

Salad Days

A Foray into Postmodernist Fiction

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We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality (J.G. Ballard, 2).

Ballard's view of the contemporary world may seem exaggerated, yet he succinctly describes a trend of thought that has proven to be quite common in the postwar era. With the rise of the media, from newspapers to radio to television and now the internet, representations of reality have come to dominate modern life. This phenomenon has inevitably inspired contemporary literature as well. The group of authors whose works are influenced by this have been labeled as postmodernists.

This thesis, to make use of a fitting colloquialism, attempts to take a look under the hood of postmodernist literature. In the past decades there has been frequent debate on postmodernist literature, and as a result many theories have been posited concerning its idiosyncrasies and their underlying motivations by critics like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Brian McHale, Umberto Eco and many others. As a result, postmodernist literature has largely been canonized and its particular literary devices thoroughly analyzed. In a brief survey the most prominent results of this debate will be discussed.

Following that is a fictional short story about the life of one Everard Slugg. The story tries to apply some of these postmodernist devices without blatantly emulating existing authors. Subsequent to the short story is a stylistic analysis in which the various writing choices are elaborately explained.

The Survey – Postmodernist Fiction

A survey of postmodernist literature

“Postmodernist”? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit – or the blame – for coining it in the first place: Arnold Toynbee? Charles Olson? Randall Jarrell? There are plenty of candidates. But whoever is responsible, he or she has a lot to answer for (McHale 1987, 3).

Because there is no record of who first introduced the term *postmodernism* into literary theory, and no official manifesto of postmodernist literature, there are no official defining characteristics for postmodernist texts. The only obvious denominator is that postmodernist texts are nearly all post-war – although even that has shifted to include some pre-war texts, amongst which some critics even include *Ulysses*, generally considered to be the epitome of *modernist* literature.

There is a lot of fluctuation in academic discourse between *postmodern* and *postmodernist* literature, both indicating the same phenomenon. Now that, which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet, but nevertheless, in the interest of clarity, this essay will consistently use the term *postmodernist*. As Brian McHale succinctly phrases it:

POSTmodernISM

This ISM [...] does double duty. It announces that the referent here is not merely a chronological division but an organized system – a poetics, in fact – while at the same time properly identifying what exactly it is that postmodernism is *post*. Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post *modernism* (McHale 1987, 5).

The affix *-ism* has meaning, for without it a chronological period in time is implied. Thus it will henceforth be included.

The first association with the term *postmodernism*, or *postmodernist literature*, is usually that it is a genre that chronologically follows *modernist literature*. The second is that the two are closely related, and that postmodernist literature must be a direct reaction to modernist literature. Although accurate to degree, this does not adequately describe the full scope of postmodernist literature.

Over the course of years critics and theorists have made an effort to narrow the focus of the term to a set of texts with certain unifying elements. Because postmodernism has been used as an all-encompassing term for a multitude of post-war literature, however, this has proven to be a difficult task. The range of the term still varies wildly, from all even slightly experimental literature to just the metafictional, to maybe just one or two authors. To an uninvolved observer it may seem that the term *postmodernism*, used in other art forms for more specific purposes, was floating about unused through literary theory space and critics have desperately leaped at the opportunity to fill the void.

Nevertheless, *postmodernist fiction* today, by hesitantly murmured consensus, applies to a group of texts that share certain distinct features, none of which on their own are exclusive to *postmodernist fiction*, but combined form that nigh-undefinable yet oh-so-loveable beast of a literary movement.

One common view which should be addressed is that postmodernism is closely linked to, or even the same as poststructuralism. However, as structuralism (and therefore to a degree, poststructuralism) is derived from outdated theories, it is of no real use in any further discussion of postmodernist literature, although some structuralist ideas maintain a degree of

relevance, albeit indirectly. Nevertheless, this survey will approach postmodernist literature by discussing the various unifying elements and explicit theories on postmodernism itself, not by comparing it to other movements.

In his *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Bran Nicol has summarily listed the principal features of postmodern literature:

- (1) a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as constructed aesthetic artefact
- (2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'
- (3) a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text (xvi)

Although, as he points out, these elements all individually occur in other genres. "The question is really one of degree," says Nicol (xvi). For this reason he endorses the approach of Brian McHale, an authority on postmodernist theory, who introduced Jakobson's concept of the *dominant* to postmodernist discourse.

Perhaps the most dominating aspect of postmodernist literature is the question of reality, and how to interpret it. This idea can be found in Baudrillard's theory of *simulacra*, which deals with representations of reality through signs. The *real* is also at the centre of McHale's theory of an *ontological dominant* in postmodernist fiction – ontology being concerned with the nature of existence. Another oft-quoted approach to postmodernist literature is that of Lyotard, who considers the postmodern attitude to be one of revolt against what he calls *metanarratives*, large narratives that "impos[e] a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions and events" (Nicol, 11). Finally, many theorists, such as Jencks, Hutcheon, Barth and, to some extent, Eco, have observed *double-coding* is a dominant feature in postmodernist literature. They look at binary oppositions, how postmodernist fiction is both a break with and a continuation of modernism, how it draws attention to its own status of a fictional text while at the same time drawing the reader into the fictional world.

The question of reality: simulation, ontology, and the importance of TV

As mentioned before, postmodernism is often compared, or even equaled to poststructuralism. Bran Nicol argues that "one way in which postmodernism is indeed 'poststructuralist' is because in problematizing the question of 'the real' it signals that it comes after *structuralism*" (6). Structuralism is a philosophical movement concerned with the separation between language and the real world. However, it is of no use to further involve structuralism, or indeed poststructuralism, in the discussion of postmodern fiction. The reason is that structuralism is based on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, which have been heavily contested and are considered to be outdated. Nevertheless, the ideas pertaining to *the real* originating from, or similar to, structuralist theory, such as Baudrillard's *simulacrum*, maintain some validity and relevance in postmodern theory.

The *real* is a frequently recurring concept in postmodern literature. Due to the ubiquitousness of fabricated realities, such as the ones shown on television, what is real and what is not can prove difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish. The example of Orson Welles' 1938 radio version of *War of the Worlds* springs to mind. This is a phenomenon that the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who, despite not being a self-proclaimed theorist of postmodernism, is often dragged into scholarly debates on the subject, refers to as

simulation. Bran Nicol describes Baudrillard's *simulation* as “the state of affairs when we engage somehow with a representation rather than the the real thing” (6). Baudrillard is fascinated by the theory of semiotics. Our world today, Baudrillard argues, consists increasingly more of *signs* representing reality. Through these signs we experience the world, and as such they shape our reality, becoming what Baudrillard refers to as *hyperreality*. Examples include media representations of politics and warfare, reality TV, and most recently the rise of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, although Baudrillard has not explicitly included social media in his theories.

Although Baudrillard's simulation is but a popular aspect of postmodern fiction, it falls in line with Brian McHale's theory of an ontological dominant, as ontology is primarily concerned with the nature of existence and thus reality.

The concept of different realities being represented on TV is one which recurs frequently in postmodern literature. McHale, on the function of both TV and films in postmodern literature, says that “[c]ommon to both is their function of introducing a second ontological plane or level within the plane of the fictional world” (1992, 125), by which he means that the already fictional reality is further complicated by additional realities within the fiction. Martin Amis makes use of TV in his *London Fields*, where the idea that TV is a different reality altogether is explicitly stated:

He was actually in great difficulty here. Himself on TV: he couldn't work out how the two worlds overlapped. Try as he might, bringing all his powers to bear, he just couldn't work it out.

He straightened his darting finger at her. 'Like the news. You don't want to believe everything on TV. No way to carry on' (416).

The character Keith Talent religiously reveres TV throughout the book, and considers TV to be the ultimate form of reality. When he finally gets to appear on television TV himself, he chooses not to represent himself with his slum house, worn out wife and child, but as a bachelor with a pretty girl on his arm. A different reality for TV.

This is also evident in the manner in which Keith Talent discusses darts, and on one occasion, a football match. When these subjects come up, Keith suddenly speaks in the jargon of a television sportscaster:

Some of the light went out in Keith's blue eyes as he said, 'During the first half the Hammers probed down the left flank. Revelling in the space, the speed of Sylvester Drayon was always going to pose problems for the home side's number two (91).

The effect of this TV speak is further blurring of the line between the *actual* reality (in this fiction) and the simulated reality of television.

This idea that there is a plurality of realities is at the heart of McHale's theory of the ontological dominant. His idea is supported by other theorists he mentions, such as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann who “regard reality as a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language” (McHale 1987, 37). In a similar vein, sociologists Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor posit that there are other, peripheral realities which offer an escape from the collective reality of Berger and Luckmann:

All around us – on advertisement hoardings, bookshelves, record covers, television screens – these miniature escape fantasies present themselves. This, it seems, is how

we are destined to live, as split personalities in which the private life is disturbed by the promise of escape routes to another reality (Cohen & Taylor, 139).

Brian McHale neatly incorporates the problem of plural realities in his concept of the ontological dominant, an idea he derived from formalist theorist Roman Jakobson. The *dominant*, as the term implies, is the “focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components,” and “guarantees the integrity of the structure” (Jakobson, 105-10). According to McHale, modernist literature primarily has an *epistemological* dominant (“How can I interpret this world?”), whereas postmodernist, he says, has an *ontological* dominant (“Which world is this?”).

McHale takes his idea of epistemological dominants and ontological dominants from the poet Dick Higgins, who spoke of cognitive and post-cognitive questions. The questions, which McHale finds applicable to modernism and postmodernism respectively, are:

The Cognitive Questions

(asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958):
“How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?”

The Postcognitive Questions

(asked by most artists since then)

“Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (Higgins, 101)

The idea of an ontological dominant is useful in that, not only does it not incorporate previous observations about postmodernist literature rather than discard them, but it also provides a motivation for *why* these features occur.

[w]hile such catalogues do often help us to begin ordering the protean variety of postmodernist phenomena, they also beg important questions, such as the question of why *these* particular features should cluster in *this* particular way – in other words, the question of what *system* might underlie the catalogue – and the question of how in the course of literary history one system has given way to another. These questions cannot be answered without the intervention of something like a concept of the dominant (McHale 1987, 7).

Postmodernist fiction [...] is fiction organized in terms of an ontological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the mode of being of fictional worlds and their inhabitants, and/or reflect on the plurality and diversity of worlds, whether “real,” possible, fictional, or what-have-you (McHale 1992, 147).

Metanarratives, and the distrust thereof

Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French philosopher, considered postmodernism to be a disbelief in metanarratives. Metanarratives, as described by Brian McHale, are “the various stories [...] about human emancipation and progress that once served to ground and legitimate knowledge” (1992, 5). Nicol tells us that according to Lyotard the credibility of these metanarratives has declined in the postmodern period as people came to realise that, using the same elements but a different rhetoric, the story could be entirely different. Rather, according to Lyotard, people of the postmodern age prefer smaller narratives, without the

ambition to be all-encompassing and legitimizing (12).

Bran Nicol argues that there is truth to Lyotard's theory, and that “[p]ostmodern novels [...] typically offer the reader a surfeit of intertextual references and allusions which seem, tantalizingly, to point to a single explanatory master-narrative but in the end lead us to nothing” (12). Although some elements of Lyotard's approach may be reflected in postmodern literature, other theorists have nevertheless been critical of his theory, as well as his attitude towards metanarratives. As Brian McHale says, “[t]o undertake to make sense of a complex phenomenon such as postmodern culture is inevitably to tell some kind of story about it, and that story will inevitably be implicated in some metanarrative or other” (1992, 6).

Double-coding, and the joys of the binary approach

Another prominent approach to postmodernism, which Bran Nicol tells us was introduced by Charles Jencks, a critic of architecture is that of *double-coding* (15). Double-coding means that the art, in this case literature, is both a continuation of and a break with modernism, that it is both high culture and low culture, “simultaneously 'readerly' and 'writerly'” (McHale, 206). According to Nicol, this theory is “principally an ironic mode, which simultaneously says or does one thing *and* another” (16). Nicol argues that this ironic mode is characteristic of the postmodern way of thinking (13). As an example of this irony, Nicol uses a frequently used quote by Umberto Eco, postmodern theorist *and* (arguably postmodernist) author:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love (111).

The idea of double-coding can be found in this view of postmodernism – not only in the binary phrasing of the passage itself (he knows that she knows and she knows that he knows), but also in the sense that something new is being said which is both a break with a preceding tradition and a continuation thereof.

Nicol's primary example of this ironic approach is that of metafiction (16), one of the principal idiosyncrasies of postmodernist literature. Metafiction draws the attention of the reader to the fact that what they are reading is, in fact, fiction, breaking the illusion of reality in the novel. This does indeed tend to give postmodernist works an ironic feel. But although the phenomenon referred to as double-coding is, to some degree, an accurately observed aspect of postmodern literature, it does not succeed in giving a complete image, along with motivation, of what makes certain literature postmodernist.

Conclusion

The one thing any critic can agree on is that there is a plethora of features attributed to

postmodernist literature. Yet it is in the nature of critics to avoid a consensus like the plague, and postmodernism remains hard to define. However, practically all postmodernist literature tends to draw the reader's attention to its own status as a fictional text by deviating from a typical, immersive style. This can be done through self-reflexivity using metafiction, or a blurring of the line between fiction and reality. Through these devices postmodernist authors poke and probe and see how they can make the reader's perception of reality wobble.

This fascination with the concept of reality seems to have a correlation with the immense availability of alternate realities in the (post)modern age, whether on television shows or in books or on the radio. It is no wonder perception of reality takes such a dominant role in postmodernist literature.

Theorists have argued that postmodernism is a thing of the past, now that it has been analysed and canonised and all. But the development of the postmodern condition is still ongoing and escalating – more and more realities or representations thereof become available, especially now with social media on the rise (twitter, facebook, etc). Postmodernity is a constantly mutating monster, and the era of postmodernist fiction is not quite over yet.

The Fiction – Salad Days

Some years ago

Noisily, at the crack of dawn, young Everard Slugg loudly broke wind and startled himself awake. He sluggishly turned his head in the direction of the alarm clock – 7 A.M.

“Bollocks”, he groaned, and promptly resumed his sleep. Two hours later, give or take, confident a timely arrival at his nine o'clock lecture would be impossible, barring a feat of superhuman speed, he scrambled out of his hide-away bed and, conscience temporarily relieved, went to make his morning coffee.

He stumbled through his room. His room, what can I say about his room. The floor was nearly completely cluttered. Everard's philosophy was *any surface suffices*. Couch, desk, shelves, chair, early-sixties vintage bean bag. He had to trust to luck not to slip and break his neck. Loose papers abounded. At the stairs Everard turned around and surveyed the scene, like a general overlooking a field of corpses. And, hopefully like that general, he felt a pang of guilt. He resolved right then and there to clean up his act, and his room. After breakfast.

Everard went upstairs, staring vacantly as the steps disappeared beneath him. Adding in this morning's, he had missed five lectures now. This meant he'd never be able to catch up, so he wouldn't pass the course now. This despite the fact he could have passed it easy. After all, he was a clever enough lad. If he would just listen to his father, and behave and study. Subject should be easy enough too. *Aromatherapy*. A ridiculous choice. Enough to put a strain on his old man's bad ticker. Still, nearest to medicine he could manage, with his grades.

The feel of the icy flagstones of his grandparents' kitchen against his bare feet broke his reverie. It was the duty of the first one up to turn up the heat. *Can't leave it on, must be frugal, dear*. Shivering, Everard braced himself and crossed the floor to turn on the kitchen's small, antiquated radio. A crackling sound burst forth from its dust-ridden speakers as tinny music began to play.

Everard hummed along as he inserted a clean filter into the coffee machine. It was sad, Irish, old man's music. Like the bum in that film, right before they trashed him. Nasty film. One scoop, ground beans poking out above it. Two more of those. Add water and flip the switch. The ensuing gurgling of the coffee machine intertwined with the dolorous voice.

From a hook on the wall opposing the stove Everard grabbed a weighty frying pan, a permanently greasy heirloom from his grandfather, *opa*. There was just *oma* now, since last year. *Opa* caught pneumonia and kicked it. Strangely unrecognisable in the end, leathery skin, and cold, rigid jaw. Deftly, Everard put the frying pan on the biggest gas burner, far left on the blackened, dirty hob of the cast iron kitchen stove. With a dull knife he sliced a chunk of butter and dropped it in the pan to liquefy on a low flame.

As the butter's solidity slowly yielded to metal's increasing heat, Everard eagerly cracked four eggs and let their contents plummet into a beaker. Wielding a whisk, he vigorously beat the yolks into a yellow foamy substance. This, he poured into the skillet, now sizzling. Firmly he sprayed salt from its white, plastic container, nigh invisible on the solidifying yellow surface. With sudden, sharp twists he cracked black pepper from its mill. Finally, with an elegant flourish he sprinkled basil on it. He prepared two ham-and-cheese-covered slices of bread, and then slid the omelet onto them elegantly.

Everard carried his meal back to the sofa in his room. He flopped down, somehow not spilling the food, and turned on the television. Ever since he was a boy he could never just sit and eat – he always had to watch something on television. It was cartoons then. Now his distraction of choice was cooking shows. The one fruity guy who seemed forcibly cheerful, the attractive young lady who distracted from the actual cooking going on, even the foul-mouthed vulgar bloke who didn't seem to do much cooking at all.

It was ten to ten when the show was over, and Everard had two more hours to kill.

From an almost Escherian pile of books he grabbed the top one – *Crime and Punishment* – and started to read.

The doorbell dragged Everard back into reality. He answered the door. It was his friend, Ham Harris, smiling at him from beneath a freshly shaven scalp, here to recruit him for party preparations. Had I not mentioned that there was to be a party this evening? The feast was to be held at Ham's place, where parties were commonplace. Harris was a poor man's Gatsby. Lacking a Daisy to pine for, he had instead acquired the drinking habit of a middle aged professional darts player. Destruction of his liver and generally having a jolly old time seemed to be the primary focus of Harris's early twenties.

Which provides us with an appropriate segue into the objective of this afternoon's expedition. The month's money was gone ere the month had properly started, yet whiskey, wine and beer had to be obtained for to enable a glorious drunk. Thus began Everard's brief career as a criminal entrepreneur.

"Clean the rug and pour the coffee, there's mischief to be made!" cried Ham.

"Hello to you as well," replied Everard, and stood aside to let Harris in.

"How goes it?" asked Harris.

"It goes. You? How's the degree?"

"Magnificently stagnant. No progress whatsoever. Shan't be bored next year. Shall we commence?"

Everard nods, "In the living room, but clam up. Oma's asleep upstairs, and she has the ears of a bat."

"Marvelous, how fares the old slouch?"

"She fares," Everard replied, as he lead Harris through the hallway into the living room.

Ham took off his coat and set down his bag. From it, he produced two old newspapers.

"Mint 2004, a good year," said Harris, and proceeded to tear them into small square bits, which Everard spread on the floor. Harris then pulled fists full of hair from a plastic bag, all of it ginger, yet some long dark and thick where others were short light and thin.

"Equal parts human and feline," he announced proudly, He had not only inflicted baldness on himself. He had also shaved his mother's cat.

"Today I am a man! For to shave a cat who'd rather not is equal to any rite of passage."

He dropped the hair and together they began to divide it among the torn newspaper segments. Everard got a big box of sparklers, left over from New Year's, from the kitchen cabinet, as well as two serrated knives from the drawer beneath it. Knives in hand, they proceeded to shave the ignitable tops of the sparklers into the hairy piles. They then rolled up the packages, wrapped the lot with rubber bands and stuck a sparkler through each.

Everard grabbed a heavy duty biodegradable garbage bag. *For one must always do one's best for the environment.* He slipped the home-made stinkbombs into the bag, then handed it to Harris. He then grabbed his sports bag, and together they went out.

They stepped out into the bustle of the old canal – *dreamed a dream, by* – and ventured away from the shopping crowd circulating the town's centre. He saw an old lady in a long trench coat skulk on a front porch. *Old hag.* She had a stern set of the jaw. Likely she was in the habit of poisoning the neighbourhood cats. Across the bridge with pretty, ornate lanterns on it. An old man looking eager to discuss the weather's vicissitudes with perfect strangers strolled

by on the opposite side and waved. *Arthritic hand*. Past the canal lock, right turn here and up to the mill. *Sundance to my Butch*. Everard realised Ham had been talking, and looked up.

“What?” said Everard.

“I said,” Harris replied, “this is a grand adventure we are on. You the Sundance to my Butch.”

“Sooner you the Mephistopheles to my Faustus,” said Everard.

“Lovely,” said Ham, and smiled.

Meanwhile, an old pub awaited in an unpleasant alley.

The pub was all but deserted this time of the day. Only two people on staff. One drunk in a booth, like Marmeladoff, was wasting away his afternoon and pension on whiskey. Everard carried the sports bag into the pub's embracing warmth and dark. The drunk, who had been singing when Everard entered, stopped and struggled to focus his eyes on his first fellow drinker. Outside, meanwhile, Harris climbed an icy fence holding the trash bag and positioned himself outside the kitchen's slanted upper windows.

Inside, Everard grabbed a random newspaper from the table by the entrance and walked to a booth, far right corner of the pub, facing away from the bar.

“A pint of Guinness,” he said, as he sat down. The bartender gruffly brought him his drink, demanded payment, then vanished back to the bar. As Everard was taking his first sip, as if it was his cue, Marmeladoff resumed singing.

... son can you play me a memory,
I'm not really sure how it goes,
but it's sad and it's sweet,
and I knew it complete
when I wore a younger man's clothes.

Everard ignored him, and took out his cellphone to text his friend: go. He sipped his Guinness and waited.

Outside, Harris had prepared the stinkbombs. On Everard's go, he lit the fuses and chucked the bombs in through the window. Three of them missed target and bounced back, allowing to experience Ham first hand the effectiveness of their stink formula. Shocked noises emanated from the kitchen window. The cook fled out the back door just as Harris nimbly absconded back over the fence.

Inside, Everard saw the bartender rush into the kitchen in response to the cook's terrible cries. Everard sprang into action and leaped over the bar, grabbing bottles of whiskey, rum, vodka, anything he could get his hands on, stashing them in the sports bag until it was full. He grabbed another bottle of whiskey, slipping this one to Marmeladoff as he hurried to the front door.

The partners in crime met up outside, and with great strides proceeded away from the pub ere their mischief could be noted.

Around 5 o'clock in the morning the party started dwindling down. Intoxicated people stumbled out, giving thanks to their gracious host at the door, and professing unanimous agreement on the party's unbridled success. Everard, meanwhile, was comatose on the

couch, and had been since two hours into the party. He had talked to a lovely girl before that, who had shown genuine interest in him despite his sullen demeanour and increasingly slurred speech. Yet Everard would have no memory of her the following day.

A few years after that

Greedily, Ham Harris pulled the pot from the machine and placed it on the lopsided table. Covering the pot with a ragged yellow tea cosy, its original colours lost in the depths of time, he whispered.

“We thank thee, Lord, for this caffeine injection we are about to receive.”

Turning around, he crossed the room and stopped next to a dilapidated camp bed, its occupant still squirming in his sleep. Bluntly, Harris kicked the bed.

“Wake up, you vagabond!”

Coughing, Everard Slugg sat up and reached for his Marlboros on the nightstand. He lighted one, and sighed contentedly after taking a drag.

“I’ve a present for you. Fresh scalding coffee,” said Ham.

“Timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes” Everard replied gruffly.

“Do be pleasant. There is toast left, a veritable feast. Alas, I must away to the salt mines. Adieu, mon cher!”

Listening to Harris exit the room, Everard's eyes followed the trail of smoke emanating from his cigarette, illuminated by shafts of light invading the room from the cracked windows, high up on the wall. He climbed out of bed and, taking care to tread on the floor's few remaining tiles, ambled over to the toilet in the far corner of the room for the most pressing of his morning rituals.

Relieved, he approached the sink and emptied the contents of the coffee pot into it. A veritable maelström of java. A *javaström*. He washed away the remnants with a few hesitant spurts of suspiciously coloured tap water. From the cupboard over the sink, two rusty hinges a testament to a door long gone, he grabbed a bottle and a glass and poured himself a scotch.

Almost as an afterthought, he collected his wrinkled jeans from the foldable chair by his bed – well, mattress – and put them on. Carrying his drink, he climbed out a window onto a fire escape, and ascended.

What was that line? *Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead?* Well, all but stately, malnourished Everard Slugg came from the dingy, rust-covered metal staircase, bearing his scotch. He paused and basked momentarily in the sun's warm embrace. He looked over the rooftop, an assembly of crates and barrels strewn about, seemingly at random. In the centre a small table stood with a stolen Coca Cola parasol stuck through its middle. On either side was a beach chair.

Everard crossed the roof to the parapet, where he rested both hands and drink on the stone top. Down on the street a throng of indiscriminate heads bustled along, each no doubt contributing in their own fashion to the city's productivity. Grimacing, he reached down into his pocket and felt the texture of a bundle of notes. A rapidly dwindling bundle. He sighed. Survival instinct would soon coerce him to seek gainful employment.

Tomorrow, perhaps.

Everard turned around and strolled over to the table, admiring the Pollockesque composition of bird excrement on top of the parasol. Adjusting the cleanest of the two beach chairs, he noticed a large dark orange stain and speculated desultorily about its origins. He shrugged and sat down.

After taking a sip, Everard Slugg leaned back and listened to the susurrant lives of other people.

Today

Today started like any old day. I hardly thought by the end of it I would have killed my father.

I woke up a bit earlier than usual, 9 o'clock. Normally I get out at elevenish. Just so long as it's still technically morning. But today I had an appointment. One I actually had to, and intended to keep.

I got out of bed. Nobody there to greet me, congratulate me or sing me a song. I adjusted my underwear, sucked in my gut and went about my morning ablutions. I decided to multitask. A shave in the shower, three days worth of bristle. Then I brushed my teeth, still in the shower. Cold, fresh minty toothpaste contrasts nicely with hot steamy water clashing down on you. Note to self: make a habit of this. Although I had now brushed my teeth *before* I broke fast. Reverse the order next time.

Out of the shower, I stepped into my studio apartment's small annexed kitchen. Just whip up a quick breakfast today, nice and easy. We have a loaf of brown bread, fresh from the baker, a tomato, bright red and juicy, some succulent chicken filet, slices of fine aged Gouda and fresh lettuce. First we slice up a tomato, making sure they're nice, fine slices. Use a serrated blade for ease of cutting. Then we spread two slices of the freshly baked brown bread on a plate. Cover one slice with fileted chicken. Then we put some lettuce on top of the filet, followed by the tomato slices. Crack some black pepper on top of those tomatoes, and some salt. Add a sprig of parsley for flavour, and then cover the tomatoes with a slice of the Gouda. This way you make sure the moisture from the tomatoes doesn't seep into the bread, makes it all soggy. And there's your simple yet delicious breakfast.

In eight or nine bites this simple yet delicious meal was devoured.

I then got dressed as best I could. Laundry day had been postponed past the point where I no longer had entirely fresh items of clothing. I slipped on my shoes using my grandfather's old shoehorn. I then put on a mottled suit jacket that looked like a clown's second choice, tactically covering a stain on the breast of my shirt. Goo up the hair, ruffle a bit, glance in the mirror and off I go.

It was surprisingly brisk for a May morning. I couldn't be arsed to go back in for an actual coat, so I pushed on. I unchained my bright yellow old lady bike and mounted it. The bike squeaked pleasantly as I rode towards the distantly looming Dom tower.

"Morning," I said.

"Who are you?" asked the student counselor, Mrs Blauraupe.

Slightly taken aback, I answered:

"Everard Slugg, madam. Hoping to resit an exam, missed it due to circumstances."

Mrs Blauraupe nodded, the folds of her saggy neck crumpling into one another like a caterpillar's segments. "Circumstances."

She turned to the monitor in front of her hammered the keys on the keyboard mercilessly. "Hmm," she said, as she scanned the screen. "Third attempt at a degree, hmm. Only passed Equine Anatomy and Physiology, hmm. Failed Horse Behaviour and Welfare, Nutrition for Sports Horses, Horse Management. Took Horse-human Relationships last period, but missed the exam, yes?"

"That's the one," Everard said, meekly.

"Hmm. I feel inclined to ask. Are you sure you wish to continue? One course all year. Not a performance dissimilar to your previous *two* degrees," She enunciated the word two with excruciating care, her fuzzy lips emerging from her worn face on the *w*, as though she

were puckering to kiss an unwanted grandchild, “Two courses in Aromatherapy. Three in Chiropractic.”

At this point I interjected:

“But those weren't the right choices for me.”

“And *Equestrian Psychology* is?” she asked.

“It's interesting,” I answered, meekly.

Mrs Blauraupe turned her head to face me. Through thick glasses she looked at me just long enough to be awkward. But then a kind smile lifted her wrinkle-fractured face.

“A lot of subjects are, dear. The question is whether you wish pursue a career in the field. What is it you want to do?” she asked.

This was a question I had not anticipated. It was one I had continually postponed considering. I answered:

“Not rightly sure. Thought I'd find out eventually, in the course of events. My father always wanted me to get into medicine.”

Mrs Blauraupe planted an elbow on the desk and rested her chin in her hand, “And so you hover on its fringes, gravitating from one dubious subject to another, the latest of which would, at best, see you in the employ of a midget in jodhpurs wanting you to whisper sweet nothings to his jaded mount in an attempt to elevate the beast's spirits in time for the upcoming derby.”

I blinked, “Wow. Explicit.”

She went on, “May I suggest that you unenroll, and consider changing to a subject *you* want to study. If any at all. University is not for everyone.”

Suddenly I felt drunk, trying to talk while also trying not to fall over. Like knitting a cashmere sweater while engaging a moustachioed Russian in a game of chess.

“Now if you'll excuse me, I have other students to see. Good day, Mr. Slugg,”

“Good day, Mrs Blauraupe,”

“And Mr. Slugg,”

“Yes, Mrs. Blauraupe?”

“Good luck, Mr. Slugg.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Blauraupe,”

I could just drop out of University? What on earth would I do? I tried to stand up without stumbling. Get a job, start a mediocre career? I put on my coat and grabbed my bag. Don't want to be a minimum wager. I would need a marketable skill. I turned around, opened the door and walked out.

I felt weird, like I'd just woken up all groggy. You know that scene in *Papillon* where Steve McQueen emerges after five years of solitary after he'd been recaptured? I felt the way he looked then.

As I walked home, my brain now fully focused on the question, I cycled through my list of interests. Pretty much all are intellectual in nature. Books, history, artsy films, music, not playing it, but you know, listening. The weekend edition's cryptic crossword. Oh, and cooking, and cooking shows. Nothing you'd build a career without a University education. Well, except maybe the cooking.

But why not? Why should intelligence and intellectual interests dictate my choice of profession? I enjoyed literature, but not other people's far fetched interpretations of it. I enjoyed history, doesn't mean I wanted to teach it, or carry on a scholarly debate in an effort to establish some academic truth. And while I was passingly interested in the various aspects of the medical profession, it is far from being even a primary interest in my life. That was my father's idea. I've been living a story he wrote. I have been living fiction. No more.

But I do enjoy cooking, like on *TV*. I could do *that*.

When I got home the phone was ringing. Only one person who would actually call me on my landline. I dropped my bag and hurried to the phone.

"Hi dad," I said.

"Hello son. Just ringing to wish you a happy birthday."

"Thanks dad," I said.

"How's school?" he inquired. Not *How are you?* or *What's new?*

"It's not school, dad. It's University," I said.

"Right, I forget. Of course they teach *Equestrian Psychology* in University nowadays," said the tiresome old man.

"Well about that. I decided to quit," I said. I heard a sigh on the other end.

"What's next?"

"Cooking."

"They have *cookery*? What manner of University has *cookery*?" he exclaimed.

"No University does. It is not *in* University. I don't *need* to be in University. I no longer subscribe to your reality."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means I'm going to be a TV Chef."

I braced myself for the inevitable shitstorm of abuse, but it never came. Just a thump on the other end of the line.

"Dad?"

Ms. Nosy, my father's next door neighbour, told me the doctor had said it was a heart attack, it could have happened at any moment, he had a bad ticker. Nobody's to blame.

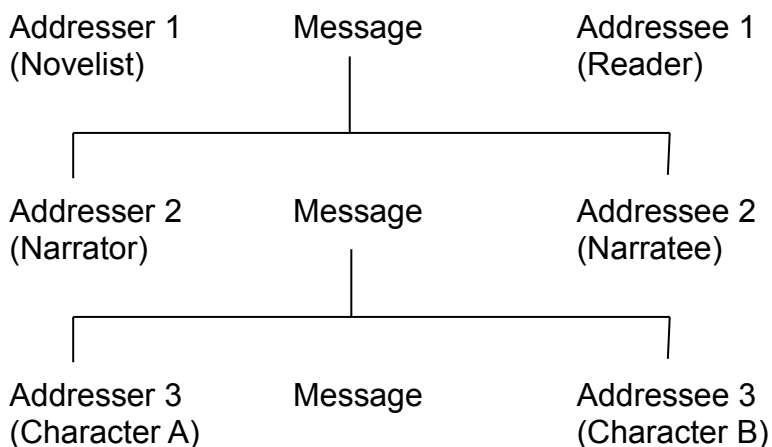
The Analysis – My Writing

Structure and postmodernist devices of *Salad Days*

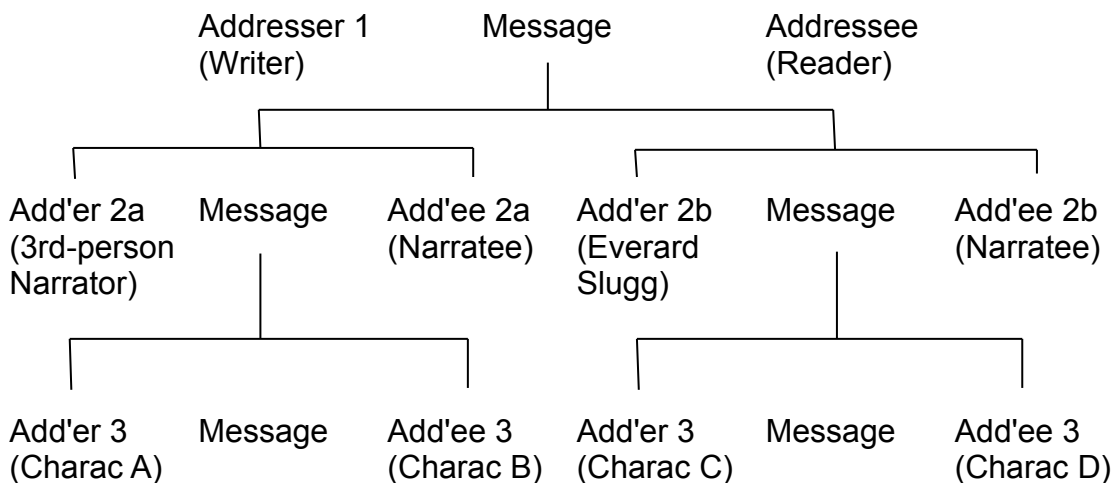
Salad Days is a short story which attempts to incorporate certain aspects commonly found in postmodernist literature, such as foregrounding its own status as a fictional text through the use of an unreliable narrator, or rebellion against metanarratives.

The story consists of three separate days, over the course of several years. The reason for this format is to enable a *bildungsroman* effect without resorting to summary. In addition, the three day format allowed the switching of narrative style from third person to first person in a subtle manner.

Mick Short argues that in order to discuss the so-called discourse structure in novels and short stories, three levels of discourse are needed (256). He illustrates this with the following diagram:



This systematic approach is useful when dealing with fiction that toys with narrative style, as is the case with *Salad Days*. In *Salad Days* the majority of narration is done in the third person, but the final part is narrated in the first person. Short provides an example of another work of fiction that uses alternating narrative viewpoints (*Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens), and also has made a diagram of this example (261). For *Salad Days*, such a diagram would look like this:



The third person narrator, according to Mick Short, is traditionally more reliable than the first

person narrator because the narrator is usually not a character in the fiction. For this reason, Short argues, the *novelist* and *narrator* viewpoints are often collapsible (260). People tend to assume the all-knowing narrator and the writer are the same. In *Salad Days*, however, the third person narrator is unreliable, interjecting personal observations or allusions at times, such as: "His room, what can I say about his room," or "What was that line? *Stately, plump Buck Mulligan,*". The judgmental tone of the narrator's interjections are intended to subtly insinuate that the narrator might be the protagonist's father, or at least his implied father, narrating his life.

In addition to this, the narrator generally refers to the protagonist by his first name, but almost always refers to the character Ham Harris by last name, implying social distance. The only time Ham Harris is referred to by his first name is during their walk to the pub, when Everard is musing introspectively. The reason he is referred to as Ham here is to add to the doubt that perhaps the narrator is not actually Everard's father, but just his father's voice in his head. This tactic is referred to by Short as social deixis (272).

The reason for having this implied father narrator is to suggest the idea that the protagonist, Everard Slugg, is living a social fiction. The fiction here is that of going through the motions accepted by peers, and implicitly dictated by parents – go to university after high school, get a degree and ultimately a career involving that degree. Yet this is a storyline that his father has written out for him. Lyotard's idea of rebellion against metanarratives inspired this idea. And so Everard Slugg too rebels, on the last day.

In the last chapter the story switches to first person narration. This change was made to further enhance the idea that the character, in the years leading up to this day, was living life according to his father's narrative, but has now made a drastic change. Compared to the third person narrator, the first person narrator is a lot less distant and, without the judgmental comments, seems a lot more reliable. However the first person narrator also has his flaws. His view of reality is altered by television, as is shown when he internally narrates his cooking like a TV chef would, reminiscent of Martin Amis's Keith Talent who talks like a sportscaster when discussing darts and football. When Everard ultimately decides to break off his academic career, his new choice is to become a TV chef. He wants to escape from one reality into another, which he gleaned from television.

In addition to this, the character of Mrs Blauraupe is intended to decrease the reliability of the narrator's grasp on reality. The name, Blauraupe, is a German translation of Blue Caterpillar, an allusion to *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carrol. References to this are made during the conversation, as Everard notices her neck reminds him of a caterpillar's segments. The conversation also progresses similar to Alice's conversation with the Blue Caterpillar, where the Caterpillar is terse at first, but later becomes friendlier and provides good advice.

Aesthetic choices

Asides from the choices made to incorporate postmodernist devices, there are also writing decisions made for purely aesthetic reasons worthy of mentioning. These decisions for the most part concern the characters, the dialogue and the setting.

The main character, Everard Slugg, is not based on any existing archetype. He is introspective and withdrawn, yet shows intelligence despite making nothing but bad decisions. He is intentionally portrayed in a rather plain way, to emphasize his passive mentality – exaggerated a bit, for the sake of character development. The character of Ham Harris is more loosely modeled on the dandy bon vivants found in the works of Oscar Wilde, such as Basil Hallworthy and Algernon. He is also reminiscent of James Joyce's Buck Mulligan, who I

imagine was also inspired by Wilde. Such a character, besides being a subtle tribute to the genius of Wilde and Joyce, fits nicely with the picaresque style attempted by the story – particularly in the first day.

The dialogue between these characters is intentionally kept to a minimum, as the protagonist is meant to be sullen. In what little dialogue there is, Ham is almost ridiculously outspoken and cheerful for the sake of contrast, to further emphasize Everard's brooding. The dialogue between Everard and Mrs. Blauraupe, although altered to fit the specifics of the story, is modeled on the dialogue between Lewis Carroll's Alice and the Blue Caterpillar in *Through the Looking Glass*.

The settings are largely rustic, at least in the first two days. The main reason for this is that rustic settings are aesthetically pleasing. The second, better, reason is that it gives the story a timeless feel, which enhances the passive nature of the protagonist. The only real concession to this is the mention of cooking shows in the first day, as this is important to the story.

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