
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fragmentation and Discontinuity in Hyper-Text Literature: A Study of Michael Joyce's Afternoon, a Story

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| ABSTRACT

The present study is concerned with Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987), as one of the fundamental works of hypertext fiction which plays a crucial role in the evolution of digital literature. It investigates how fragmentation and discontinuity function within a literary text; they are not merely seen as stylistic devices but structural principles. The study argues that *Afternoon* transforms fragmentation into an epistemological condition through an analysis rooted in poststructuralist theory and media studies. The paper also analyzes the way Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* decentralizes narrative authority, subverts chronological order, and redefines the role of the reader through embedding discontinuity into its digital form. Therefore, fragmentation and discontinuity are essential elements that are meant to reflect significant transition and systematic shifts in narrative forms in the digital age.

| KEYWORDS

"*Afternoon, a Story*", discontinuity, fragmentation, hypertext fiction, post- structuralism.

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1. Introduction and Background

The emergence of hypertext literature marks a decisive shift in the evolution of narrative practice, fundamentally changing established conceptions of textual structure, authorship, and readership. Unlike the sequential logic that produces chronological print narrative, hypertext literature is structured through networks of linked "lexias" that privilege multiplicity, discontinuity, and fragmentation. The late twentieth century witnessed a profound shift in literary production with the emergence of hypertext fiction. Enabled by digital technology, hypertext literature challenges traditional print conventions by replacing linear progression with networks of linked textual fragments. In contrast to traditional print narratives which create a sequential order of events, "hypertext narratives allow readers to navigate multiple pathways, producing unique reading experiences with each traversal" (Landow, 2006).

In the 1960s, the term "hypertext" was coined by the American philosopher, Ted Nelson, in an attempt to describe "non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader" (Nelson, 1992, p.2). Hypertext is not purely technological and did not exist in a vacuum; it evolved as a result of the continuous interaction between poststructuralist narratives and techniques and the development of digital computing. The theoretical framework suggested by poststructuralism combined with postmodern techniques such as nonlinearity and fragmentation found tangible representation and expression in emerging technologies. Consequently, storytelling or narrative was "reconceptualized not as a linear, predetermined progression but as a dynamic, interactive network shaped by reader navigation" (Landow, 2006; Bolter, 2001).

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The study sheds light on the way hypertext connects to poststructuralist theories, particularly those of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Both authors emphasize nonlinearity of the narrative and highlight the reader agency. For example, Barthes's concept of the "writerly text," "which invites active reader participation" (Barthes, 1974) finds practical application in hypertext fiction. Similarly, Derrida's notion of decentered text and meaning corresponds to hypertext's rejection of traditional, linear narrative structure. Landow (2006) argues that hypertext "embodies many of the ideas and attitudes proposed by Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and others" (p. 3). This study explores Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987) as one of the pioneering digital works, in accordance with historical circumstances which help in facilitating the development of hypertext fiction, placing it within both digital innovation and literary experimentation of postmodernism. It also contends that hypertext fiction not only breaks up linear narrative conventions, but also reevaluates the modes of reading and writing in the digital era. Jay David Bolter (2001) explains that "digital writing represents a "remediation" of print, meaning that new media refashion older media forms. Hypertext does not eliminate print narrative but transforms its structural logic." (26)

1.2. Hypertext and Postmodernism

Hypertext fiction and postmodernism have a lot in common; in fact, they share many characteristics such as fragmentation, uncertainty, and metafiction. For example, metafiction, as Waugh (1984) puts it, is a fiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact" (p. 2). On her part, Linda Hutcheon explains that postmodern texts are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). It means that metafiction in those narratives intentionally reminds the reader that fiction is an artistic creation, like in those postmodern texts which use frame narratives or a story within a story and present multiple narrators to question the truth behind the text like in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* which is built on a complex frame narrative. Italo Calvino and other writers such as Thomas Pynchon contributed to nonlinear narratives before hypertext became widespread. While these fragmented print narratives reproduce fragmentation and narrative self-consciousness, "hypertext operationalizes it through clickable links and computational structure" (Bolter, 2001).

1.3. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Post-structuralism and Decentered Meaning

For poststructuralists, meaning is lost and often decentered; they reject unified narrative structures and fixed meanings in literary texts. Thus, post-structuralism is a movement that "questions the objectivity or stability of the various interpretive structures that are posited by structuralism and considers them to be constituted by broader systems of power" (Lewis, 1982, 12). Unlike the assumption of structuralism which argues that meaning is fixed and stable, poststructuralist theorists, such as Derrida argue that "meaning is always deferred within a system of differences." (Derrida, 1976) he adds that "meaning is not present in a stable form but emerges through difference within a system of signs (Derrida, p. 62). He further explains that *différance* involves both "Difference and Deferral"; this is meant to describe relation between signs and meaning; meaning is shifting and always postponed and changed; it is never fully present, but it is almost relational and in a kind of process.

Based on the principles of poststructural theory, meaning is always shifting and not fixed; and it is the responsibility of the reader to find the meaning; Barthes proclaims the "death of the author," asserting that "interpretation resides with the reader rather than the writer" (Barthes, 1977). This is actually in line with what hypertext reflects since it rejects linear narratives and challenges fixed meanings through clicking a link which would direct the reader to another point or text, there would be no fixed meaning, thus the reader is seen the producer of meaning and "actively participate in constructing narrative sequences" (ibid). In the light of poststructural theory, this paper shows how meaning is shifting and almost lost In *Afternoon* due to its non-linear narratives and lexias which make it a fragmented narrative-something more of a network than a line.

2. Discussion

2.1. Fragmentation and discontinuity in Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*.

Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* is classified as a hypertext story which reflects the influence of digital fiction and the way it creates a crucial change in the structure of narrative through fragmentation, discontinuity and multiplicity. While conventional printed storytelling focuses on linear development of plot, Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* consists of "lexias" or text units connected electronically making the reader to get across the narrative in a non-sequential way. The present study discusses the way Joyce's work use of fragmentation and narrative discontinuity reflects uncertainty and the lack of narrative authority; instead of creating a

chronological form of narrative as in conventional printed storytelling, it creates chaotic form of narrative placing the responsibility on the reader to construct the meaning. Based on the theoretical contributions of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, the study places Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* within both digital and post-structural contexts.

To begin with, Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* does not contain specific chapters or printed pages; instead, it includes 'lexias' connected through hyperlinks. This form does not only allow the reader to go through the texts, but it also results in multilinear perspective as it breaks linear and traditional storytelling sequence. As George P. Landow (2006) explains that hypertext "breaks the linearity of print by organizing text as a network of relations" (p. 2) lexias which are connected by hypertext produce a fragmented form, thus the reader does not encounter a unified text form, but more of discontinuous units whose tone and perspective keeps shifting. For instance, one lexia in Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*, says "I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning" (Joyce, 1987) recurs in several contexts and creates narrative discontinuity and instability.

Discontinuity and fragmentation are closely related to the thematic significance of the text. The protagonist's struggle is never resolved; Peter's suspicions that his ex-wife and their son have been involved in a car accident are never clarified. There are no specific answers to his inner conflict due to the multiplicity and fragmentary nature presented in Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*. There is no single unified plot; instead, there are contradictory events which result in indeterminacy and shifting in meaning, which is in line with Jacques Derrida's "difference, the idea that meaning is always deferred and constituted through differences rather than fixed presence (Derrida, 1978). Similarly, Joyce's text consists of lexias separated by gaps; each lexia present a single perspective, and the gaps allow more interpretation on the part of the readers, thus, there is no single meaning to rely on, but fragmentations and more revisions.

Unlike traditional narratives in which the author plays a vital role in shaping the thematic significance of the text, Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* gives space to the reader as if the author is dead. While the former follows a chronological sequence and single unified plot, the latter allows the reader to move through different links, thus he/she would decide the order of events. This interpretative activity of places responsibility on the reader; he/she is the producer of meaning. As Barthes (1977) suggests, "the writerly text invites the reader to "produce" rather than simply "consume" meaning". Joyce's narrative and its fragmentations demonstrate this shift, since each path for each lexia produces a different version of the narrative, subverting the authority of the author.

In fact, digital hypertext itself strongly impact fragmentation and discontinuity in Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*; it is a technological medium that shapes its fragmented and nonlinear narrative through segments and lexias. Hayles (2008) maintains that "electronic literature foregrounds the materiality of its medium, making the processes of reading and navigation integral to the text's meaning (p. 25). In Joyce's work, the reader is engaged in defining the meaning through clicking and the frequent visits of lexias; this technique which is never used in print narratives highlights readers' interactivity within a digital technological environment.

2.2. Linear vs. Non-Linear: Time and Memory

In linear narratives, the reader is able to explore specific topics and analyze themes within specific context, following a chronological order. In contrast, Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*, readers are not allowed to find a specific path where causes lead to effects due to its fragmented, non-linear progression. Unlike linear progression that we often find in traditional print narratives, Joyce's work includes a cyclical, temporal progression due to its "lexias" which can make readers move backwards and forward creating disorder and confusion. More importantly, Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* can never have a unified structure since it is based on the memory of its protagonist; it relies on his recollections and memory which are also fragmented and loose. As Brian McHale (1987) writes, "postmodern narratives often foreground ontological uncertainty, questioning the nature of reality itself" (McHale, 1987). In *Afternoon, a Story*, readers often get lost; they can never identify whether events are real, unreal, or forgotten.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Afternoon, a Story* reflects a wider literary and technological shift due to its non-linear hypertext structure which contributes a lot to digital literature. It anticipates the rapid increase and development that occurred in digital media and storytelling. As a hypertext work, *Afternoon, a Story*, it embodies principles and aspects of poststructuralist literature whose language does accurately reflect reality, its meaning is shakable, and its author is no longer central. As Landow (2006) observes, "hypertext embodies the principles of poststructuralist theory by decentering authority and emphasizing the interconnectedness of textual elements" (p2-15).

Like many poststructuralist texts, *Afternoon, a Story* shows that meaning is unstable and strongly shakable; neither the author nor texts have an authoritative unified voice. Instead, it consists of ironic and contradictory parts or "lexias" which have become the only defining features and signs that exist in an endless chain. Readers can never find a specific narrative sequence nor can they reach resolution or ending.

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