

Anne Tyler's *the Accidental Tourist*: a Postmodernist Study

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to render a postmodernist reading of Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*. After an introduction to postmodernism, the novel will be analyzed within a postmodernist frame to show that it's a postmodernist work.*

Keywords: postmodernism; reaction; silence; binary opposition; self-reflexivity; reference; difference

Introduction

The term postmodernism has been the subject of heated debates. It was first coined, Nicol contends, in the 1940s to describe a reaction against modernism in architecture. As regards its use, Nicol adds, it began to be widely used in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators, especially Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler who wanted to describe a new trend in literature that either rejected modernist techniques or adapted or extended them. In the following decades, the term postmodernism began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history (p.1). Like Sontag and Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, an American critic, used this term to specify certain tendencies in literature in the 1960s. To take an example, in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1982), Hassan argues that “the postmodern spirit ... is not really a matter of chronology” (p.139). Regarding the relationship between postmodernism and literary criticism, he claims that the postmodern is not simply a major cultural shift; it also involves a new relationship between humans and the milieu.

As a literary trend, postmodernism succeeds modernism. It is, Hooti (2011) claims, “a dramatic deviation of man's thought line; it is a renaissance towards breaking the fossilized shackles of the prescribed norms and notions, which have changed into economic and political institutions” (40). Hooti adds that postmodernism is

“...a new era of endeavor whose activities are unclear and whose meanings and implications are not yet well understood” (41). In a post-modernist fiction, everything exists, Lewis (2001) maintains, “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” (123). Commenting on the characteristics of this type of fiction, Lewis adds that the “conventions of verisimilitude and sanity [are nullified]” and that “characters inhabit a dimension of structure less 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” (123).

Lewis is saying that the postmodern novel does not hold up a mirror to reality, and that it is not a copy of the external world. Arguing in support of this contention, Waugh (1984) holds that postmodern fiction can “never imitate or ‘represent’ the world but always imitates or ‘represents’ the discourses which in turn construct that world” (100). Emphasizing the fictional world of postmodern fiction, Lodge (1992) holds that postmodern novel is “fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures” (206). The reason underlying postmodernists' attitude towards the external world is that they believe that there is no reality to be reflected, no absolute truth, and that the universe itself has no center. For these reasons, meaning and coherence, to them, do not exist in the world or the text. This stand renders postmodernists closer to the advocates of post-structural theory of literature who refuse to accept, Norris (1982) argues, “the natural link that common sense assumes to exist between word and thing” (4).

Poststructuralists believe that signifiers have no definite signifieds, and that signifieds are legion, which is conducive to a multiplicity of meanings which cannot be grasped because there is no fixed intellectual reference in the world where we live. This multiplicity of meanings connected with the myriad signifieds can be equated with indeterminacy which is a marker of any postmodern novel.

Discussion

To take an example, Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* is a postmodern novel for several reasons. The first reason is that this novel reflects the absurdity of life. The central character, Macon, realizes that his life is meaningless, and has difficulty finding meaning in it. The result is that he resorts to routine to make his life orderly and stable. Sarah, his wife, refers to these routines that make her husband's life depressing. Addressing Macon, she says: "You just go on your same old way like before. Your little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day by day. No comfort at all" (3). When Ethan dies, routines do Macon no good, and totally fail to soothe him. Lacking relief, he becomes depressed and withdraws from the world around him. Macon's behavior is typical of humans. So many fathers act the same way Macon does when they lose their sons. In other words, Macon is an ordinary character. This ordinariness of Macon's, Charles's, Sarah's, Julian's, Muriel's, Alexander's, Rose's, and Alicia's characters is a postmodern characteristic, and constitutes the second reason for the contention that Tyler's novel is postmodern. *The Accidental Tourist* gives an extraordinary insight into the lives of ordinary middle-class individuals who are on a quest for their identities, and have obligations toward their families. These individuals do their best to strike the necessary balance between their dire need for identity and their obligations toward their families that are largely in decline. To take an example, Macon, the central character writes travel guides to businessmen who are reluctant to travel, and instructs them on how to travel without feeling that they have left home. He fails to maintain his family after the murder of his son, Ethan. His wife, Sarah, asks for divorce because she does not hold him to be a "comfort" (3). Justifying that, she addresses him, arguing that she "just can't live with [him] anymore" (4). Sarah's asking that she be divorced breaks up marriage and gives rise to the collapse of the family, which comprises the third marker of postmodernism.

Commenting on family disintegration which seems to be in full vigor in the novel, Robertson contends that [Tyler's] assault on the notion of what is a proper family makes her close in spirit to other postmodernists who regularly engage in what might be called category assassination, questioning just about every conventional distinction between one concept and another that we use to order our lives and thought (192). As regards family decline, Tyler clearly demonstrates that divorce breaks up not only Macon's family but also Charles's and Porter's families. She probably wants to draw the attention of those in power to this serious problem whose consequences are certainly grave. Obviously, divorce impacts not only wives and husbands but also children and the society where they live. Just as divorce destroys society, so does the television set. Tyler hints at the role of TV. She makes it clear that television is an enslaving and destructive force in the society. Tyler's narrator describes Macon's "nights" as being "terrible" (14). Giving a reason for this description, he says: "It wasn't that he had trouble getting to sleep in the first place. That was easy. He'd watch TV till his eyes burned" (14). The word "burned" shows the discomfort or pain Macon undergoes as a result of watching TV. This discomfort itself reflects not only Macon's obsession with watching TV but also the impact that the television set has on his life. Reckoning with Macon's obsession with TV and the impact that it has upon his life, it can be safely said that humans of whom Macon is one are losing control of their technologies, which is the fourth reason for the claim that Tyler's novel is postmodern.

These uncontrollable technologies that are widely used are double-edged. They can be either a blessing or a curse. To take an example, Macon sat, on a flight to New York, "next to a foreign-looking man with a mustache. Clamped to the man's ears was a headset for one of those miniature tape recorders. Perfect: no danger of conversation. Macon leaned back in his seat contentedly...The man beside him took off his headset to order a Bloody Mary. A tinny, intricate Middle Eastern music came whispering out of the pink sponge earplugs. Macon stared down at the little machine and wondered if he should buy one. Not for the music, heaven knows – there was far too much noise in the world already – but for insulation. He could plug himself into it and no one would disturb him. He could play a blank tape: thirty full minutes of silence" (30). This quotation shows how technology can work both ways: it brings about a disturbing noise, and it can, at the same time, minimize the contact between a passenger and another. Technology creates "insulation" between Macon and the other passenger from the Middle East. It also facilitates Macon's traveling from one place to another, and helps him perform his domestic duties at home.

Whereas he travels to Paris and England by air, he travels to other places by car and by train. When Macon was, for instance, at Heathrow airport in London, he sailed, without waiting for his luggage, “through the red tape far ahead of others,” “exchanged his currency and boarded the Underground”(33). Addressing Muriel and justifying his dire need for one to look after Edward, Macon maintains: “I’m about to catch a plane. I’m leaving for a week, and I don’t have a soul to look after him. I’m desperate, I tell you” (28). Macon also uses various machines at home. While he slips in the washing trolley, breaking his leg, a cat gets caught in the dryer vent. On another occasion, Macon adjusts the air conditioner’s controls to help Edward, his dog, feel better(25). In addition to showing that humans are losing control of their technologies, Tyler’s narrative style is the fifth marker of postmodernism. The novel is simple and flows smoothly. It is written in a simple language which makes it easy for readers to read and understand it. Besides simplicity, Tyler employs irony which is a hallmark of postmodernism and facilitates readers’ getting the writer’s message, knowing about the theme, and distinguishing between appearance and reality. The type of irony used in the novel is called irony of situation which occurs “when there is,” Angela Janovsky argues, “incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens”(Study.com). This irony occurs in Tyler’s narrator’s description of Macon who is “seated in a stenographer’s chair, tapping away at a typewriter that had served him through four years of college; he wrote a series of guidebooks for people forced to travel on business”. The irony in this quotation is that Macon composes a series of travel guidebooks despite his hatred for traveling. He has used the typewriter during the four years of college that has helped him through his work; now he is helping others with the typewriter by writing guidebooks for businessmen unwilling to travel. Readers don’t expect Macon that writes these guidebooks to hate to travel. This expectation is not congruous with reality. Macon’s reluctance to travel falls short of readers’ expectations. This situation is ironic because Macon who writes guidebooks for travelers is taken to be attracted to traveling, but in reality he is not for traveling; he hates to travel.

Besides employing irony, Tyler, who chooses Baltimore to be the setting, gives Macon, the central character, the opportunity to travel to other cities, such as New York, Paris, and London. Macon’s travels to these cities obviously shows that place is not fixed, which suggests that *The Accidental Tourist* is a postmodern novel. These travels also indicate that Macon is dissatisfied with his life, that he means to find a secure place in the external world for himself, and that he rejects the limitations on the self. Furthermore, these travels help Macon create a new space for him, and they’re double layered. Besides having an outward focus, Macon’s travels have an inward focus. They are personal in nature, and focus on self-discovery. Commenting on this aspect of travels, Mortimer describes it, in *Journeys Through the French African Novel*, as “the journey to self-understanding”(117). Remarking about this argument, Krishnamurthy maintains, in *Journeys of Self-Exploration in Ken Bugul’s Le Baobab Fou*, that this characterization of the journey motif “strongly suggests the links between journey and identity, and is indicative of the importance of journey as a means to self-awareness”(117). Krishnamurthy’s contention is both reasonable and acceptable because traveling is a journey that does two jobs of which self-discovery is one, and fleeing the restrictions confining freedom is another. This argument seems to be true of Macon who is on a quest for his identity, and whose journeying reflects his restlessness, dissatisfaction, and confusion.

Conclusion:

It has been demonstrated that Tyler’s *The Accidental Tourist* is a postmodern novel for several reasons. Firstly, this novel focuses on Macon’s journey of self-discovery which is an inner problem. Secondly, it reflects the absurdity of Macon’s life. Thirdly, the characters in the novel are ordinary humans. Fourthly, humans are losing control of their technologies. Fifthly, the narrative style of the novel is simple. Sixthly, the use of irony. Seventhly, the notion of place is not fixed.

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