

Postmodernism and joyce carol oates essay sample

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For my short essay I will focus on a postmodern reading of Joyce Carol Oates, "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Corrections and Began My Life Over Again." More precisely, as a postmodern text.

Postmodernism refers to texts that reject coherence in a narrative, objective truth, and show doubts about the reliability of language to communicate.

Postmodern techniques that are evident in Oates story were fragmented narrative, disrupted time sequence, disunified subject, and metanarrative.

The first aspect I will talk about is fragmented or nonsense narrative. To me these terms are pretty self explanatory. Fragment narrative is a narrative given in bits and pieces, as opposed to a straightforward linear narrative. It also uses fragment and run on sentences, or to put it another way, tends to disregard a lot of syntactical and grammatical rules. Nonsense narrative most of the time falls under fragmented narrative too, it is a narrative that has no clear meaning, yet can have shades of meaning and ambiguous meaning. Nonsense narrative (and fragment narrative) is also characterized by a lack of coherence relative to writing in the modern period. The first example of the story I will use is in the very beginning. Directly under the title there is a small "paragraph" of fragment or nonsense narrative. I don't even really know what to call it and due to the capitalization of most of the words it seems to be an extended secondary title.

It says, "Notes for an Essay for an English Class at Baldwin Country Day School; Poking Around in Debris; Disgust and Curiosity; A Revelation of the Meaning of Life; A Happy Ending (pg 522)." The reader is not sure what to make of this; it is in fragment form and at first glance may appear to have no meaning. As I read the story through again I began to think that this was the <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-and-joyce-carol-oates-essay-sample/>

author talking about how she had found an essay in the trash at a school and she was basing this story on it. Later when I came upon the part where the girl was writing her essay it made me think they may be the same one. It says, " I work on my lesson [an essay] for Mr. Forest. I have filled up eleven pages. Words pour out of me and won't stop. I want to tell everything. . . (528). There are many examples of fragment narrative in the story, and in fact the story is largely made up of fragmented narrative, rarely keeping with any linear thought pattern for too long. Like the example above though, they usually will weave in and out of each other, returning to make connections off and on throughout the story.

Oate's use of fragment narrative affects the story in a number of ways. It affects the tone making it seem jagged, and modern. These work well with the context of the story because it is a very grim tale, and it is also a story that seems to be in the latter half of the twentieth century. The fragmented narrative also goes well with the story because there is no dialogue. If there had been dialogue in fragmented narrative in the dialogue the piece may have been unbelievable because we know people don't talk in short jagged sentences most of the time. However, when people think often times they will think in a fragmentary manner rather than always in complete sentences. Since the majority of the story takes place in people's heads and the rest with the narrator the fragmented narrative gives the story an authentic feel.

I will now go on to talk about the disrupted time sequence, as it and fractured narrative are closely related. A disrupted time sequence is a

characteristic pretty unique to postmodernist literature. The book uses the movie Memento as an example. I can think of a number of stories that employ this technique, The Rules of Attraction stands out as one that uses it very interestingly. In this story the disrupted time sequence lends itself to the fractured narrative, and vice a versa. The fact that the author employs these techniques demonstrates the postmodernist's lack of regard for coherence in a narrative. This technique can be explained pretty easily in this story, as every time it jumps around it is numbered and given a main heading, almost like an outline. An example from the story of how this happens can be shown easily by looking at #1 on 528 under Events.

By the heading we know this section will deal with events, so its safe to assume that every numbered paragraph will most likely be an important event. Rather than worrying about the time in between events, the author will just focus on the events directly. And that is exactly what she does. Going from an event at Branden's where she is shoplifting in #1, to a scene in at Clarita's in #2. The fact that these are both under the heading "Events", lends them coherence, as we assume they are both important events. However this is far from the traditional coherence of a linear form that would lead us to the two events in simulated real time, or in the form of flashbacks. The technique of disrupted time sequence lends itself to the story in some of the same ways that fragmented narrative does.

It makes the tone more jagged, and modern, and also could be attributed to thinking pattern rather than talking because people are much more likely to jump around in their heads to different time periods than in real life. Another

thing this adds to the story is suspense. Suspense is a great aspect to have in any story, and in this story it is very uniquely and expertly used. The disrupted time sequence rather than actually creating the suspense makes it more interesting, and since it is more unique than a linear storyline there is less chance to fall into a cliché. It seems really fresh, and while the suspense is building it is impossible to guess what will happen next, because you don't know where you will go next!

Next is the aspect of the disunified subject. A disunified subject is a character that doesn't seem to have control over their actions or motives. The main character in this story is a very good example of this. Often times we find her not knowing why she is doing something. One example, "The girl's heart is pounding. In her pocket is a pair of gloves! . . . In her pocket! Shoplifted!. . . In her purse is a leather billfold (a birthday present from her Grandmother in Philadelphia) with snapshots of the family in clean plastic windows, in the bill fold are bills, she doesn't know how many bills. . . (526)." This quote shows how she has no real motive for stealing, and that she even has money, probably enough to pay for the gloves. Though it does hint that she gets a rush from stealing, it never comes out and says it. An even better example though is on page 524. Under the heading III World Events it says, "Nothing.", and under the heading IV People and circumstances Contributing to This Delinquency, it also says, "Nothing." This basically comes out and says that there is no reason for her to be shoplifting, and no reason for her to run away.

So this hints at the fact that she doesn't really control her actions, because she's doing things and she doesn't even know why. In addition to these things I believe the perspective of the story adds to the disunified character. This is done by switching from third person perspective when regarding the main character as "the girl", to the first person perspective of I or myself and using them both to refer to the same "person". There is an example of this on the first page, first line under the first heading, it goes, "The girl (myself) is walking through Branden's, that excellent store (522)." It then goes on to refer to the girl in the third person, even though we know it is the narrator speaking about her self. Then in the next section it does the opposite. It goes, "The girl seated at home. A small library, paneled walls of oak. Someone is talking to me (522)." In this line the perspective changes from third person the girl, to first person me with no real logical transition. In both of these examples it contributes to the disunified character by making the girl seem like two different people.

We see her as "me", and as "the girl." In addition this contributes to the incoherency of the piece because of its illogical transitions. Like the disrupted time sequence this also makes the story more suspenseful because we are less sure as to what the character will do next. IT also gives the story a modern feel as the disunified subject is a pretty modern idea, and the questioning of any ultimate realities is modern also. In addition it also contributes to the idea of this taking place inside the mind rather than outside. Based on the idea that most people have a split conscious, that of their internal monologue and external monologue.

The next aspect of postmodernism I will discuss is the metanarrative. A metanarrative is a story in which it is conscious of being a story, and conscious of the process of writing the story. There are quite a few instances of this in the story. One example is, “ He takes green pills, yellow pills, pills of white and capsules of dark blue and green. . . . he takes other things I may not mention, for what if Simon seeks me out and climbs into my girl’s bedroom here in Bloomfield and strangles me, what then. . . (524)?” Starting with, “ he takes other things. . . it becomes metanarration, the narrator is talking about writing the story. Another example of the metanarrative is, “ Simon has fair long hair, curly hair, spent languid curls that are like . . . exactly like the curls of wood shavings to the touch, I am trying to be exact. . .(531)” Once again this is the narrator speaking to the reader about the writing of the story. This makes the story more personal and makes us feeling that the narrator is right there. It also contributes to all the other things the other aspects have too.

As we can see the techniques (or “ non” techniques) of fractured narrative, disunified subject, disrupted time sequence, and metanarrative are aspects of a story likely to only be found in the postmodern era and are all evident in this story by Joyce Carol Oates. They are all employed to create a jagged and modern tone, a feeling that this takes place inside the mind, and an interesting presentation of suspense. Studying postmodernism is interesting to me, because we are currently in the Postmodern era. One can wonder why these changes in storytelling have come about. Partially it is the disbelief in language as a means to communicate well, and the belief in subjective truth that have contributed to this.

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One also wonders if it has to do with the fast pace television society we live in today, bringing to mind the large number of children with so called ADD disorders. The lack of coherence, and shortening, or fragmenting of communication is becoming an apparent part of the 21st century. Another theory I have that contributes to this is the move to a visual culture largely in respect to television and movies. While these things are all hard to prove, and I'm not even trying to in this paper, they are interesting points brought on by reading postmodern literature. Maybe it will take a hundred years before the patterns can really be made sense of, and then they can be analyzed and taught in English classes during the next era.