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Indeterminacies in Howatch's St. Benet's Trilogy

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Susan Howatch

Abstract

Indeterminacy is one of the essential components of Postmodern Literature. Indeterminacy reflects the fluid times of the postmodern period. Usage of indeterminacy piques the interests of the readers and engages them with the text. Like an artist or a writer, the readers also unfold and evolve. Leaving things to the imagination of the readers makes the text interesting to them whenever they revisit the text. Susan Howatch in her St. Benet's Trilogy (*The Wonder Worker*, *The High Flyer* and *The Heartbreaker*) uses indeterminacy to engage the readers with the text.

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This paper aims to give instances of indeterminacy in the three novels and how they arouse the curiosity of the readers.

Key words: Indeterminacy, curiosity aroused, making their own meanings

Introduction

This paper aims to present the fact that Susan Howatch's *St. Benet's Trilogy* contains one of the essential postmodern aspects - Indeterminacy. Indeterminacy piques the interest of the readers and hence engages the readers thoroughly with the text.

Definition and Meaning

Indeterminacy in literature can be defined as when components of a text call for or require the readers to make their own decisions about the text's meaning (Baldick 2008).

Indeterminacy was first discussed in Jacques Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* written in 1972.

According to Donald Davidson, to know what a speaker means by an utterance is to know what belief that speaker intends it to express. Identifying meanings is thus inseparable from the task of attributing beliefs. However, we could get access to a speaker's beliefs only when we could identify instances where a speaker holds a sentence true. (Baghramian, p.1)

There are different layers or strata in a work of art. The first is the phonetic layer "sound components." The second is the semantic layer - consisting of words, sentences, paragraphs – and the third is the layer of represented objects of real life. The unknowability of a story is not distant or concealed but it constitutes the reader's cognition. (Johnson, Barbara)

The reader perceives the differences between the objects in real life and the objects represented in art. These differences are the gaps which have to be filled. They have been defined as 'Indeterminacies'. Reading involves our removing or filling in the indeterminacies and concretizing the work to our consciousness.

John Cage's story readings and music compositions are popular instances where indeterminacy was celebrated. The listener and the reader are expected to interpret and make their own meanings. The musical compositions were a mixture of the sublime, ridiculous, sportive, meditative and geometrical. For an uninitiated person, the whole music and story reading sessions with a medley of sounds and pregnant silences appear absurd. The story is read in varying speeds with a multitude of sounds in between baffles and intrigues the listener. (Stewart Lee)

Scope and Impact

According to Postmodernists any text is a discourse governed by many ideologies. In postmodern context no ideology reigns supreme. Our contemporary life is full of instabilities and contradictions. Roland Barthes opines that once a story is narrated, 'the author is dead' and the text is at the disposal of the reader. (Lodge and Wood)

While writing a text or drawing a picture, artists evolve and unfold. In a similar way, readers and viewers too unfold and evolve. They should be able to find new insights and new meanings in a text or a painting, however many times they read a book or look at a picture.

Reading a novel or a text is more engaging than watching a film because the readers can let their imagination run riot. In a film, there is an actor, a scene, a climax - the one who watches a film sees everything; but once a text is written, 'the author is dead'. The text fully belongs to the readers - in the sense the readers can do what they want with the text - give it meaning, make it complex, arrive at conjectures which the author did not even dream of. We are intrigued and compelled to visit a text only if there are indeterminacies. Some authors use narrators of indeterminate gender. So, is a text always a conundrum?

Indeterminacy enhances appreciation of a text, sheds light on literature and in the process reaffirms the value and validity of literary thought. Indeterminacy and ambiguity are not one and the same. Indeterminacy is applied not only to literature but also to the interpretation of texts. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2011 pg.1) Indeterminacy gives room to multiplicity of possible interpretations of given textual elements.

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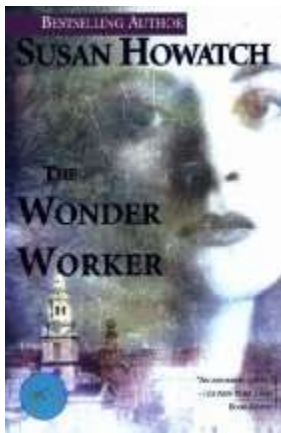
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Indeterminacy, Ambiguity and Generality

There is a distinct difference among indeterminacy, generality and ambiguity.

- In indeterminacy the connotation does not include or exclude any particular property. Indeterminacy is where a text lends itself for many connotations and meanings.
- Generality is where generalizations are made.
- Ambiguity is being vague or having more than one meaning.

Howatch's St. Benet's Trilogy



Susan Howatch's novels have been on the best-sellers' list for the last 35 years. She started off her career writing gothic romances, thrillers and then family sagas. She graduated to ecclesiastical novels reinventing the role of the Church of England to suit the needs of the present day human beings. St. Benet's trilogy, written in late 1990s and in early 2000, is set in the financial district of London with St. Benet's Healing Centre as its focal point. All the three novels *The Wonder Worker*, *The High Flyer* and *The Heartbreaker* deal with how its charismatic rector Nicholas Darrow and his maverick colleague Lewis Hall help in the integration of the fractured personalities of the protagonists while they themselves get healed in the process.

The Narrative Technique

There are many convoluted trails and themes in Susan Howatch's novels. She weaves her plot and narrates the story from multiple narrators. So each narrator tells the story from his/her

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perspective. The readers being the 'god' (WW) can see the overall picture, can draw their own conclusions.

The Characters

No human being is completely readable, predictable and transparent. However close we are to a particular person, still that person remains an enigma. That is why study of human nature is of perpetual interest. Howatch's characters too are unfathomable. We do not know whether Carta's father got healed of his addiction to gambling and whether she was able to forgive him. We do not know who killed Sophie. Was it an accident or a murder? The author's intentions are unclear.

Susan Howatch employs indeterminacy to enhance the readers' engagement with the novels. All the three novels *The Wonder Worker*, *The High Flyer* and *The Heartbreaker* leave a lot to the imagination of the readers.

The Wonder Worker

Francie turns up in St. Benet's Healing Centre with the intention of seducing Nicholas Darrow with a butcher's knife in hand. "Her eyes were glittery, febrile and mad." The scene suddenly shifted into a different gear. "I'm getting him, I'm having him, he's mine." (WW p. 494) Francie shouted. Her eyes were like black holes. Her face was skull-like.

Francie in *The Wonder Worker* lives in a world of illusion thinking her husband physically abuses her and that Nicholas the rector of St. Benet's Healing Centre loves her as deeply and passionately as she loves him. Nicholas performs deliverance on her when she is fissured by split personalities. Francie is taken to the hospital for treatment. Her fate is left to the imagination of the reader as to whether she joins her husband or whether she leaves him.

The High Flyer

Carta Graham loses her mental faculties when Mrs. Mayfield corrupts her mind and puts the idea that she would smash herself down from her thirty fifth floor. (HF p.162) She becomes paranoid about the high rise and is scared to go anywhere near her balcony or window fearing that she would fling herself down. The idea that the velvety darkness of the sky would threaten her very

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existence is implanted in her by Mrs. Mayfield. She confides in Eric Tucker, "Something's wired a computer virus directly into my brain. I've been hacked." (HF p.197)

On the night of her meltdown she travels from her Barbican flats to Gilbert Tucker's Fleetside Church, tortured by imagined ghosts, fearing for her safety. An atheist, when she is terrorised by Mrs. Mayfield's predictions, she feels butchered and beaten up. Her entire personality felt as if she had been slashed to ribbons and spat upon. She became 'fragility personified and she was going to pieces.' (HF p.163)

Kim Betz, when all escape routes are gone, self-annihilates himself rather than surrendering to the police. We do not know whether Kim Betz tells the whole truth to Carta Graham and if Betz kills Sophie.

The Heartbreaker

Richard Slaney's wife Moira pursues Gavin Blake without realizing that he is a gay prostitute. He provides an essential service to the power hungry wheelers and dealers of London's financial district. Both Richard Slaney as well as his wife Moira was trashed by Gavin Blake, The Heartbreaker. When Blake dumps her ruthlessly what happens to Moira?

A Conversation with Susan Howatch

In her conversation with *Reader's Guide*, Howatch justifies how she does not provide all the answers in her novels. She leaves many loose ends so that the readers can arrive at their own conclusions. (HF *The Reader's Guide*)

Q. Did Kim finally tell the truth at Oakshott?

Ans. This is a valid question. He is, after-all, a pathological liar. However, I think that night at Oakshott when he makes his final confession, he is telling the truth – I myself think he tells it the way it is. But there is always a shadow of doubt, and I don't tell my readers what to think. They are free to draw their own conclusions.

Q. Do you know what really happened the night Sophie died?

Ans. Well, Kim has no real motive to murder Sophie. Kim tells Carter, “The very last thing I needed was an in-depth police investigation into my private life, and anyway by the time our attempt to destroy Sophie's credibility failed I had a motive the size of a mountain. Of course, I wasn't going to kill her!” That hangs together, I think. But again, I leave it to my readers to decide for themselves. I don't tie up all the loose ends.

Q. Will Carter's father finally keep a promise and stop his gambling? Will Carter forgive him even if he doesn't?

Ans. That's for the reader to decide. Her father wants to stop, and the reconciliation with Carter will give him real incentive. Carter will do her best. She wants to help him heal. Will he succeed? We don't know. Again my readers will have to make up their own minds.

Sophie remains a shadowy figure. The readers never get a chance to see her and hear her firsthand.

There is no full closure in *The High Flyer* and there are questions still to be answered. Mrs. Mayfield escapes scot free after all her evil deeds.

Conclusion

Popular books are never considered suitable for academic study. Though Howatch has been writing novels for the last nearly 40 years, her novels have never been considered relevant for research. But in the last ten years, the opinion changed with the advent of her ecclesiastical novels where she emphasizes the essentiality of spirituality for the underpinning of the modern human being. Her profound exploration of the emotional, psychological and spiritual depths has made her novels highly suitable for academic treatises. She herself has become a recluse in the last 8 years unavailable for the public. Perhaps her insatiable desire to look more and more inwards has made her seek isolation. She employs indeterminacies in her trilogy to engage the interest of the readers. Her novels are compelling and absorbing since her treatment kindles the readers' imagination.

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