986, P. 62).

Edward Walkiewicz in his essay "John Barth" (1986) states that Barth's short story 'Frame-Tale' is a 'recycling of elements from Barth's own fictions' and functions as a three-dimensional representation of the stories that comprise the collection as a whole. By doing this, Barth declares departure the linear narrative and replacing it with recursive one with no clear beginning and end (Walkiewicz, 1986, P. 62).



Moreover, with development of the events of the story and with more self-references, the narrative transferred to be 'entropy'. This time this level of narrative deals with themes rather than structure. It occurs when constant self-referential references (often repeated loops) lead to destroying of the meaning of the text or make digression in the meaning. Passage of time does not mean development of events rather means loss of meaning and information. Accordingly, a recursive narrative means a story which "turns its own tail," shifting the process of reading into examining the mechanics of writing (Hofstadter, 1990, P. 20).

While the good example of 'entropy' is Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy" (1984) with same title. N. Katherine Hayles in *Chaos Bound* (1990) criticizing how Pynchon 'story centers around the idea of decay and destruction of everything in this world. Pynchon uses this theme 'entropy' to tackles a "heat death" of information (Pynchon 115) When the destruction of the party in his short story represents to the increasing "noise" of a chaotic system. It shows chaos and ruin of postmodern life where energy can no longer be transferred, rendering the characters' attempts at connection or recursive stability futile (Pynchon 91). By using entropic framework, Pynchon states that all systems whether real or fictional are subject to decline and disorder. (Hayles, 1990, P. 118).

"The Circular Valley" (1950) by Paul Bowles

The story talks about Atlajala, the major character which is spirit that settled a valley in north Africa. It is spirit without body, that is why it occupied every one come to this place. In the beginning it entered the animal body and everything is ok. But the troubles start with coming of humans to this valley. The first people appear in the story are monks. They come to this valley to stablish monastery. Here, the spirit discovers the difference between the animals and humans. It faces a complex psychological problem. It is new and intoxicating layer of existence: subjective emotion and moral guilt that is related to humans. Concerning animals there is fleeting sensations, while human thoughts on the other hand, are "heavy" and lingering (Bowles:1950, PP. 104-112).

The story is complicated with coming of new visitors to this valley (A man and woman). The spirit enters to the woman's body to discover she is very sad and neglected by her bossy husband. The spirit touches her pain, sorrow and her fear of being rejected. This makes the woman feels that she is isolated and stranger from others even her husband. This leads to psychological breakdown. The story end with the departure of humans from the valley. Expecting everything is going to return to its usual, but actually it is not. the humans corrupt the valley with their thoughts, moralities, and the complexity of the souls. The spirit cannot enter to the simple sensory bliss of animal life after all these disasters (Bowles:1950, PP. 104-112).



In "The Circular Valley," entropy is appeared as physical and psychic depletion of the human characters as the Atlajala "uses" them, such as, "She felt herself becoming a hollow thing that the wind could blow through... a vessel being emptied of its contents" (Bowles 124). This is the application of narrative entropy. The shift in the woman's character (Miranda) from complex to hollow, from order to disorder is the evidence of narrative entropy. Gena Dagal Caponi notes that this "hollowing out" is a hallmark of Bowles' characters, who often succumb to a "centrifugal force" that strips away their humanity until only the void remains. The recursion of the spirit's possession does not build a climax; it facilitates a "winding down" of the human soul (Caponi, 1994, P. 14).

Narrative entropy appears also at the end of the story when humans leave the valley and everything returns to its usual. The valley becomes calm and peaceful where the "energy" of the human drama is exhausted, leaving behind only a "hollowed-out" reality (Bowles 124). So, Bowles' endings often reflect a "return to a primal, indifferent stasis," suggesting that the recursive loop of the valley is a closed system from which nothing is gained. The story ends exactly where it began—with the spirit alone in the silence—confirming that the "human" part of the story was merely a temporary glitch in an infinite cycle of repetition (Caponi, 1994, P. 91).

While The Möbius Strip is achieved by collapsing the distance between different historical eras within the valley. "The memory of the monks was no different from the memory of the bees; both were part of the same vast design that was always present" (Bowles 118). Bowles illustrates the Möbius mechanic by milting the linear timeline into a single, he mixed 16th-century scene (monks) with modern one (the modern-day bees). This is a recurring "design through all the story. Actually he is milting the "before" and "after" of the story. Richard Patteson argues that in Bowles' topography, "time is not a sequence, but a recurring pattern," where all events exist on the same plane of reality (Patteson 86). The narrative is "recursive" because it does not move forward; it loops back onto itself, ensuring that every inhabitant of the valley becomes part of the same eternal, twisted surface of memory (Patteson, 1987, P. 86).

Moreover, dominating the spirit of the couple (Miranda and Aziz) by Atlajala, this by itself is Möbius because their inner thoughts and Atlajala's behavior are the same. Johannes Bertens argues that this inhabitation creates a "dissolution of the Western ego," as the characters' individual desires are swallowed by the spirit's ancient, repetitive hunger. The middle of the story functions as a recursive feedback loop: the spirit experiences the humans' emotions, which in turn alters the humans' behavior, leading to a state of psychic "infestation" that blurs the line between the observer and the observed (Bertens, 1979, P. 142); (Bowles, 1950, P. 115).

"The Swimmer" (1964) by John Cheever



The story centers on Neddy Merrill 'the swimmer'. As an attempt to prove his physical power and escape from his social-financial problems, he decides to return his home depending on swimming in his town Westchester. At the beginning of his journey, he feels he is brave, explorer, and hero. The turning point in the story occurs with occurrence of the storm which shifts the whole actions as well as the atmosphere. He still struggling all the physical and psychological obstacles alone. Finally, he reaches his destination, but it is catastrophe. He discovers that he is alone, his family abandoned him due to his alcoholism and financial problems, his home is destroyed because of the storm, finally, he is not brave, young and powerful athlete, rather he is an old man (Cheever, 1978, P. 603-612).

According to the text, "reach his home by water" by swimming across a string of pools he names "The Lucinda River" (Cheever 603). Scott Donaldson considers that a ritualistic recursion; Neddy is not just traveling, he is performing a self-conceived myth. This opening sets up a "geographic quest" that mask a deeper, more fractured reality, where the repetitive act of swimming becomes a "compulsive loop" of self-delusion (Donaldson, 1988, P. 192).

Another critic, analyses the middle of the story describing it as "episodic recursion" to show the "fragmentation of the protagonist's memory," where each pool represents a recursive layer of his past life that he can no longer fully access or control. swimming from pool to pool is considered as "temporal compression." The four seasons occur or repeated in a single afternoon, and the character body and power is gradually faded. This middle section represents the looping of social cycles—the parties, the drinks, and the polite conversations—which Neddy experiences as a blurred, recurring dream (Hunt, 1983, P. 114).

The transformational state of Neddy from high to low level is considered as a Möbius Strip, "He had done it, he had completed the Lucinda River, but the house was dark... the place was empty" (Cheever 612). The journey was supposed to lead "home" (forward movement), but the "twist" in the narrative reveals that "home" no longer exists. According to George Hunt, Cheever creates a "Möbius-like temporal fold" where the protagonist is "swimming through his own history" without realizing that the "past and present have merged". The "inside" of his delusion and the "outside" of his tragic reality are the same continuous, inescapable loop (Hunt, 1983, P. 117).

Patrick Meanor focuses upon the suffering and destroying of Neddy, "He was cold and he was tired and the blue water... seemed to have no warmth in it. He felt that he had grown old and weak in a few hours" (Cheever 610). For Patrick Meanor this quotation is the primary evidence for narrative entropy. The "recursive" act of entering the water—which at first provided vigor—eventually leads to "thermal death." Scholar Patrick Meanor notes that as Neddy progresses, the "environment itself becomes entropic," shifting from the warmth of summer to the "stark, cold reality of autumn," symbolizing the inevitable "decay of the



suburban dream". The loop doesn't sustain him; it consumes him (Meanor,1995, P. 81).

Patrick Meanor comments also on the end of the story describing it as recursive quest. It ends when the major character realizes his adventure is no more than a "static entrapment" in a life that had already ended years before. So, the river stands as a closed loop of denial (Meanor, 1995, P. 78).

"The School" (1974) by Donald Barthelme

The story centers around Edgar, the teacher- narrator, who observes ambiguous acts of death in his school. The series of death starts with the sudden death of plants followed by the death of all the animals in the school (snakes, an herb garden, hamsters, and a local puppy), reaching to human beings. The first person died there is Koran orphan who is sent to this school by charity organization. The tragedy is completed by the death of many grandparents and it concludes by the death of two students in a strange accident. In such circumstances, Edgar as a teacher is required to explain these events to his students and make them understands the other values of life besides death. This push him to make love-relation to his assistant, Helen, as an attempt to make the values of 'love' and 'life' equal to the value of 'death'. The final scene in this story is while the couple stands in the class, a new gerbil is brought into the room. The last event suggests a cycle of life and hope, especially with cheering of the students (Barthelme,1981, PP. 305-308).

The opining line "Well, we had all these children out planting trees" (Barthelme 305) stands as the recursive unit of the story: an attempt at nurturing life that immediately results in death. Critics argue that Barthelme uses this beginning to set up a "rhetorical trap" for the reader. According to Charles Molesworth, the "deadpan delivery" of the initial failure (the orange trees) signals a narrative that will not progress through character development, but through the repetition of a single theme—the inevitability of loss (Molesworth, 1982, P. 42).

The middle of the narrative is describes as being cyclical one or repetitive. In the middle of the story, in each paragraph there is a living thing in the school and die in a sudden and strange way. The death functions structural devices. This creates mechanized tragedy which is called "staccato recursion" where the school is the center of absurd (Stengel, 1985, P. 118).

The narrative entropy can be found in death of the first student, "And then there were the Korean orphans we adopted... They all died. The cause of death was not totally clear... It was as if they had just given up" (Barthelme 2). It is the exhaustion of the "life-force" within the story. As the objects of care become more human, the failure to keep them alive becomes more profound. Charles



Molesworth argues that this reflects a "systemic heat death" where the language of education—usually meant to foster growth—becomes a "dry, entropic ledger of casualties" The recursion leads to a total depletion of hope (Molesworth, 1982, P. 45).

The reader could find the Möbius narrative at the end of the story, "There was a knock on the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly" (Barthelme 3). As Jack Hicks observes, the appearance of the new gerbil "re-animates the loop," suggesting that the "school" is an infinite space where the human desire for life is constantly being "re-inserted into a system of certain death" (Hicks, 1981, P. 67).

This final scene reaches a peak of existential despair (the "inside" of the strip), the "new gerbil" twists the story back to the "outside" (the beginning of a new cycle). Wayne B. Stengel suggests that this "structural loop" ensures that the story never truly ends; it merely "re-initializes its own absurdity" (Stengel 121). The cheer of the children is the sound of the narrative loop closing and reopening simultaneously (Stengel, 1985, P. 121).

Conclusion

According to narratology, telling a story is important, but the way of telling it is also important. Sometimes, the narrator's way leads to digression, other times the narration affects the reader's perception of the events.

In this regard, and with postmodern revolution in every aspect of the life including novel, recursive narrative gives more role to the reader than before. Now, he is equally influential as the writer himself in determining the meaning of the text.

Recursive narrative is not a matter of repetition or self-referentiality, rather it degrades and complicates itself in every reference or repetition. Moreover, recursive narrative affects all the elements of the novel, and returning to the beginning does not mean the same or without changes, the characters for example, after exposing to heavy experiences will change a lot in individual's personality. This means replacing liner progress of the events by circular one is not a matter of style rather of function, to show the disruption of reality.

By analyzing the three postmodern American texts, the researcher reaches to this fact, in each short story, there is different recursive mode. In " The Circular Valley" the recursion is metaphysical. The loop is spatial where the environment is fixed, the circular nature is repeated but it is fixed, what is changeable or affected are the humans only. Bowles' employment of entropy is to shed light upon human devastation of the land in modern life as well as the writer wants to focus on the psychological chaos of modern life. So, the recursive narrative in " The Circular Valley" learn the reader this message Humans are irrelevant, variable, and changeable, while the cycle nature is fixed as it was.



While the recursion in "The Swimmer" is psychological one. the loop is delusional and deep dives trauma. Neddy Merrill uses the repetitive act of swimming to "rewrite" a timeline that has already broken. Because of the recursive narrative in this story, the reader discovers that Neddy's journey is actually inner exile or prison.

Finally, the recursion narrative in " The School" is absurdist and somehow linguistic one. The loop is rhetorical. The same language is repeated specially these expressions that are connected with "death". In addition, the rhythm of birth-death cycle is repeated with developments of the events' rhythm. The recursion of the event (ambiguous death) affects everything even the language as when the teacher of the class faces difficulty in explaining the absurd death which occurs in the school or how far he hardly presents a convincing answer to his students' philosophical questions concerning the value of life and death. The school is the life itself, with death of something (human or nonhuman), it necessarily followed by birth of other.

The ultimate finding of this research is that recursive narratives are inherently "anti-heroic." In a traditional story, the hero changes the world. In a recursive narrative, the world (the loop) changes the hero—usually by dismantling them. Whether it is the spirit in the valley, the cold water of the pools, or the death of the classroom pets, the mechanic of recursion serves to prove that the "circle" is more powerful than the "line."

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