**“Ambivalent Parody”: The Question of Genre in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot***

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**Abstract**: The present paper attempts to examine the ways in which ambivalent parody manifests itself in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) by focusing on the treatment of one of the genres, metafictional novel, into which the novel can be categorized. The paper contributes to the discussion on the novel’s multi-generic nature and argues that the parody manifested in this literary worklies in the duality of following and subverting the expectations that have been associated with the genre of the metafictional novel. Finally, by relying on the close connection between parody and deconstruction, the paper endeavours to illustrate how the interpretation of the parody present in the novel is possible within the theoretical framework of deconstruction.

**Keywords**: parody, metafiction, deconstruction, multi-generic

**Introduction**

The primary intent of this paper is to examine the ways in which ambivalent parody manifests itself in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) by focusing on the treatment of one of the genres, metafictional novel, into which the novel can be categorized. I attempt to demonstrate that the essentially parodic nature of this literary worklies in the duality of following and subverting the generic expectations that are being created in the reader all through the reading process. Finally, by relying on the close connection between parody and deconstruction, I am going to illustrate how the parody present in *Flaubert’s Parrot* can be interpreted within the theoretical framework of deconstruction.

**The Question of Genre in *Flaubert’s Parrot***

At first sight, when talking about a single literary work, the word ‘genre(s)’ as written above may seem to be rather puzzling with respect to the plural suffix in parentheses. However, as soon as one has finished reading Julian Barnes’s novel, it becomes entirely clear what the reason is for using the plural form of the noun, since, as many critics have already pointed out, *Flaubert’s Parrot* is of a “multi-generic” nature exhibiting the characteristic features of such subgenres of the novel as the biographical, the autobiographical and the metafictional novel (Holmes 78).

Yet, the fact that readers acknowledge the presence of a multiplicity of genres in the novel does not prevent them from wondering how it is possible for a single literary work to be categorized into more than one genre at the same time, especially if they take into consideration the definition of this literary term: “[a] literary genre is a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind” (Baldick 105). In other words, any genre is shaped to a great extent by expectations concerning the form, the content, the style, the characters, the events, and even the outcomes of that particular type of composition. On the one hand, such expectations can help writers in the production of their works, as they are directed by the literary tradition which does not let them deviate from the conventionally accepted usage of their chosen genre in an arbitrary manner. Furthermore, the expectations can also act as guides to the readers; they can give readers a clue as to how they should read the composition, what they should be looking for in it. Considering this latter role of expectations, it seems to be quite obvious that the multiplicity of genres present in a single literary work does everything but giving clues to the reader about the meaning or the message they should be after. As “readers are left awash in a sea of possibilities,” they have “no solid ground on which to base their interpretations” (Beyers 84).

The interpretative task assigned to the reader is problematized not only by the simultaneous presence of a multiplicity of genres but also by the parodic treatment of each of the genres, by following and subverting generic expectations. In the following section, I would like to illustrate how *Flaubert’s Parrot* fulfils or fails to fulfil the expectations that have been associated with the genre of the metafictional novel.

***Flaubert’s Parrot* as a metafictional novel**

According to Patricia Waugh’s definition,

[m]etafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. . . . Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. (2, 6)

Although the term “‘metafiction’ might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself . . . metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels” (Waugh 5).

In accordance with the expectations of the device, discussions about what Szigeti identifies as the “problematic nature of the relationship of representation and reality (word and world, sign and signified)” (135–136) permeate almost all chapters of Barnes’s novel. Braithwaite tends to emphasize the fallacy of all those characteristics of fictional works that are in apparent contrast with what can be found in real life. He harshly criticizes, for instance, the postmodern habit of offering alternative endings to a novel on the grounds that this simple solution does not reflect the difficulty of making serious and irreversible choices in life:

When the writer provides two different endings to his novel (why two? why not a hundred?), does the reader seriously imagine he is being ‘offered a choice’ and that the work is reflecting life’s variable outcomes? Such a ‘choice’ is never real, because the reader is obliged to consume both endings. In life, we make a decision – or a decision makes us – and we go one way; had we made a different decision . . . we would have been elsewhere. The novel with two endings doesn’t reproduce this reality: it merely takes us down two diverging paths. (99)

Furthermore, in the chapter entitled “Cross Channel,” Braithwaite lists those kinds of novels which he would ban from the literary stage partly on account of their simplicity. He writes: “[t]here shall be no more novels in which a group of people, isolated by circumstances, revert to the ‘natural condition’ of man, become essential, poor, bare, forked creatures” (110). In order to put an end to this genre, Braithwaite writes the last such short story. At the end he comments: “[y]ou see how easy it is to write, how much fun it is? That’s why I’d ban the genre” (111).

The idea of books being the simplified and clear-cut versions of real lives resurfaces throughout the novel, most apparently in the chapter entitled “Pure Story,” in which Braithwaite comments on the questionably soothing quality of books: “Books say: she did this because. Life says: she did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren’t. I’m not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people’s lives, never your own” (201).

Despite the fact that Braithwaite recognizes and constantly reflects on the inappropriate nature of books as explanations of one’s life, in order to make sense of his own domestic life he also utilizes books as sense-making devices. By collecting as much information as possible concerning Flaubert, Braithwaite tries to create a coherent narrative, an explanatory pattern of Flaubert’s life that would account for Braithwaite’s own existence and personal tragedy. However, as Braithwaite himself is very much aware of this, the relating of someone else’s life will never be able to create a meta-narrative that would impose a comprehensive and unquestionable meaning on one’s own life.

The fact that there is an opposition between Braithwaite’s judgements and his actions concerning literature in general proves that *Flaubert’s Parrot* can be taken as a mock metafictional novel. Another example supporting this interpretation can be found in the opposition between Braithwaite’s view on coincidences and Barnes’s employment of this literary device. The narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan calls attention to the multi-level functioning of the plot:

[i]n narrative, plot exists on two levels: the plotting of the author, who creates the storyline; and the plotting of the characters, who set goals, devise plans, schemes and conspiracies, and try to arrange events to their advantage. The plotting of both author and characters is meant to exercise control: for the author, control over the reader, who must undergo a certain experience; for the characters, control over other characters and over the randomness of life. But sometimes the goals of the author are at odds with the goals of characters. (56)

In her essay “Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design,” Ryan proposes to investigate the “plot twists that arise from this conflict between author and character goals,” one of which “involves an active intervention by the author, an attempt to fix the problem” through what she calls “cheap plot tricks” (56). These are narrative clichés, events that look forced upon and seem “to be borrowed ready-made from a bag of tricks” (Ryan 57). The literary device of coincidence is considered to be such a “cheap plot trick” by Ryan, since “[t]he degree of probability of a coincidence is inversely proportional to the size of the pool of events that are possible in a certain situation” (58). This argument seems to be echoed by Braithwaite in the novel:

And as for coincidences in books – there’s something cheap and sentimental about the device; it can’t help always seeming aesthetically gimcrack. . . . One way of legitimizing coincidences, of course, is to call them ironies. . . . I wonder if the wittiest, most resonant irony isn’t just a well-brushed, well-educated coincidence. (71)

Indeed, the “cheap plot trick” of coincidence appears in the novel in a highly ironic way. Beside the three short anecdotes from Flaubert’s life which involve coincidences, the plot trick appears in the novel in an implicit way as well. In the third chapter Braithwaite gives us an account of his first meeting with Ed Winterton: “I first met Ed Winterton when he put his hand on mine in the Europe Hotel. . . . It was at a provincial booksellers’ fair and I had reached a little more quickly than he for the same copy of Turgenev’s *Literary Reminiscences*. The conjunction induced immediate apologies, as embarrassed on his side as they were on mine” (35). In this short passage, the word “conjunction” is extremely telling in itself, suggesting that the meeting between the two men was quite accidental. The way coincidence is employed in this case stands in opposition to the role allocated to the device in theoretical formulations, such as Ryan’s: the “highly improbable spatial and temporal convergence of life paths” usually serves “the interests of the story and the goals of the author” at the same time (59). As opposed to this, however, Barnes’s novel applies this literary device to create a stumbling block for the protagonist who is unable to make progress in discovering the truth about Flaubert’s relationship with Juliet Herbert.

All in all, it can be concluded that *Flaubert’s Parrot* undermines the genre of the metafictional novel by maintaining some of its chief characteristics but at the same time twisting the tradition.

**Parody and Deconstruction in *Flaubert’s Parrot***

By both following and subverting the conventions of the metafictional novel Barnes creates in his *Flaubert’s Parrot* an ambivalent parody. The word parody (“a mocking imitation of the style of a literary work” (Baldick 185)) is derived from the Greek *parōidia* (counter-song), a compound word made up of *para* (against) and *aidein* (to sing). However, by taking the second meaning of *para* (besides) into consideration, *parōidia* can also be considered to denote a neighbouring song (Hutcheon *A Theory* 32). On the basis of this duality, Hutcheon claims that parody is inherently antithetical in nature, since it “paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (*A Poetics* 11). The “repetition with critical difference” (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 7) that lies at the heart of parody is implied in the novel by the generic expectations parodied and the “new incorporating work” (32). It is important to note here that if the incorporation of genre expectations did not happen, there would be no possibility for parody to work at all, since parody, being inherently antithetical in nature, relies as much on incorporation as on differentiation.

The duality of incorporation and differentiation observable in parody constitutes the theoretical basis of deconstructionas well. In fact, the similarity between the way parody operates and the view deconstruction adopts on language and reality is so strong that it made some critics argue “that they are secretly the same thing” (Phiddian 681). If we take the suggestion that the practice of parody and deconstruction are essentially the same at face value, the fact that *Flaubert’s Parrot* is ripe for interpretation within the theoretical framework of deconstruction can hardly be doubted.

Deconstruction is often considered as a theory that “subverts almost everything in the tradition, putting in question received ideas of the sign and language, the text, the context, the author, the reader, the role of history, the work of interpretation, and the forms of critical writing” (Leitch qtd. in Ellis 260). On the basis of this supposedly anti-revolutionary nature of deconstruction, critics argue that deconstruction is “another version of New Criticism’s traditional methodology of close reading” (Nealon 1266). As opposed to the New Critics, however, who totalize “the text by offering an all-inclusive meaning or interpretation,” deconstructionist are said to totalize it “in exactly the opposite way – simply denying meaning or interpretation by showing how oppositions in the text cancel themselves out” (Nealon 1267). Culler argues that “[i]n undoing the oppositions on which it relies and between which it urges the reader to choose, the text places the reader in an impossible situation that cannot end in triumph but only in an outcome already deemed inappropriate: an unwarranted choice or a failure to choose” (81).

It is important to note, however, that in his writings Jacques Derrida warns against conceiving of deconstruction simply as a process towards the neutralization of oppositions:

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces. (Derrida “Signature” 329)

Thus, for Derrida, deconstruction cannot end in neutralization in which binary oppositions cancel each other out, since this would result in what Norris calls a “deadlocked *aporia* of meaning” (qtd. in Nealon 1269). In order for deconstructionto “*intervene* in the field of oppositions it criticizes” (Derrida “Signature” 329), it has to make the “second movement of the double reading” in which “a certain totalizing way of reading” created by the binary oppositions “must be radically displaced – its grounds must be rethought carefully, and the opposition must be reinscribed in a system that respects separation, that stands on a discontinuous, withdrawing ground.” In this way the larger “textual” field in which the reinscription takes place is able to account for “undecidability” which is “necessary if reading is to continue and not simply to stifle always and everywhere” (Nealon 1270).

Discussing the novel with respect to the theory of deconstruction, it can be argued that first-level deconstruction, “the *overturning* of the classical opposition” (Derrida “Signature” 329) is achieved by Barnes through the subversion of the traditional expectations that have been associated with the genres. It is important to note, however, that this act of subversion does not lead to the “deadlocked *aporia* of meaning” (Norris qtd. in Nealon 1269) caused by the self-cancelling binary oppositions. If the undermining of genre expectations cancelled the genres themselves, the novel would simply become unreadable. As opposed to this, if the traditional generic expectations that have been undermined are retained, readers are able to focus on the act of subversion itself which is necessary for the observation of the novel’s essentially parodic nature. In order to achieve this, both the expectations associated with the genres and the undermining of these expectations should be displaced, reinscribed in a larger textual field that can account for the co-existence of binary oppositions as well as for “undecidability” caused by the simultaneous presence of a multiplicity of genres.

As Derrida argues, “undecidability” is conditioned by the systematic nature of the textual field itself. In his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1966) Derrida rejects the “concept of a centered [sic] structure” (107) on the grounds that if we take “a fixed origin” (107) for granted, our interpretation will be limited since each of our readings will be governed by the conviction that there is a “*transcendent* reading” (Derrida *Of Grammatology* 160) residing in the text. However, the “absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification indefinitely” (Derrida “Structure” 110), as a result of which all the limits of sense-making are removed “both in the creative act and in interpretation” (Sarbu 257).

Similarly to Derrida, Braithwaite in metaphorical terms also warns readers against approaching a book with the belief that there is some ultimate truth residing in the text: It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down./ It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses. / It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist. (Barnes 133) According to Anna Gács, Barnes’s resistance to offer a privileged reading of his novel can be understood as a manifestation of that particular authorial presence in literary works that aims at taking part in the process of interpretation not by restricting it but by making it possible for readers to acknowledge the multi-generic nature of the text they are reading (16). In this way *Flaubert’s Parrot* is able to remain what Lodge calls a “labyrinth without exit” (226), a novel that escapes every attempt at generic classification. The desire for this is articulated in the novel as well: “[i]f the sweetest moment in life is a visit to the brothel which doesn’t come off, perhaps the sweetest moment in writing is the arrival of that idea for a book . . . which is never sullied with a definite shape, which never needs to be exposed to a less loving gaze than that of its author” (134).

**Conclusion**

In my paper I attempted to analyse the ways in which ambivalent parody manifests itself in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* by focusing on the treatment of one of the genres, metafictional novel, into which the novel can be categorized. I demonstrated that the essentially parodic nature of this literary worklies in the duality of following and subverting the expectations that have been associated with the genre of the metafictional novel. Finally, by relying on the close connection between parody and deconstruction, I endeavoured to illustrate how the interpretation of the parody present in the novel is possible within the theoretical framework of deconstruction.

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**A Form that Accommodates the Mess**

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