

Teaching the Term of “Metafiction”

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Abstract. As a relatively new literary term, metafiction has been more and more deal with in courses of Postmodernist Literature, but people haven't seemed to reach any consensus. Generally speaking, metafiction involves at least some of the following properties: taking fictionality as a theme to be explored, thus foregrounding the artificiality of fiction; demonstrating symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity by commenting on the act of narration or the intrusion of the author into the text itself; postulating the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems, or dealing with the arbitrariness of language, or flaunting the creation paradox and demonstrating how the construction of fiction is the construction of different kinds of discourse; commenting on the creation of art; handling the relationship between fiction and reality; using literary or mythical allusions to remind readers of the textuality and intertextuality of the novel, etc.

Introduction

As a relatively new literary term, metafiction has been more and more deal with, still people haven't seemed to reach any consensus, namely, there has existed many a controversy nowadays over what metafiction is, how it originated, and what contribution it has done to both literary theory and literary critical practice. Indeed, people believe that the term metafiction has been denominated for the first time in the monograph titled *Fiction and the Figures of Life* by William Gass, the American novelist and critic. When describing the fiction of John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges and Flann O'Brien, he writes, "Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions." [1] In fact, many factors contribute to the debut of metafiction. Since the Second World War, people have been faced with all the cultural, political, social and technical upheavals. As is known, great changes have also taken place in the literary field. Critics have begun to talk about "the death of the novel" and "the crisis of the novel" as well as "the exhaustion of literature".

Origin of Metafiction

The world is no longer what it used to be and does not consist of eternal verities as usual. Novelists and critics no longer hold the traditional materialist and positivist points of view on the world, which results in the rejection of the realism.

When searching for a new way out of the predicament, novelists have discovered a new form which, departing from reality, focuses on the examination of fictional form. This proves what Patricia Waugh claims:

Could it not be argued instead that metafictional writers, highly conscious of the problems of artistic legitimacy, simply sensed a need for the novel to theorize about itself? Only in this way might the genre establish an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about "plot", "character", "authority" and "representation". The traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality. [2]

In the contemporary life, the cultural condition leads to the debut of various avant-garde movements. What confuses the critics is how to define them clearly. As we known, in modernist fiction, novelists often write about the struggle for personal autonomy through their opposition to

the conventions and institutions. Unfortunately, post-modernist novelists find the contemporary society owns more complex institutions and the power structures are so mystified and varied that it is much more difficult to represent the mutable and hectic world in their novels. Again, Waugh declares:

Metafictional writers have found a solution to this by turning inwards to their own medium of expression, in order to examine the relationship between fictional form and social reality. They have come to focus on the notion that “everyday” language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently “innocent” representations....Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly “objective” facts in the “real” world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality. [3]

Miscellaneous Definitions

William Gass seems to be among one of the first to try to define metafiction. He disagrees with people who consider the novel as means to view reality and who pay much attention to the content instead of the form of novels. He regards metafiction as the literary text “in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed.”[4]As a philosopher himself, he advocates the borrowings of philosophical ideas in the construction of fiction and suggests the treatment of fiction in a critical and self-conscious way.

William Gass’s contemporary writers also spare no efforts to define the term, at the same time offering their opinions with regard to his definition. The American scholar Larry McCaffery, in his study on the implications of the term “metafiction” and examine Gass’ work titled *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, points out that “like other critics who have adopted the term ‘metafiction’, Gass is making a subtle but much needed distinction between anti-novel and metafiction.” [5] In the same essay, he argues that metafiction derives from “meta-theorems” being developed in the 1970s in other disciplines which seek to contrive what Gass himself has called “lingoes to converse about lingoes”. McCaffery indicates that Gass is interested in the problems of metalingual and metafictional discourses as an extension of his formal training in the philosophy of language. In *The Metafictional Muses: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (1982) McCaffery considers metafiction to be two related fictional forms: one is the type “which either directly examines its own constructions as it proceeds or which comments or speculates about the forms and language of previous fictions; the other is that “which seeks to examine how all fictional systems operate, their methodology, the sources of their appeal, and the dangers of their being dogmatized.”[6]

For John Barth, who raises the issue of “the literature of exhaustion”, the novel’s status as a major art form is not without doubt, but one way for the novelists to deal with the predicament is by the writing of metafiction. He argues that by writing about the used-upness of novelistic forms, or a novel which imitates a novel rather than the world, the novelist becomes a kind of critic, solving the problem of “the literature of the exhaustion.” Put in another way, a metafictional novel is highly conscious of its own condition as a novel. In his essay, Barth declares that the state of exhaustion is no cause for despair, which is certainly right and is later proven by the literary history. Metafiction’s appearance seems to be one of the examples to prove the exhausted possibilities of fiction as a source of vitality in the novel. To explain the vitality, Barth explores the fiction of novelists such as Borges and Beckett. From their works, we know that their experimental techniques “extend the horizons of the novel into philosophical realms, concerned with the representation of representation, the contamination of reality by dreams, the metaphysically disturbing effect of the regressus in infinitum produced by the story-within-story, and the process whereby characters in a novel become authors or readers within the fiction, reminding us of the fictitious aspect of our existence. Barth’s essay at least drops certain hints with regard to the definition of metafiction.

Robert Scholes is one of the writers who sought to define the term “metafiction” in the early 1970s. He also discusses the fiction of prestigious writers including Borges and Beckett, concluding

that the attempts of experimental fiction of the 1960s “climb beyond Beckett and Borges toward things that no critic can discern”. [7] In his essay titled “metafiction”, Scholes holds that there are four aspects of fiction (fiction of forms, ideas, existence and essence) which correspond to four critical issues on fiction, namely, formal, structural, behavioural, and philosophical. He also argues that each critical perspective is the most suitable response to the four aspects of fiction. Then he argues that as metafiction “assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself,”[8] the scheme offers a model for the typology of metafiction, so that four distinct directions in metafiction can be understood to relate to these four aspects of both fiction and criticism. The essay proves to be extremely valuable for its contention that when a novel assimilates critical perspective, it acquires the power not only to act as commentary on other fictions, but also to integrate insights usually expressed externally in critical course. Due to Scholes’ contribution, the famous American critic M. H. Abrams highly praises him as the person who “has popularized metafiction (an alternative is surfiction) as an overall term for the growing class of novels which depart from realism and foreground the role of the author and reader in inventing and receiving the fiction.” [9]

The Australian critic Wenche Ommundsen, in his *Metafiction? Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts* (1993), based on the others’ study, has further promoted the study of “metafiction”. At the beginning of the book, he quoted definitions from other critics to reveal “both continuities and differences in critical account of metafiction” [10]. He gives a summary of their study: Some of them refer to the relationship between fiction and reality; some remind us of the close relationship between metafiction and literary criticism; others stress their concern with language and story-telling process and claim that metafiction serves as a reminder that everything in the human world is mediated through systems of representation. Based on the others’ research, he puts forward his own points of view:

Metafiction presents its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artefact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning-making systems of our culture. Fiction is in its turn allegorized, made to stand as a model for all acts of cultural construction and interpretation, for the myths and ideologies which organize our reality according to narrative structures...[11]

Ommundsen then quotes Lyotard’s opinion that our perception of human life is organized according to our society’s narratives of what is true, just or real, and continues to argue that reflexive texts function as microcosms, connecting with larger structures in the human world. According to him, the text-world relation is what makes metafiction relevant in more ways than as a substitute for literary theory. So, in a word, the meaning of metafiction is just the meaning of the human world. [12]

In the introduction of *Metafiction* (1995), a collection of essays edited by the British critic Mark Currie, he admits that the first use of the term “metafiction” is attributed to William Gass, but he doesn’t agree that the fiction with self-consciousness and self-awareness is the appropriate definition for it for the following three reasons: first, the idea of self-consciousness is strangely inconsistent with most postmodern literary theories which would attribute neither selfhood nor consciousness to an author, let alone a work of fiction; second, there is a vertiginous illogicality about “self-consciousness”; thirdly, the relationship between a critical term and its literary object becomes rather confused as the literary object itself performs a critical function. This borderline is like a bridge to connect them where they can assimilate each other’s insight. For criticism it chiefly means an affirmation of literariness in its language, for fiction the involvement of critical perspectives within fictional narratives. Furthermore, To make it clear, he gives two different examples, namely David Lodge’s *Small World* that takes the professional literary criticism as the fictional object instead of highlighting the artificiality of the fictional process, and Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* which foregrounds the artificiality of the fiction without referring to any of the literary criticism. Currie maintains that the two novels both develop the self-commentary that gives them the self-consciousness. This is where the definition of metafiction as the borderline discourse allows for marginal cases. Then Currie again gives two examples of marginal cases: the

fiction which regards the dramatized narrator or novelist as one metanarrative device, the result being including a substantial proportion of fiction as metafiction; and “the fiction which depends on intertextuality for its self-consciousness: narratives which signify their artificiality by obtrusive reference to traditional forms or borrow their thematic and structural principles from other narratives.”[13] Currie explains that we regard them as marginal cases for they are implicit about the relation to criticism or their artificiality. He concludes it is better to consider metafiction to be what Patricia Waugh calls “a function inherent in all novels” rather than a generic category. The other conclusion is that “metafiction in some cases is not inherent, in the sense that it is an objective property of the literary text, but that it depends upon a certain construal of fictional devices as self-referential, or metanarrative in function.”[14] These demonstrate a double relevance to metafiction of the boundary between fiction and criticism.

Sarah E. Lauzen implies in the definition that metafictional novels are quest novels, and they contain the means to examine and interpret themselves as well as the critical perspectives on the present status of the literary species. Lauzen moves on to claim that a metafictional novel use metafictional devices both abundantly and systematically and that in such a work, the device that points to itself should have some significant weight. After analyzing the typology of textual narcissism proposed by Linda Hutcheon, Lauzen extends the types of self-reflexivity to yield more categories of metafictional devices. As is known, on one dimension, Hutcheon separates overt narcissism from covert narcissism. Here Lauzen has her own “overt” corresponding to hers, but has Hutcheon’s version of “covert” divided into three aspects of “exaggeration, reduction and eccentric”. On the other dimension, Hutcheon distinguishes the diegetic from linguistic aspect. Here, Lauzen includes “language” and “medium” approximating her “linguistic” aspect, while subdividing the diegetic aspect into three main categories, namely narration and point-of-view; content which is further broken down into plot and action, characterization, setting and theme; and structure. Lauzen then gives a perfect chart concerning her typology of metafictional devices, saying the aim of the division is “intended to capture, in a rough-and ready way, the familiar facets of the classic well-made realist story”[15].

In her well known work titled *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, the Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon has made a comprehensive study of metafiction. At the very beginning of the introduction, she pointed out that the book “was originally conceived as a defence of a kind of fiction which began to run rampant in the 1960s,” and “‘Metafiction,’ as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity.” [16]

Then she declares that most texts can be divided into those aware of their linguistic constitution and those diegetically self conscious. In other words, texts mainly present themselves in two modes: either as language or as narrative. Hutcheon also points out:

But there seem to be two possible varieties of each of these modes, and these will simply be referred to as the overt and the covert forms. Overtly narcissistic texts reveal their self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves. In the covert form, this process is internalized, actualized; such a text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious. [17]

She further discusses these four types of metafiction in terms of many specific texts which exemplify a selection of those that the typology was originated from. She explains that “the choice of many texts discussed as examples rather than only a few analyzed in fuller terms was made in order to show the broad range of this metafictional phenomenon- and thereby to account for the view that the implications it holds for novel theory cannot be ignored.”[18]

Perhaps it is due to the contributions of the above critics, in the year 2000, Chris Baldick seems to give a fairly precise and short definition of the term “metafiction” in his *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

Fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its won fictional status. In a weak sense, many modern novels about novelists having problems writing their novels may be called meta-fictional in so far as they discuss the nature of fiction; but the term is

normally used for works that involve a significant degree of self-consciousness about themselves as fictions, in ways that go beyond occasional apologetic addresses to the reader. [19]

Though it is not all-inclusive, compared with the others' definition, this one is more comprehensive and extends the range of metafiction to include quite a lot of fiction.

Conclusion

So far, scholars have studied the definition of the term "metafiction" and raised so varied problems regarding metafiction, it is impossible to give a more exact or comprehensive definition to it, but we should bear in mind that, generally speaking, metafiction concerns at least some of the following features: taking fictionality as a theme to be explored, thus foregrounding the artificiality of fiction; demonstrating symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity by commenting on the act of narration or the intrusion of the author into the text itself; postulating the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems, or dealing with the arbitrariness of language, or flaunting the creation paradox and demonstrating how the construction of fiction is equal to the construction of different kinds of discourse; commenting on the creation of art; handling the relationship between fiction and reality; using literary or mythical allusions to remind readers of the textuality and intertextuality of the novel, etc.

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