Postmodern Elements in The Eyre Affair

Postmodern Elements

The Eyre Affair, being Fforde’s homage to the world of literature itself, pays tribute to a wide variety of literary characters, stories, styles, and concerns. The postmodern aesthetic is one literary influence that manifests in the story in a variety of ways, whether as a sort of tongue-in-cheek reference to the aesthetic as a historical trend, a genuine fascination with postmodern literary techniques, or even a postmodern embrace of both. Postmodern elements within the novel manifest themselves in a variety of ways, but can generally be identified as hallmarks of the aesthetic, which are all shared with other postmodern novels. Through its wide swath of characters, its use of historiographic metafiction, its investigation and manipulation of the mystery novel as a genre, its exaggerative style, its frequent word play, its intertextuality, and its allusions, the novel can perhaps be most immediately recognized for its relationship to the novels of Thomas Pynchon—specifically The Crying of Lot 49, Inherent Vice, and Against the Day. However, the novel exhibits many other postmodern elements as well, some of which are catalogued below along with related scholarly quotes.

The Glorification of Bad Taste

The postmodern sensibility tends to celebrate the union of high and low culture in an age when elitism is increasingly less concentrated in any one area of society. In the postmodern age there exists a plurality of voices as never before, and as a result, these many voices have a larger say in what can feasibly be termed “art.” Whether knowingly or unknowingly, The Eyre Affair capitalizes on this trend by incorporating instances of “bad writing” into the text. These passages are commonplace in cheap fiction but usually inappropriate in serious literature:

“He kissed me gently on the lips. It felt warm and satisfying, like coming home to a roaring log fire after a long walk in the rain. My eyes welled up and I sobbed quietly into his collar as he held me tightly” (356).

“‘I’ve never seen a Neanderthal in a suit before,’ observed Landen.
‘Never mind about Mr. Stiggins,’ I said, reaching up to kiss him.
‘I thought you’d finished with SpecOps?’
“No,’ I replied with a smile. ‘In fact, I think I’m only just beginning!...’” (374).

The first example here seems more appropriate for a Harlequin Romance through its use of melodrama, and its predictability. The second example is a poor segue to subsequent books in the series, and functions more to encourage readers to continue the series, rather than to provide a profound closing thought for the end of the novel. Similarly, the novel’s predictable and inevitable happy ending is a cliché that has become formulaic for recreational literature.

Hybridity of High and Low Culture

The Eyre Affair is largely concerned with pillars of English fiction such as the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and of course Jane Eyre. However, its fascination with low culture manifests itself in increased pop-culture references, which are typically deemed too shallow and unimportant for serious literature. These references are visible in allusions to not only the pop culture of our own reality (such as through the reconstruction of Shakespeare’s James III as a parody of The Rocky Horror Picture Show), but also to the pop culture of the novel’s diegesis, (e.g. the repeated references to the Will-Speak machines).

The Deemphasization of Authorship

The author as a force of literature has been greatly diminished in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With the rise of new forms of literary criticisms that downplayed the importance of biographical correspondence between an author and their work, books have become increasingly open to multiple interpretations and understandings aside from what the author originally intended. In The Eyre Affair, authorship becomes greatly problematic. The very notion of characters venturing in and out of texts disrupts authorial power and obscures their intentions, and indeed, Thursday’s actions are partially credible in the authorship of Jane Eyre, while Charlotte Bronte becomes increasingly less relevant. According to scholar Martin Horstkotte,

“...The Eyre Affair reveals Thursday Next as the second author of Jane Eyre, alongside Charlotte Bronte, a reading that the title of chapter 33 (“The book is written”) supports. Thursday is ultimately responsible for the version of Jane Eyre known in the world of the reader, which differs considerably from the “original” version before Thursday’s alterations” (150 Horstkotte).

Similarly, scholar Erica Hateley states,

“Thursday, already symbolically associated with Jane Eyre, is effectively associated with Charlotte Bronte in that she ‘authors’ some of the novel’s most famous (or infamous) episodes in a style that a Bronte Federation member describes as ‘pure Charlotte Bronte.’ ... The erasure of authorial presence—beyond the conflation of Bronte with Thursday—could be read as a fetishization of the text in and of itself. ... Rochester symbolically ‘authors’ Thursday’s romantic happy ending as she has authored his” (1032-3 Hateley).

Anachronisms and Historiographic Metafiction

Because the world that Jasper Fforde presents in The Eyre Affair is an alternate reality, anachronisms perhaps seem less obvious. Yet, if the reader assumes Fforde’s reality to be a variation of our own, perhaps redirected from the future through the use of time travel, then many things in the novel become anachronistic, from the everyday casualness of cloning to the extremely drawn-out Crimean War.

Additionally, unwritten history in Jane Eyre is explored in The Eyre Affair, which documents the history of Bronte’s brainchild to the final edition that currently exists, including Thursday’s influence on the plot, which is not seen by readers. According to Hateley,

“Political history is also defamiliarized. ... These anachronistic conjunctions represent a postmodern dehistoricized aesthetic and establish a primary world divorced from the constraints of realist narrative in keeping with the novel’s pastiche of generic modes, including science fiction, romance, police-procedural, and most significantly, fantasy” (1024 Hateley).
Similarly, Horstkotte explains,

“Thursday Next’s adventures in The Eyre Affair provide the reader with a highly amusing explanation for the events in Jane Eyre and also discloses what ‘really happened’ in the unwritten parts of the novel. This technique parallels the portrayal of ‘unofficial’ history in fantastic historiographic metafiction” (151 Horstkotte).

Self-Referential Metafiction

The book explores self-reflexivity in particular during the scene in which the BookWorms begin to manipulate the text of the narrative. In this instance, the BookWorms’ activity directly influences the words on the pages of The Eyre Affair, drawing attention to the fact that the BookWorms and the other characters of the novel are themselves in a book. Thus, when the BookWorms begin to add unnecessary punctuation to Fforde’s prose, it functions as Fforde’s literary equivalent of “breaking the fourth wall” by acknowledging the work’s nature as one whose existence is fundamental and inextricably tied to the words with which it is written. This metafictive tangent is very postmodern in that it is yet another way to question the conventions and traditions of literature. An example to illustrate what happens in this scene is provided:

“‘Hade’s, The Instruction Manual.’
‘Please!’ pleaded Mycroft. ‘You’re Upsetting The Wor’ms! They’re Starting to hy-phe-nate!’
‘Shut-up, My-croft,’ snapped Schitt. ‘Ha-de’s, please, The In-Struc-tion Man-ual.’” (313).

Click here for more in-depth analysis on this topic.

Playfulness and Fantastical Exaggeration

Because The Eyre Affair is set in an alternate reality, the nature of Fforde’s universe is somewhat undefined. This allows for strange possibilities, such as black holes being stopped with basketballs and Dodos being revived and kept as pets. Yet, however commonplace this may be for Thursday’s world, these phenomena are very fantastical for the reader, though they are presented realistically. This makes for a sort of exaggerative realism—one that can also be found in other postmodern works. For instance, Orin Incandenza in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest becomes inexplicably trapped under a gigantic water tumbler at one point in the novel, and being unattached in any way to an aesthetic of magical realism, the reader is forced to assume that the event is normal though it clearly could not happen in real life. Another example may be found in Thomas Pynchon’s Against the Day, when Kit visits the Museum of Mayonnaise and becomes involved in an explosive mishap:

“Trying to clear his eyes of the stuff, slipping repeatedly, he half swam, half staggered toward where he remembered having seen a window, and launched a blind desperate kick, which of course sent him flat on his ass again, but not before he’d felt a hopeful splintering of glass and sawdust, and before he could think of a way to reach the invisible opening to climb through, the mayonnaise-pressure itself, like a conscious beast seeking escape from its captivity, had borne him through the broken window, launching him out in a great vomitous arc which dropped him into the canal below” (547).

Pynchon clearly seems to be having fun here with so unrealistic a situation. Similarly, Fforde’s readers are meant to accept “meringuing” as a legitimate threat of death in The Eyre Affair, though in reality such a scenario sounds silly.

“‘Yes. Is Owens still with you?’
Owens was Mycroft’s assistant. He was an old boy who had been with Rutherford when he split the atom; Mycroft and he had been at school together.

‘A bit tragic, Thursday. We were developing a machine that used egg white, heat and sugar to synthesize methanol when a power surge caused an implosion. Owens was meringued. By the time we chipped him out the poor chap had expired. Polly helps me now’” (94-5).

The Destabilization and Frustration of Meaning

Because of the intertextuality of the novel, its word-play, its self-reflexivity and other factors, The Eyre Affair becomes increasingly dense with meaning. Though some of this meaning may be present simply to distract the reader (for instance, there is no thirteenth chapter in the novel), it also reflects the reality of the postmodern era, in which information proliferates far more quickly than any individual could ever hope to access it. Thus, meaning in real life becomes blurred, obscure, and frustrated, due to its own excess. This also makes the job of religion very difficult, as it has a seemingly endless queue of questions to answer. Flieger comments on this aspect of the novel:

“Iterative, driven by the compulsion to repeat, obsessed with citation and recursive narrative; it is preoccupied with aftermath, remainder, excess, fragment: indeed, it often seems to bear witness to a global catastrophe, psychological, historical or aesthetic, including the splintering of the Cartesian rational subject; it reflects a profound crisis of legitimation, including the authority of language as referent, questioning its capacity to apprehend and account for the world it both creates and confronts; visually, it also questions the organizing viewpoint of one sovereign perspective; the post-text often gravitates toward the comic mode, its slippery linguistic antics serving to undermine authority” (89 Flieger).

Intertextuality and Pastiche

The novel is extremely indebted to other texts. It is after all primarily a response to Bronte’s Jane Eyre. However, many other novels are also present in the work, including many of Shakespeare’s plays, several of Dickens’ works, Wordsworth’s poetry, and Stoker’s Dracula, among others. In addition, Jane Eyre and The Eyre Affair are further interconnected in that the clairvoyant episode in Bronte’s novel, in which a disembodied voice calls Jane to return to Thornfield, is actually written into Jane Eyre in Fforde’s book. Similarly, Thursday is responsible for Bertha’s fate, which changes the end of Jane Eyre permanently. Because of this, it would seem that Jane Eyre could not exist without The Eyre Affair, and vice-versa. According to HATELEY,

“Movement between literary and actual realities is a central trope of the novel and is a reified form of intertextuality. Similarly, the symbolic understanding we have of cultural capital is reified in the world of Thursday Next. It is not just Charlotte Bronte’s work that functions as an intertextual reference point in Fforde’s novel, but ‘high’ culture in general” (1028 HATELEY).
In addition, *The Eyre Affair* samples many genres and defies easy categorization. The novel features elements of young adult fiction, science fiction, adventure, mystery, satire, fantasy, thriller, and romance. Taken together, the book exhibits genre-bending qualities whereby parts may be classified as belonging to certain genres, but the book in its entirety is very difficult to place.

**Self-Referential Failure of Postmodernism/Historical Inevitability**

Although the novel’s embrace of postmodernism opens up a plethora of possibilities for how the book can function, it is interesting to note that the novel’s plot does not ultimately transcend the conventions of Victorian literature in regard to its typical feminist and classist outcomes. According to Hateley,

“Despite the possibility opened in *The Eyre Affair* of both Jane and Thursday achieving an implicitly feminist level of autonomy, the ‘standard’ comedic resolution of marriage and money is restored to each by the novel’s end. Both the text and its heroine and ‘saved’ from the postmodern aesthetic and reintegrated into a coherent patriarchal order that was signaled throughout the novel by an ongoing trope of cultural conservatism” (1028 Hateley).

**Other Elements**

Finally, *The Eyre Affair* exhibits other postmodern elements. One of these is parody, and much of Jane’s story is parodied in Thursday’s life. For instance, Thursday’s changing of jobs corresponds to Jane’s changing of locations in the eponymous novel, Bowden’s clumsy proposition of at the very least cohabitation corresponds to St. John’s businesslike proposal of marriage, and in both novels, the female protagonist chooses a domestic life with a handicapped partner. Fforde also flirts with the temporal distortion present in the narratives of many postmodern novels, usually manifested in fractured, non-linear narratives, through his use of time travel. Although the narrative is not non-linear in a typical postmodern way, it does certainly have a warped sense of chronology as characters travel both to and from the future as well as to and from fiction. And finally, technoculture is a common characteristic of postmodernism which is also featured in *The Eyre Affair*.

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Jasper Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*