

Notes on My Cobbled Together Approach to Narrative Analysis

RE: The Realist Novel

First, I begin from the premise that the Realist novel and 19th-century fiction in general is a formal arrangement of perspectives and ideas that has is not (necessarily) realistic. This is Colin MacCabe's premise in "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses."¹ What MacCabe identifies is the structure of the Realist novel, wherein you get multiple perspectives from different characters but always get an unwritten perspective, which he calls, "metadiscourse," in the which the narrator or the narrative's perspective (if the narrator isn't identifiable as embodied) organizes these perspectives according to the 'right' perspective: the perspective that sees things rightly and the perspective the author² wants the readers to have. So for the purposes of these notes, what I take away from that is the idea that the text isn't a reflection of reality and isn't copying the world as the author sees it, but is instead a relatively deliberate fabrication that organizes the world according to the author's viewpoint (ideology, perception, desire, philosophy, etc.). So for instance, *Our Mutual Friend's* England is just as much a built world as Philip Pullman's 20th century (the *His Dark Materials Trilogy*). Therefore, the way to read characters, events, images, scenes, etc. is not as copies referring to an original outside the novel but as parts and elements of an intricately woven design.

EXCEPT.... A Realist novel has the effect if not the intent (but really it also has the intent) of seeming to replicate reality and that has consequences that make it important to then read the text as fabrication of reality in reference to that reality. Illustration: Esther Summerson from *Bleak House*. Rather than investigating her story in reference to illegitimate children in the Victorian Era and seeing how accurate or plausible it is. I'd begin by thinking of what Esther represents within the world built by the novel. Without origins to either help or hurt her, with a commitment to being always busy, etc., Esther is the novel's ideal person. Now comes the move to read her onto reality. For whom or for what is she a stand-in? The Victorian lower middle class is one answer.

Vulgar Plot-ism

This move to read the elements of the novel onto their historical context not as realistic copies or copies of any kind by as symbolic or emblematic in some way or another is one I trace to my reading of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: or Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Jameson is a Marxist critic whose slogan in this early book is "always historicize." To cut a very dense and long story short, Jameson has this idea that literature or at least narrative organizes a whole bunch of mixed, partially understood, deluded, clear-sighted, correct, wrong-headed ideas, beliefs, habits of thinking, etc. into a cohesive whole that generally serves the status quo. I don't

¹ MacCabe, Colin. "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses." *Tracking the Signifier*.

² Quick note: I'm going to continually use the idea that the 'author' has intent. For a long while in academia, this would have been considered a hopelessly retrograde notion. I use it as a name for the albeit ultimately imaginary consciousness holding the meaning together.... That's a long story!

really believe this is necessarily the case. However, I do take from Jameson the idea that the way narrative arranges things is political. So, Jameson and MacCabe are coming together here for me.

I also read Jameson alongside of Raymond Williams.³ In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams outlines a theory of historical change. Rather than seeing history as a series of abrupt shifts from one power to another, he sees it as always in process so that the ideology of one dominant class is always on the same historical stage with the ideology of the former dominant class. And at the same time, because that stage is a society in which those oppressed by one or the other or both also live, the stage is shared with the ideas (not quite a fully formulate ideology) of another class. These are respectively named, “the dominant,” “the residual,” and “the emergent.” (Williams, rather optimistically, thought history was only going one way and that the emergent class would necessarily be the proletariat who would do away with class society. Ha-ha.)

So putting Jameson and Williams together I come up with the idea that when reading the way a novel arranges its version of reality, when can gauge it and also inform our reading of it by thinking of which of its elements belong to the dominant and the residual and how it depicts those elements. From there we can begin to think about its general politics and start to triangulate its representations with historical information and the logics of various economic systems. The rough and ready form of this kind of reading, as you know very well, is to ask the question: “who gets their ‘just comeuppance’” in the novel? If the novel’s version of comeuppance-getting is also the novel’s version of justice, then we get a good, broad sense of the novel’s worldview. *This is vulgar plot-ism*—a phrase obviously meant to echo the idea of ‘vulgar Marxism’. It’s kind of a version of ‘follow the money’.

And where this really gets fun is when you’ve built this system out of a narrative and then you look for what isn’t there. Out of all the many ways of viewing the world that a novel might put before us (in order to systematically correct them); out of all the combinations of possibilities for events and relationships; out of all the places a character may go; out of all these things—what are the ones that the text doesn’t present? And what do the absences of these things mean? Are they taboo? Are they just not even within the realm of possible scenarios the text/the author/the historical time period could imagine? What?

³ I should pause to point out that Jameson, Williams, MacCabe are to greater or lesser degree readers of Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist cultural critic (imprisoned by the Fascists for years for his views). Gramsci originated the concept of “hegemony” that is used by most contemporary Marxist, post-colonial, and critical theorists.