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Postmodernism's Unique Structure

Postmodernism is one of the most unique literary movements because of the unorthodox topics covered in works, but also because of the unorthodox style of writing that postmodern authors employ within their works. This radical difference between postmodernism and other literary periods exists because of postmodernism's challenging of other movements in order to create work unlike any other from any other period. The unique narrative structure seen in postmodern works not only provides the reader with a radically different form of reading than what is seen in traditional novels, but this unorthodox style of writing also serves the purpose of adding an extra layer to the story that the author is conveying to the reader. The postmodern narrative structure, as seen in the works *On a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino, *Briar Rose* by Robert Coover, and *Ava* by Carole Maso, is formed through the use of short vignettes to form the story in a way that is fragmented, a skewed chronology of the events in the novel, and ambiguous endings that both do and do not offer a sense of finality.

Instead of using the traditional style of the use of chapters in order to craft a novel, postmodern writers often employ short vignettes to move their stories along, although the chronology is often skewed. Even though Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* seems to be written in a traditional narrative form for a novel with the use of chapters, once one reads the novel, it is easily noticeable that the chapters do not flow naturally like the chapters of a traditional, linear novel would. For instance, Calvino ends "Chapter One" addressing the main character, which is you, the reader, instructing that "you are ready to attack the first lines of the first page" (Calvino 9) as the character in the novel, "you," as well as the literal reader of the

novel begin reading. The unique postmodern form of structuring the narrative is quickly seen as the next chapter begins (which is not titled “Chapter Two,” but instead titled “If on a winter’s night a traveler”) with the telling of a completely different story than the story that began in “Chapter One.” Calvino, instead of continuing his novel about a reader reading a book, starts a completely different novel by telling the reader that “the novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter” (Calvino 10). This new chapter does not correlate with the events in the previous chapter, which shows the skewed internal chronology within Calvino’s novel; however, the novel is arguably in a chronological order on the external level. It is at this point in the novel that it is clear that Calvino uses vignettes instead of traditional chapters in his novel because the previous section of the work (“Chapter One”) does not relate to the current section of the work (“If on a winter’s night a traveler”). After the vignette titled “If on a winter’s night a traveler,” the third vignette titled “Chapter Two” begins with Calvino addressing the main character (as well as the literal reader of the novel) by mentioning that, “You have now read about thirty pages and you’re becoming caught up in the story” (Calvino 25) right as he interrupts the story once more in order to steer the storyline in its original direction. The almost seamless connection between the last words of “Chapter One” and the first words of “Chapter Two” show the external chronology of Calvino’s novel because if the reader were to read strictly just the numbered chapters, leaving out the titled chapters, the reader would notice the traditional linear structure of a novel instead of the inconsistent and skewed chronology that is seen if Calvino’s novel is read from the first page to the last as it is intended to be read. Within *If on a winter’s night a traveler* is seen the uniqueness of the postmodern narrative form in the short vignettes that do not chronologically follow each

other as they are placed in the novel but work together in order to form the novel's overall external chronology.

Robert Coover in his novella *Briar Rose* also employs short vignettes and nontraditional chronology in order to craft his postmodern piece. The vignettes sometimes follow through chronologically, but like Calvino's novel, Coover uses both external and internal chronology in order to move the storyline along. Internal chronology is seen during an encounter with Rose and the dark fairy when the dark fairy proclaims that she wants to "tell [Rose] a story" (Coover 49). At this point in the novella, this one vignette ends and another vignette follows starting with "once upon a time" (Coover 49), continuing the dark fairy's wish of telling a story to Rose. Because these two fragmented vignettes come directly after one another, they show Coover's use of internal chronology; however, because not all of the vignettes are placed in chronological order within the novella, externally the novella is not chronological and follows more of a circular line of chronology instead of a traditional linear line. During another one of the dark fairy's stories to Rose, she mentions that Sleeping Beauty and the prince could have had an enjoyable life together "if it hadn't been for the jealous wives" (19). Only three short pages after this story, the evil fairy repeats these same words almost exactly while once again telling Rose that Sleeping Beauty and the prince "*might* have lived happily ever after...if it hadn't been for his jealous wife" (22). The repetition of these words forms the circular external chronology of the novella because by repeating the same words (from two different vignettes that are separated in the novel by a vignette unrelated to either), Coover shows the reader that the order in which the events in the novel occur in the vignettes is not as important as the stories happening within each individual vignette. Through the use of internal and external chronology, as well as a

multitude of vignettes that sometimes pair with one another but can also stand alone, Coover crafts his novella in the narrative form that is unique to postmodernism.

Like Calvino and Coover, Carole Maso also employs the use of vignettes and internal and external chronology to steer her novel, *Ava*; however, Maso takes the postmodern style of the vignette and makes her work even more postmodern by deconstructing the vignette. Maso does this in order to structure her work into miniature vignettes often only comprised of a single sentence. Through these minuscule vignettes, Maso sets up her novel to be without internal chronology, which fits in with the postmodern narrative form. The lack of internal chronology can be seen when Ava references through her thoughts the time when she and her husband at the time “carved [their] names Ava et Anatole and drew a heart” (Maso 157) into a tree. This memory of Ava’s second husband is closely followed by a memory of her current lover when she remembers when “Danilo’s brother calls to say he has opened a new artists’ space in Prague” (Maso 158). These two vignettes show the lack of internal chronology within the novel because the first memory is not only a memory of Ava’s second husband and the later a memory of her current lover, but the two memories do not relate to each other in any way. Although the novel does not move along with internal chronology, like Calvino and Coover’s respective novels, *Ava* also follows some form of external chronology. Through the separation of the novel in three sections titled “Morning,” “Afternoon,” and “Night,” Maso creates the external chronology of the novel by writing Ava’s thoughts as they happen throughout the day. Even though the memories that Ava has do not follow the chronological order in which they happen in Ava’s life, the exterior of the novel is still chronologically written because the novel is the documentation of Ava’s thoughts throughout the day as she has them. Through the use of deconstructed vignettes

and skewed chronology, Maso's novel, *Ava*, is an excellent example of postmodern narrative structure.

Another characteristic of the postmodern narrative structure is the element of ambiguity of the endings of the works. Even though the endings of these three works lack finality, they still offer a solid ending by suggesting the continuation of the characters even though the novel is finished. Calvino ends *If on a winter's night a traveler* with the main character exclaiming to his wife that he is "almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (Calvino 260). Although this suggests an ambiguous ending, the reader can still find solace in the ending because the main character, you, the reader, finally solves the mystery of the novel that he spends the duration of the novel searching for and ultimately reaches his goal of winning the girl, Ludmilla. Since, in a way, the character's lives are just beginning, the continuation of the narrative is suggested, which is different from the solid endings of traditional novels not part of postmodern literature. Just like *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Coover's novella *Briar Rose* also has some ambiguity in its ending, but it still suggests the carrying on of the characters' lives within the story. Coover ends his novella with Rose telling one of the many princes that visit her throughout the novella to "tenderly if you can, toothily if need be, take this spindled pain away..." (Coover 86). With the use of the ellipses at the end of the quote, Coover suggests that the story continues, whether it be that this prince is finally the one that will save Rose or that she will continue to be trapped by the dark fairy. Although this ending is ambiguous because it leaves the reader wondering if this final prince is the one who will save Rose, it still serves as a proper postmodern ending to this postmodern narrative because of the ambiguity and the suggestion of the continuation of the story.

Unlike *If on a winter's night a traveler* and *Briar Rose*, *Ava* has somewhat of a finite ending, though still ambiguous. Since throughout the novel the reader reads all of the thoughts that Ava has throughout the last day of her life, when the novel ends with “You are ravishing” (Maso 265), the reader can assume that here is where Ava’s story stops because that is the last thought she has while living. Even though the reader does not know for sure if Ava has passed away or not at the end of the novel, the need to “find a cure” (248) is referenced several times throughout the novel, as well as the rare blood disease that Ava suffers from. Knowing that Ava suffers from a rare illness and the fact that her thoughts simply stop at the end of the novel, the reader is offered a finite ending to Ava’s story, although the ambiguity still lies in who Ava thinks is ravishing or who she is remembering called her ravishing.

Through the three works *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino, *Briar Rose* by Robert Coover, and *Ava* by Carole Maso, a definitive postmodern narrative structure is seen. Calvino’s unorthodox way of titling the vignettes he writes and the order in which he places them within the novel works to camouflage the external chronology of the novel. Coover’s use of short vignettes works to highlight the circular chronology of his novella through the use of both internal and external chronology. Maso’s deconstruction of vignettes into single sentences works to make the postmodern narrative form even more characteristically postmodern along with her use of external chronology and the abandonment of internal chronology. All three works arguably have some sort of ambiguous ending, but they also allow the reader to see that although the novel ends literally, it does not necessarily end figuratively. Through the use of vignettes, skewed chronology, and ambiguous yet solid endings, the postmodern narrative structure is created.

Works Cited

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