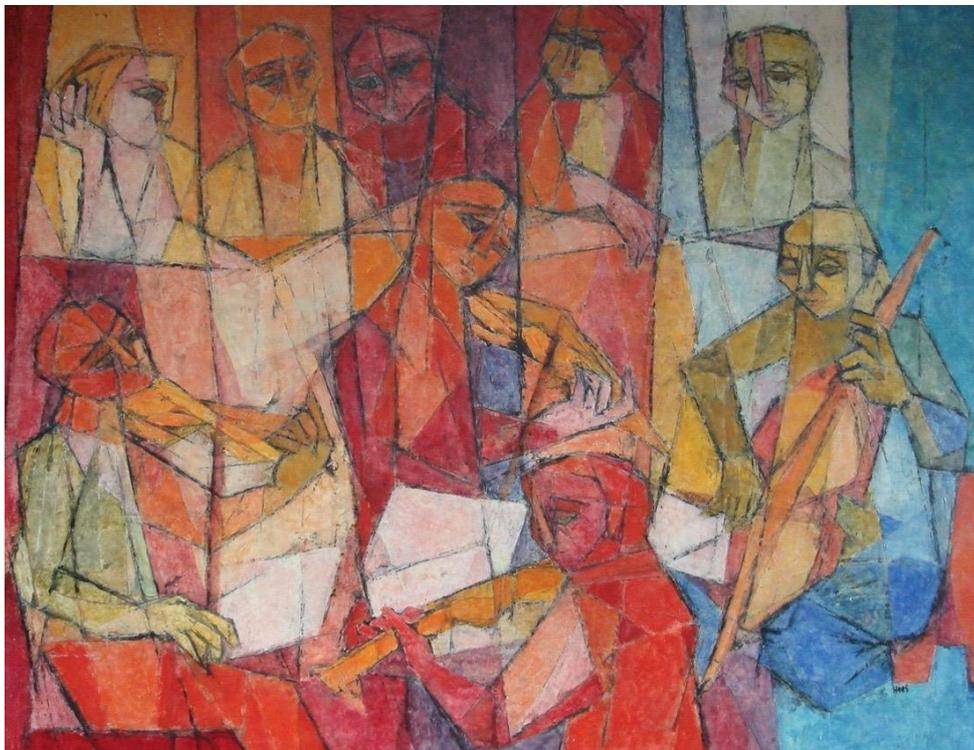


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‘All This Happened, More or Less’: the Influence of Modernism and Postmodernism on
Omniscient Narration in Twentieth and Twenty-first-century Novels



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Abstract

The topic of this thesis is omniscient narration in late-twentieth and twenty-first-century novels. Narration in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* have been analysed to see if and how modernism and postmodernism have influenced omniscient narration in late-twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction. The omniscient narrator was a common type of narration in nineteenth-century realist fiction, but this thesis focuses on the ways the omniscient narration has changed since. Key characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, like fragmentation, subjectivity and metafictionality are visible in the narration style of these three novels: both *Slaughter-House Five* and *Atonement* feature a subjective omniscient narrator, while *White Teeth*'s narrator presents herself as observer to the individual perspectives of the characters. This research establishes how omniscient narration has changed since the nineteenth century and how it is connected to modernism and postmodernism, as well as touching upon omniscient narrations connection to historiographic metafictional concerns and the debate about the death of the novel.

Keywords

Omniscient narrator, Kurt Vonnegut, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, modernism, postmodernism

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1. Introduction

“All this happened, more or less.”

-Kurt Vonnegut

Omniscient narration is something often associated with nineteenth-century fiction (Barry 225). Omniscient narration suits realism, the predominant literary style of that century in the United Kingdom, and its aim is to portray life faithfully, as omniscient narrators can reveal much about the world the characters live in (Baldick 184). Miller calls omniscient narration “so crucial to nineteenth-century English fiction, so inclusive in its implications, that it may be called the determining principle of its form” (qtd. in Dawson, “Real Authors” 93). That does not mean that omniscient narration was never used after the nineteenth century, but it is possible that this type of narration has changed. Both modernism and postmodernism reject the idea that life can be portrayed faithfully, and instead turn to the idea that it can only be portrayed in subjective ways (Barry 79). A narrator who is all-knowing and all-seeing seems at odds with modernism and postmodernism. Hutcheon also reflects on the importance of realism in nineteenth-century fiction, and how fiction has changed since:

Today, many want to claim that realism has failed as a method of novelistic representation because life today is just too horrific or too absurd. But surely Dickens saw nineteenth-century London as both horrific and absurd, but he used realism as his mode of ordering and understanding what he saw and thus of creating what we read. It is perhaps this function of realism that we have come to question today, in our selfconsciousness about (and awareness of the limits of) our structuring impulses and their relation to the social order. (180)

This thesis focuses on three novels, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughter-House Five*, Smith’s *White Teeth* and McEwan’s *Atonement* that show the self-consciousness that Hutcheon mentions, as well as other elements of modernism and postmodernism, yet combine it with omniscient

narration. The research question in this thesis is: how has omniscient narration in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction been influenced by modernism and postmodernism?

The remainder of this chapter features the theoretical framework necessary to answer this research question, as well as the methodology used to analyse *Slaughter-House Five*, *White Teeth* and *Atonement*. The following three chapters discuss the analysis of these novels.

Omniscience

In a sense, all novelists are omniscient. As Penelope Lively puts it: “any novelist is in the happy position of being omniscient – of knowing everything about everybody, and deciding just how much information to release to the reader” (14). The narrator chooses to share certain details with the reader, and leaves out others. It is of course impossible for a narrator to communicate ‘everything’, but the level of detail can still diverge widely: backgrounds of minor characters, history, and information not known by characters in the story can be shared. What choice the novelist makes in this does not only depend on the type of narrator, but on focalisation as well. Where the narrator tells the story, the focaliser is the character whose point of view is provided. In Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, there is an omniscient narrator who occasionally offers his own commentary on the story world as he tells it, while focusing on Elizabeth Bennet and her thoughts on the story.

Omniscient narration has been defined by Gerard Genette as having zero focalisation, as there are no constraints as to whose minds the narrator can enter (Barry 225). This does not mean that there is no focaliser, as *Pride and Prejudice* for example shows. An omniscient narrator can shift between multiple focalisers as well as narrate parts of the story that are not focalised through any one of the characters. Thus, Mieke Bal proposes to replace it with external focaliser, to indicate that it is the narrator whose point of view the audience reads

(Jahn 103). Although it is the narrator's perspective that is given, the narrator himself can also relay a character's point of view. Because the term external focaliser does not indicate the double layer of point of views, the more general term omniscient narrator is used in this thesis.

An omniscient narrator is always heterodiegetic, meaning that he is not a character in the story. Heterodiegetic narration is often associated with third-person narration, but this does not have to be the case: omniscient narrators can refer to themselves in first person. A narrator who is dramatized, "given a life and personality of his own" is an overt narrator (called authorial narrator by others, for example Genette) (De Jong 26). An overt narrator may also be self-conscious and refer to himself as narrator or writer. The narrator in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, for example, says: "And, as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave [...] not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them" (61).

According to William Nelles, the characteristics of this omniscient narrator, are: (1) omnipotence, a narrator that created the world; (2) omnitemporality, the ability to talk about various periods in time longer than one lifespan; (3) omnipresence, the ability to go everywhere and see everything; and (4) telepathy, the ability to read character's thoughts (119). Not all four of these characteristics have to be present to the same degree, or at all, so long as at least one is present. Nelles uses these criteria to analyse nineteenth-century fiction, specifically Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Nelles emphasises that omniscient narration is a fairly broad category, as there can still be great differences between the narration in novels. For this reason, he calls the four characteristics mentioned above 'tools' for the novelist (Nelles 119). Which characteristics of omniscience are most important is debated. In this thesis, all four characteristics are discussed for every novel, as well as the overtness of the narrator, which Nelles does not mention in his article.

In his article “the Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction”, Paul Dawson emphasises narrative authority as the most important characteristic of omniscience (146). He argues that contemporary novels with an omniscient narrator often function as an “authorial proxy” to establish the value of the novel to a wider public in reaction to the debate about the death of the novel (Dawson, “Return of Omniscience” 149). Dawson only focuses on the authorial aspect of omniscient narration, even though that does not have to be present. He proposes four modes for narrative authority used by an omniscient narrator, namely (1) the ironic moralist, who addresses how to “assert the universal in relation to the particular [individual experience]”; (2) the literary historian, who relies on the authority of historical records and supplements these with imagined history; (3) the pyrotechnic storyteller, whose “narrative voice often overshadows the characters being described or analysed” and (4) the immersion journalist and the social commentator, who keeps himself distant from the characters (Dawson, “Return of Omniscience” 152-155). Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* belongs to the category of pyrotechnic storyteller, according to Dawson.

The formal characteristics of omniscience are much contested and the question in this debate is how much the narrator knows and how he can possess this knowledge. For some, such as Culler and Royle, this leads to the discarding of the term omniscience; others, such as Olson and Sternberg, defend the term (Dawson, “Return of Omniscience” 144). Like Dawson, this thesis keeps omniscient narrator as term, because it is the most well-known term and because other terms, like Genette’s zero-focalisation, do not completely cover the definition. In this thesis, Nelles’ criteria will be used to define the formal characteristics of omniscient narration. His emphasis on these characteristics as a tool is very useful, as ultimately it does not matter how much a narrator can theoretically know, but how it is used as a mode of narration. The omniscient narrator is a deliberate choice on the part of the author, used to support other elements of the story.

Modernism and postmodernism

Eugene Goodhart says about omniscience in contemporary literature: “In the age of perspectivism, in which all claims to authority are suspect, the omniscient narrator is an archaism to be patronised when he is found in the works of the past and to be scorned when he appears in contemporary work” (1). Perspectivism refers to the idea that every person has their own individual perspective and there is no one truth (OED). Subjectivity plays a large role in modernism and postmodernism, where it is one of the key characteristics. Other characteristics are a preference for fragmented forms and narratives, and a self-conscious reflexivity (Barry 79). Both modernism and postmodernism are international movements, taking place in Western societies, including both the United States and the United Kingdom (Birch).

Literary modernism and postmodernism have much in common except for their tone. While modernists are seen as nostalgic for the past and its fixed systems of beliefs, postmodernists see this as liberating and exciting. Barry summarises by saying: “The modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it” (81). A second difference in tone is that modernism favoured minimalism whereas this is sometimes seen as elitist in postmodernism, which favoured a mix of high and low culture and maximalism (Barry 81). Postmodernism also embraces parody and pastiche, as well as irony, something less present in modernism (Birch).

Modernism started shortly before the beginning of the twentieth century as a response to the rapidly changing times. Due to industrialisation, changed social, religious and political attitudes, the Modern era was very different from the previous ones (Lewis 11). Partly because of this, writers (and other artists) felt that the traditional ways to represent life were not adequate and thus they felt they needed to reject them (Lewis 1). Postmodernism

continued this debate about reality and how it should be represented. An important question in this debate is what reality is exactly (Hutcheon 55).

As mentioned above, perspectivism and the idea that there is not one truth, but rather people's subjective truths, is a key characteristic of (post)modernist fiction. An example of this is the stream of consciousness technique, where a writer attempts to give a character's thoughts directly, without the intervention of a narrator (Lewis 3). In this case, there is no narrator who explains the story world and focuses on a plot, only the point of view of one (or multiple) character(s). This is more extreme than other novels that portray a character's point of view, as the character's thoughts are still mediated by the narrator in that case.

(Post)modernist emphasis on subjectivity can be summarised by their question of "*how* we see rather than *what* we see" (Barry 79). The emphasis lies not on the facts of an event, but a character's perception of that event.

A second important characteristic in modernism and postmodernism is an affinity with fragmented forms, for example disjointed or nonlinear narratives. This is connected to a rejecting of overarching metanarratives (or grand narratives) in society, for example Christianity or the belief in human progress (Barry 83). These metanarratives were rejected because it was felt that the experience of twentieth-century life made these grand narratives impossible to believe in. As Sebald says: "If you refer to Jane Austen, you refer to a world where there were set standards of propriety which were accepted by everyone" (6). The loss of grand narratives is also visible in fiction. Sebald continues with: "I think it is legitimate, within that context, to be a narrator who knows what the rules are and who knows the answers to certain questions. But I think these certainties have been taken from us by the course of history [...]" (6).

The third characteristic of both modernist and postmodernist literature is a tendency towards self-consciousness, resulting in more metatextuality, references to other texts and

works of fiction, and metafictionality, referencing the fact that the work in question is itself a (fictional) text (Barry 79). The latter can be done having a narrator explicitly state that this is a story, by mentioning storytelling conventions or by including a story inside the story. Linda Hutcheon developed the concept of historiographic metafiction, fiction that demonstrates that history is not only facts, but is often subjective in including or excluding facts (107). This is part of a larger preoccupation with the past in many contemporary novels (Gauthier 4).

Method

The goal of this research is to see if and how the modernist and postmodernist characteristics discussed above are visible in the omniscient narration in novels from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This will be done by analysing omniscient narration in literature from this time and how it compares to criteria of omniscience in the nineteenth century, using Nelles' model of omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence, and telepathy, as well as looking for the most important characteristics of modernism and postmodernism in the narration: self-consciousness (or metafictionality), subjectivity and fragmentation. To do this, I will do a close reading and analysis of three examples of novels from the twentieth and twenty-first century with an omniscient narrator. The reason both modernism and postmodernism are discussed is that the two have much in common and that they are the main literary movements between nineteenth century realism –when omniscient narration was the prevalent mode- and late twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction (Miller qtd. in Dawson “Real Authors” 93).

The three novels, *Slaughter-House Five*, *White Teeth* and *Atonement*, published in 1969, 2000 and 2001 respectively, should give a good representation of novels with omniscient narration in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The first is American and somewhat older, the latter two British and more recent. As mentioned, both modernism and postmodernism were international movements, and are generally regarded as universal (Lord

10). For this reason, I do not separate American and British strands of modernism and postmodernism. All three novels have been well received by critics and the public.

Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five* was written and published when the postmodernist movement was still very much active, while Smith's *White Teeth* and McEwan's *Atonement* were both published at the start of the twenty-first century. Postmodernism is considered a late twentieth-century movement (Barry 78).

Before close readings of the three novels, the hypothesis was that fragmentation would mostly be seen in switching types of narration, self-consciousness in an overt omniscient persona as narrator and subjectivity in this narrator's subjective perspective. Paul Dawson poses the idea that authors use omniscient narration in response to 'the death of the novel', anxieties about the relevance of the novel and its authority ("Return of Omniscience" 150). I expected that these anxieties, as well as a preoccupation with history in contemporary novels, would also be visible in the narration of the novels. In short, I expected that omniscient narration – with all its debated characteristics- in novels from the late-twentieth and twenty-first century have been influenced by aspects of modernism and postmodernism, particularly self-consciousness, subjectivity and fragmentation. After close readings, I found that in *Atonement* fragmentation could indeed be seen through the sudden switch from an omniscient third-person narrator to omniscient first-person narrator. More important than that switch, however, was the novel's focus on fragmented memories. In both *Slaughter-House Five* and *White Teeth*, the narrator is overt and comments on the fictionality of the work, as expected. The subjective narrator is an important feature of *Slaughter-House Five* and *Atonement*, although in *Atonement*, as well as in *White Teeth*, there is also a focus on the characters' subjectivity.

2. Slaughter-House Five

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five* describes the life of Billy Pilgrim, a World War II veteran and optometrist. It deals with his experiences as a prisoner of war in Dresden and the subsequent bombing of the city. The narrative is not in chronological order: scenes from the war are followed by childhood memories or cut to scenes of his later life. Billy himself imagines this is because he has been kidnapped by aliens, the Tralfamadorians, who taught him a nonlinear perspective on time. The book also describes the time spent in a mental hospital, after he turned himself in; parts of his life with his wife, son and daughter; and the last part of his life, where he speaks up about being kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians. Billy Pilgrim's story is framed by two chapters written in first person by the narrator, the implied author Kurt Vonnegut. In these two chapters, he talks about the process of writing the novel.

Before the publication of *Slaughter-House Five* and its success, Vonnegut was mostly known as a science fiction writer (D. Smith). *Slaughter-House Five* was Vonnegut's sixth novel and became an immediate success, climbing to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. It is still the novel he is best known for and it gained a cult following (D. Smith). The novel is in part inspired by Vonnegut's own experiences, as he himself was an infantry scout during WWII and, like Billy Pilgrim, a prisoner of war who witnessed the bombing of Dresden (Summer).

Slaughter-House Five was published in 1969, when postmodernism as a movement had started although the term was not used until 1979 (Aylesworth). The influence of postmodernism on the novel is visible in the ways the narrator refers to himself throughout the novel, both in the first and last chapter, as well as during his account of Billy's story; in the ironic tone that the narrator uses; and in the unchronological order of the story, showing fragmentation. The remainder of this chapter discusses these ideas in relation to the

characteristics of an omniscient narrator: omnipotence, omnitemporality and omnipresence, and telepathy.

In the first chapter of the novel, it is already established that *Slaughter-House Five* is a fictional work. The narrator shows he is omnipotent and can arrange the events of Billy's life however he wants. The narrator explains that he is writing a book based on his own experiences during WWII: he presumed it easy to write "since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen" (Vonnegut 2). It is made clear, however, that factually reporting what he had seen is not what the rest of the novel is about. Starting the novel by stating "All this happened, more or less", emphasises this (Vonnegut 1). The fact that the narrator admits the rest of the story may not be entirely true, has implications for the rest of the novel. The reader starts the novel doubting the narrator's truthfulness, as he admits to being an unreliable narrator. Unreliable narrators describe events in a subjective way, but they do not often invent different or new events (Baldick 347). The narrator in *Slaughter-House Five* undoubtedly does the first, and arguably invents parts of the story as well. He explains how he shaped the story in the first chapter, for example by staging Edward Derby's death as the climax of the story: 'I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby,' I said. 'The irony is so great. [...] Don't you think that's really where the climax should come?'" (Vonnegut 5). He also promises Mary O'Hare not to make the war look heroic. By explaining how he wrote the novel, the narrator asserts that he created the world and is omnipotent. He also makes clear that this world is described in a very subjective and staged way. Subjectivity is an important part of (post)modernist fiction (Barry 79). In *Slaughter-House Five*, the subjective narrator is taken one step further, as it is never confirmed whether or not certain events are real, especially anything concerning the Tralfamadorians. Billy Pilgrim believes they exist, and the narrator carefully only relates what Billy thinks happened in these cases. When the Tralfamadorians are first mentioned, for example, we read: "the planet was from

Tralfamadore, he said. He was taken to Tralfamadore, where he was displayed naked in a zoo, he said” (Vonnegut 25). Later in the novel, the narrator describes Tralfamadore and its inhabitants without explicitly stating it is exactly the same as what Billy (thinks he) has seen, but it remains unclear whether the episodes with the Tralfamadoreans are real. As Reed points out, Billy Pilgrim might have invented the Tralfamadoreans to escape reality (197). When Billy commits himself to a mental hospital after the war, he becomes friends with another veteran, Rosewater. They both find life meaningless, and “so they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (Vonnegut 101). As mentioned, Vonnegut’s earlier novels were mostly seen as science fiction. In *Slaughter-House Five*, he mixes the ‘low-culture’ science fiction elements with serious themes. Combining high and low culture elements is characteristic for postmodernism, just like a subjective perspective on described events is.

Despite the fact the narrator is omniscient and omnipotent, he undermines his own authority as someone who knows what happened and the reader still cannot rely on the narrator to tell the ‘real’ story. Even after the first chapter, when it is no longer Kurt Vonnegut’s story, but Billy’s, the narrator keeps reminding the reader that they are reading a piece of fiction. This metafictionality is achieved by the overtness of the narrator: he keeps appearing in the story itself, and also makes intrusive comments. Although it usually brief, the narrator sometimes appears in Billy Pilgrim’s story. For example, when Billy is in the camp with the English POWs, the narrator is there as well: “That was I. That was me. That was the author of the story” (Vonnegut 125). In this example, the narrator is described screaming while in the latrines. Not only Billy Pilgrim seems unheroic in the novel, the narrator does as well. Another instance where the narrator is present is when Billy and the other American POWs first see Dresden. The narrator is one of them, and compares the city to Oz. He continues by saying “The only other city I’d ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana”

(Vonnegut 148). This emphasises the childlike quality of the narrator. Both the lack of heroism and his childlike qualities support the novel's anti-war theme. As promised to Mary O'Hare, the narrator does not describe the war as good. The most notable instance of the narrator's commentary is the sentence "So it goes", added after every mention of death. Because it is repeated so often, it takes the reader out of the story, reminding us that we are reading a story. Apart from the metafictional element, this is also an example of the novel's absurd humour. "So it goes" is added after every mention of death, whether it is the holocaust, the death of some lice, or the death of the novel. This is an example of the novel's view that the war and by extension life is without sense. In *Slaughter-House Five*, the narrator is clearly omnipotent: he arranges the events of the novel as he wants. On the other hand, he undermines this omniscient authority by letting the reader doubt the truthfulness of his descriptions: the reader is constantly reminded it is fiction and thus staged as well as the fact that the narrator is subjective.

Apart from the fact that *Slaughter-House Five*'s narrator is omnipotent, he also shows he has knowledge about different times and places, which extends to more than any character could know. This means he is both omnitemporal and -although it occurs less often- omnipresent. For example, when Billy meets a German colonel, the narrator breaks the narrative by adding an anecdote. The segment ends with "Billy Pilgrim had not heard this anecdote" (Vonnegut 53). Billy was not present when the German colonel told the anecdote, but the narrator was. At other instances, the narrator reveals parts of the future that Billy does not yet know, for example the death of Edgar Derby, already alluded to in the first chapter. Although Billy is the focaliser for the main part of the story, the narrator shows that he is telling the story. More important than the references to the future is the unchronological order of the novel. The events that take place in the novel are often connected associatively, but in a disjointed way. Episodes of Billy's life during the war are interspersed by events from

before and after the war very frequently. For example, because Billy's son Robert and his time as soldier in Vietnam is mentioned throughout the novel, it is suggested their experiences happened around the same time (Rigney 14). Billy can explain the changes with Tralfamadorian time warps, but they still surprise him: "Billy [...] has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (Vonnegut 23). Billy's story does not make sense to him without any temporal connections between the events. On the other hand, the Tralfamadorians are described as living without temporal connections, something which Hayden White refers to as key to coherence (qtd. in Rigney 15). Their books consist of short messages that have no relation to each other. They reject an overarching narrative, something that is seen in much postmodernist fiction (Barry 83). They make fun of humans trying to explain everything, and "telling how other events may be achieved or avoided (Vonnegut 85). Like the Tralfamadorians, the narrator is not unstuck in time, but can control where he goes. In this way, the Tralfamadorians act as a mirror for the narrator's abilities. The start of the ninth chapter, for example, shows these abilities: "Here is how Billy Pilgrim lost his wife" implies that the narrator indeed has control over time and place (Vonnegut 182). Whereas the narrator has control over the story, Billy remains unstuck in time. The fragmented narrative is an example of postmodernism.

The fourth characteristic of the omniscient narrator, the ability to read characters' thoughts, is also visible in *Slaughter-House Five*. This telepathy does not occur very often, but it is sometimes present. When the narrator does focus on someone's thoughts, it is only Billy's. As mentioned before, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between Billy's opinion or the narrator's. For example, Billy's daughter is described as follows: "All this responsibility at such an early age made her a bitchy flibbertigibbet" (Vonnegut 29). This is what Billy thinks of his daughter in that moment, evident in the type of language used, as it is

something that Billy would say. It is unclear whether or not the narrator shares this opinion. Similar to the omnitemporality, the Tralfamadorians again have the same abilities as the narrator: they communicate telepathically (Vonnegut 76). The Tralfamadorians may be a way for Billy to explain reality after he feels he has lost his grip on reality. Similar to this, the Tralfamadorians reflect how strange it is to be able to read minds. This can be read as a comment on the omniscient narration itself, and how that is more than any human can know. However, most of the narration is from outside any character's thoughts, detached from emotional language. This is used to achieve an ironic effect, as with the mentions of 'so it goes'. The narrator's understatements and irony are typical for postmodernist fiction (Birch). Another example of his detached language is in a description of Rumfoord, who is writing a book about the bombing of Dresden and how it was necessary: "He often said to them, in one way or another, that people who are weak deserve to die. Whereas the staff, of course, was devoted to the idea that weak people should be helped" (Vonnegut 193). Both Rumfoord's and the staff's viewpoints are given without judgement from the narrator, to provoke the reader into engaging with "the trivial and the serious, [...] and on the horrors of war" (Rigney 21). The description of the destruction of Dresden, when the narrator stays close to Billy's perspective, contrasts with this ironic tone. This description is very different from anything in David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden*, an actual historical text about the event that are quoted shortly after Billy's experiences. The history book offers only facts about the number of deaths, and the writers, like Rumfoord, try to use the facts to convince the reader of what they think is right: Rumfoord tries to convince Billy the bombing was a military necessity, similar to Eaker, one of the two men quoted in *The Destruction of Dresden*, who writes that although he regrets the loss of lives of people in Dresden, he regrets the losses on Allied forces more. Saundy, on the other hand, compares Dresden to Hiroshima in order to argue that nuclear disarmament is of no use in preventing future casualties of war (Vonnegut 187-

188). When put together in one text, the differences between Billy's experiences and the history text book are very great, but it is not only Billy and the narrator who have a subjective perspective on the war, the historians do as well, producing a historiographic metafictional effect (Hutcheon 107). The narrator's anti-war sentiment is visible in the narrator's promise to Mary O'Hare to not make the war heroic and in the ironic tone when talking about the war, as well as some more direct comments, for example: "there are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters" (Vonnegut 164). In tone, this is quite far from the detached one mentioned earlier. The narrator does not often make such authorial comments about people in the novel. In this case, it is used to emphasise that any view of war and history is subjective.

The influence of postmodernism on *Slaughter-House Five* is evident in the way the narrator's omniscient powers are questioned, both by his subjectivity and the comparison to the Tralfamadorians, alien creatures who possess similar powers. The narrator is often used to show how subjective storytelling is. In relation to omnipotence, the narrator reminds the reader time and again that the novel is a work of fiction and staged. The authority the narrator has because he created this story world is undermined by his subjectivity and unreliability, most importantly because the existence of the Tralfamadorians is never confirmed or denied. The Tralfamadorians mirror the narrator's ability to read minds and travel through time and space. Their omnitemporality and omnipresence shows how strange the narrator's abilities are in this respect. Billy Pilgrim, on the other hand, has lost control of time perception. His life as well as the structure of the narrative show fragmentation. The absurd and ironic humour the narrator uses to describe Billy's life is contrasted with the 'official' historical accounts in the novel as historiographic metafiction.

3. White Teeth

White Teeth, which was published in 2000, was Zadie Smith's first novel. Despite the fact that it was her debut, *White Teeth* was very well received, both by critics and the public, and made bestseller lists both in the UK and the US (Squires 79). Smith has published four other novels since 2000. One of these, *NW* also takes place in north west London, where Smith herself grew up and lives (Day).

White Teeth describes the lives of three families living in Willesden Court, London: the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens. The novel starts with Archie Jones, who has decided to go through with committing suicide after flipping a coin. He is, however, stopped by the owner of the parking spot he is in and sees this as a second chance. Shortly after, he meets Clara Bowden, a young Jamaican-British woman who recently broke with her family and their religion, the Jehovah's Witnesses. The two get married and later have a daughter, Irie. Archie's best friend is Samad Iqbal. They were soldiers who were part of the same unit in WWII and become friends again when they meet in the 1970s. During WWII, Samad asked Archie to kill 'Dr Sick', who worked on a eugenics project for the Nazis, but Archie never killed him and never told Samad. Samad is married to Alsana Begum, who, like him, immigrated from Bangladesh to the UK. They have twin boys, Magid and Millat. As Samad becomes very concerned that his sons will become too English, he decides to send Magid (he cannot afford to send both) back to Bangladesh to be raised in a more 'traditional' and Muslim way. This does not go according to plan: Alsana is furious with him, Magid becomes an atheist and "more English than the English", and Millat a womanizing troublemaker, although he later joins a fundamentalist Muslim brotherhood, which both his parents really disapprove of (Z. Smith 365). Only the last parts of the novel features the Chalfens: Joshua Chalfen is in the same school year as Irie and Millat. His father, Marcus, is a geneticist and mentor to Magid, while his mother, Joyce, is a horticulturist who tries to help Millat. Joshua

wants to escape his parent's philosophy of 'Chalfenism' and joins a radical animal rights group. The whole story is narrated by an omniscient narrator who uses one main character per chapter to focalise the events through. Not everything is focalised through these main characters, as the narrator sometimes describes thoughts of other characters or comments on the story herself.

White Teeth is an example of what some critics call a "recherché postmodernism" in fiction: "They're big, they're full of information, ideas and stylistic riffs; they have eventful plots that transpire on what's often called a 'broad social canvas'; they experiment with form and voice; they're overtly (or maybe just overly) smart" (L. Miller). This 'maximalism' is typical for postmodernism (Barry 81). Postmodernism can be seen more specifically in the omniscient narration, with the narrator playing down her role as creator, mocking grand narratives, exposing the fictionality of the novel and of history and displaying the individuality of character's thoughts. The narrator's tone is almost exclusively ironic in describing the events and characters.

Throughout the novel, the narrator often comments on the behaviour of the characters. Sometimes, these comments draw attention to the fact that *White Teeth* is fictional. For example, when the narrator starts the family history of the Bowdens, she remarks: "(for if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back [etc.])" (Z. Smith 356). Like much of the novel, these comments are made jokingly. Some pages after this introduction to the Bowden history, Clara's grandfather is introduced: "If this were a fairy-tale, it would now be time for Captain Durham to play the hero" (Z. Smith 361). In this way, the narrator shows herself omnipotent, for she decides how the Bowden history is told. Other metafictional references come in the form of film references: characters are often described as if they were in a film. For example, before Archie almost commits suicide "he had experienced the obligatory flashback of his life to

date” (Z. Smith 13). Film and television are very important to some of the characters, especially for Millat and his love of gangster films. The narrator makes many references to these and other popular-culture examples to describe the character’s actions. This blend of high and low culture is typical for postmodernism, as are metafictional references (Barry 81). On the other hand, the narrator emphasises how, “contrary to Millat’s understanding, this is no movie and there is no fucking end to it, just as there is no fucking beginning to it” (Z. Smith 464). Both references to film quoted are related to storytelling conventions: the use of flashback, and the necessity of beginnings and endings, even if there are no clear beginnings or endings in real life. The narrator states the novel is not like a movie, but it still has a more or less arbitrary beginning and end: it starts in the middle of Archie’s life, and ends twenty-five years later. This ties in with the (post)modernist rejection of overarching metanarratives (Barry 83). Throughout the novel, characters try to deal with an inability to control the future, for example Samad, who tried to give Magid the upbringing he himself had. The narrator parodies all religious groups in the novel that try to find meaning in life: Clara’s mother and the other Jehovah’s Witnesses have been waiting for the world to end so they can go to heaven, but the apocalypse is postponed every time; both the Muslim fundamentalists group KEVIN and animal rights group FATE have members that are only there for selfish reasons; and the Chalfens think very highly of themselves and anything scientific, yet do not notice their family falling apart. Their ideas about an ordered world are all mocked, and randomness takes an important place in the novel. For example, when Archie tries to commit suicide, the narrator remarks:

Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth’s diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it

was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live. (Z. Smith 4)

By listing these higher powers, the narrator indicates she does not think any of these possibilities are true. As omniscient narrator, she must know why it is 'second-chance time', but throughout the novel, the narrator makes clear these decisions by higher powers are only true in stories, not in reality. As Dawson states about the passage: "The narrative voice of *White Teeth* indicates that Smith herself can only imagine a world of random uncertainty, relativising the authority of her commentary" ("Return of Omniscience" 154). Even when omniscient, the narrator does not reveal any particular reason for Archie's survival.

Most of the narrator's comments, however, do not focus on the narrator as creator of the novel, but as an observer. The narrator uses the pronoun 'we' to include herself in the novel's audience, for example when describing Archie: "We have caught him on the hop" (Z. Smith 18). At other times, the narrator gives background information –not always relevant information- about situations, for example the page-long description of Millat and his friends, including the dress code: "Naturally, there was a uniform. They each dripped gold and wore bandanas, either wrapped around their foreheads or tied at the joint of an arm or leg. The trousers were enormous, swamping things, the left leg always inexplicably rolled up to the knee; the trainers were equally spectacular [...]" (Z. Smith 232). These types of description make the narrator seem less like a god-like creator and more like someone who also lives in the neighbourhood. This is emphasised by descriptions of people in the neighbourhood, such as "[his hair, which] Willesdeners affectionately call a Jew-fro Mullet", or the English in general "(and we never say that; the accent is wrong; we sound silly)" (Z. Smith 404; 491). By posing as part of the audience, the narrator downplays her role as creator, instead focusing on observation.

At other points, the narrator shows she has control over the narrative: the narrator skips to the time and place she wants. For example, shortly after Archie and Clara meet, there is a gap: “three months later Clara had been gently let down and here there were, moving in” (Z. Smith 46). At other times, the narrator goes back to earlier times to explain context: “let’s rewind a bit” (Z. Smith 137). This ‘rewinding’ is visible in the novel’s chapter structure: it is divided into four parts, with a character for each part and two dates, for example “Archie 1974, 1945” and “Samad 1984, 1857” (Z. Smith ix). The years mentioned first are in chronological order, but the second indicates a flashback in the first three parts, and a time skip to the end of the millennium in the last. Apart from the control over time, the narrator also shows off knowledge of different places, especially in the chapters detailing Millat’s and Magid’s lives when they are apart. The twins often experience events that are surprisingly similar to each other, for example when Magid breaks his nose during a storm in Bangladesh, and Millat breaks his after hearing this news and laughing so hard he falls over. These ‘freak incidents’ bring magical realism to the novel. Wood argues that magical realism is often part of the *recherché* postmodernism mentioned earlier (167). For the reader, these incidents are unbelievable, but as Squires argues the narrator uses “a voice that both informs and teases the reader, extending authority, interrogating authority” (62). In this way, the unbelievable incidents highlight the novel’s fictionality.

White Teeth not only foregrounds its own fictionality, but also that of historical events. Like *Slaughter-House Five*, *White Teeth* emphasises the subjectivity of history. This is especially visible in the ‘The Root Canals of ...’ chapters: these chapters describe the character’s –or their families’- past. In “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones”, Samad’s and Archie’s involvement in the war is recounted. In the chapter, Archie decides not to shoot ‘Dr Sick’ after flipping a coin, even though Samad told him to. This later influences how they see the history of Mangal Pande, who is fictionalised in *White Teeth* as Samad’s

great-grandfather: Archie theorises that Pande missed his shot at the lieutenant on purpose, because he did not want to kill, whereas Samad believes any man capable of killing. Their argument is part of a bigger debate about Mangal Pande, described as a traitor by British scholars and as a hero who started the 1857 Indian Rebellion by Samad. The chapter in which this debate takes place (“The Root Canals of Mangal Pande”) also features different textual formats, including an equation, a chart, a timeline and historians’ accounts, which “play[s] with documentary style, while an awareness of different fashions of telling history are also incorporated into the chapter” (Z. Smith 244; Squires 46). These different textual forms are not narrated, and thus the narrator does not mediate how we read them, meaning the reader has to interpret them himself the way the characters do too. The different forms show that history does not rely only on the facts, but also on how they are presented. In the middle of their debate, Archie tells Samad that whether or not Pande was a hero depends on the source texts: “‘Now, *that*,’ said Archie, patting his pile of sceptics, Michael Edwardes, P.J.O. Taylor, Syed Moinul Haq and the rest, ‘depends on that you read’” (Z. Smith 256). Despite Samad’s insistence that “the truth does *not* depend on what you read”, the narrator uses the rest of the chapter to assure the reader that it does, making the novel historiographic metafiction (Z. Smith 256; Hutcheon 107). These concerns about subjectivity return in discussing the literary canon when Shakespeare’s sonnet 127 is read during Irie’s class. She asks the teacher if the Dark Lady might have been black, but the teacher tells her there is only one correct interpretation of the sonnet: “No, dear, she’s *dark*. She’s not black in the modern sense. There weren’t any ... well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear” (Z. Smith 271). As Tournay argues, the novel “expose[s] how ethnocentric ideology continues to shape the ways in which Shakespeare’s (canonical) work is interpreted and taught, while at the same time – through Irie’s reading- [it] contests and destabilises such conservative interpretations” (226).

The novel shows that texts –both historical and literary ones- can be interpreted in subjective ways.

Subjectivity is also evident in the fourth characteristic of omniscient narration, telepathy. The narration switches between zero focalisation, with the narrator directly describing events or characters, and third-person focalisation, including free indirect speech. For example, Joshua’s thought process during a FATE meeting is described as: “Of course the cunt of it was, Joely was married to Crispin. And the double-cunt of it was, theirs was a marriage of true love, total spiritual bonding and dedicated political union. Fan-fucking-tastic” (Z. Smith 477). This is quite different in tone than for example Samad’s thoughts, shortly after he married Alsana: “Alsana who was prone to moments, even fits – yes, fits was not too strong a word – of rage. [...] In his naivety Samad had simply assumed a woman so young would be ...easy. But Alsana was not ... no, she was not easy” (Z. Smith 61). As Peter Childs explains the “vocabulary and speech-mannerisms of her characters [...] show events from their [the characters’] perspective” (201). The great number of film references in descriptions of Millat also highlight his perspective. The voice of the narrator herself is almost always ironic, which shows the influence of postmodernist irony (Birch). As mentioned, the narrator often mocks the characters, but she also has empathy for most of them. For example, she keeps pointing out that Millat is parroting from KEVIN by indicating their leaflets in brackets: “(Leaflet: *Way Out West*)” but overall still paints the impression that Millat badly wants to belong to a group (Z. Smith 445). The narrator’s sense of irony is also visible in descriptions of racism. For example, at a school meeting two white women “looked over to [Alsana] with the piteous, saddened smiles they reserved for subjugated Muslim women” (Z. Smith 131). Their patronizing smiles, however, follow right after a description of Alsana physically fighting Samad, “deftly elbowing him in the crotch” (Z. Smith 130). The list of injuries that butcher Mo endures –some caused by the police- are interspersed with

exclamations like ‘Oaooow’ or ‘ka-tooof’ between brackets (Z. Smith 472). As Tancke argues: “the novel’s characteristic strategy [is] employing dual layers of narrative – surface comedy or irony coupled with a profoundly serious ‘deep’ underlying level which surfaces” (33). The profoundly serious level can sometimes be seen in character’s statements, for example Samad’s disillusionment with the UK: “And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging” (Z. Smith 407). At other times, the narrator herself shows a more serious level underneath the irony: “it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is all small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears –dissolution, disappearance” (Z. Smith 327). The narrator displays the character’s thoughts in their own language, describing them with empathy. She also describes their anxieties about living in the UK as immigrant, although the narrator herself mostly approaches this theme with irony.

The influence of postmodernism on Smith’s *White Teeth* can be seen in the narrator’s maximalist and ironic tone, as well as in the ways the characteristics of omniscience are used: the narrator is omnipotent, but downplays her role as creator, and mocks characters for believing in higher powers that order the world. By showing she has control over the time and place described in the novel, the narrator exposes the artificiality of the novel, making the reader disbelieve the events. Furthermore, history is described as subjective and just as artificial as the novel. Lastly, the narrator reads character’s minds and adjusts the language to fit the individual character. The language and tone of the narrator herself is almost always ironic.

4. Atonement

After its publication in 2001, *Atonement* was praised by critics and sold very well. It is regarded as one of McEwan's best works (Ellam 61). *Atonement* was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize that same year, although it did not win. McEwan was already an established writer before *Atonement*'s publication, as it was his ninth novel (Ellam 81). *Atonement* starts with the events of one afternoon and evening in 1935, seen through the perspective of several characters. The novel's main character is the then thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis. She is trying to rehearse a play she wrote with her cousins. From her window she sees her sister, Cecilia, arguing with Robbie Turner, the charlady's son and Cecilia's friend. Briony thinks Robbie is behaving aggressively, but the reader knows, as Cecilia's chapter has already described the scene, that it is only a small argument. Robbie realises that he is in love with Cecilia, and writes her a letter that he gives to Briony to pass on. She, however, reads it first. When she later sees them having sex in the library, she thinks he is sexually assaulting Cecilia. After dinner, the two youngest cousins go missing. During the search for them, the oldest cousin Lola, is raped by Paul Marshall, a friend of Cecilia's and Briony's older brother. Briony sees him run away, but believes it is Robbie she sees. As Lola does not say anything, and no one else saw what happened, they believe Briony when she accuses Robbie. The first part ends with Robbie being taken away by the police. The second part follows Robbie in France, as he is on his way to Dunkirk to retreat with the army. In this section, he reflects on his time in prison, and the letters he exchanged with Cecilia, in which they also discuss Briony and her motives for accusing Robbie. In the third part, Briony's life as a nurse is described. When she is not working, she still writes stories. On a day off, she goes to the wedding of her cousin Lola and Paul Marshall, and afterwards visits Cecilia, to tell her she's decided to tell the truth about Marshall and Robbie. When she gets to Cecilia's, she discovers that Robbie lives with her. They do not forgive her, but do talk to her. In the fourth section,

however, it is revealed that the previous parts were a novel Briony wrote: Robbie died in Dunkirk and Cecilia was killed during a bombing in London. The novel is Briony's way of atoning for her crime.

That Briony likes writing stories is evident from even the first chapter. Later in the novel, her interest in modernist works is discussed. The influence of modernism and postmodernism on the novel can be seen in the revelation of Briony as writer and narrator, which also reveals her subjectivity as narrator and adds a metafictional layer. Furthermore, it is visible in the undermining of the narrator's omnitemporal power and the modernist style, both of describing thought, which emphasises each character's individual perspective and describing the surroundings. These elements are described in further detail in the rest of the chapter, in connection to the characteristics of omniscience: omnipotence, omnitemporality and omnipresence, and telepathy.

It is not until the ending of the third part, with "BT [Briony Tallis], London 1999", that it is revealed that the novel so far was Briony's manuscript (McEwan 349). With this revelation the reader realises that Briony has had full control over the narrative up until that point. It seems as if she has tried to relate the events –with Robbie and Cecilia's happy ending being the exception- as they really happened, because she writes in her diary: "I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record" (McEwan 369). Even so, the reader cannot really trust the first three parts, as Briony must have invented large parts of it, especially the thoughts of all other people besides herself; and because she is subjective as narrator and has a clear self-interest in presenting herself and her actions in a forgiving light. Later in the fourth section, she reflects on her godlike abilities as novelist: "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? [...] In her imagination, she has set the limits and the terms (McEwan 371). Especially this second

sentence is true for the novel's omniscient narrator as well: it is the narrator who mediates the character's thoughts and decides what is included and what not. Briony's comments draw attention to this omnipotence, adding a metafictional element. That she has had full control over the past events can also be seen in small clues in the first three parts, for example when she mentions alternative possibilities to the 'real' events: at the Marshall's wedding, the narrator describes first how Briony stands up and interrupts the wedding before revealing that she did not interrupt at all. Only five pages later, Briony goes to visit Cecilia and the narrator describes how "as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and her other self, no less real, who was walking backwards towards the hospital" (McEwan 329). In hindsight, the Briony walking back to the hospital is the 'real' one, as Cecilia has already died at this point, but the narrator has the power to present Briony's confrontation with Cecilia and Robbie as real. Still, the narrator acknowledges that there were other possibilities. In the fourth section, Briony as first-person narrator, finally explains what she has done and why she has given Cecilia and Robbie a happy ending. In earlier versions of the manuscript she did write what 'really' happened, and only in this draft do her "spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (McEwan 371). In this quote, her old impulse of turning reality into a fairy tale can be seen. As a girl, Briony likes writing stories because of their "neat, limited, controllable form" and her wish for order is mentioned several times throughout Part One (McEwan 37). Her preoccupation with reality being (un)like a narrative also influences the way she sees Robbie: "Briony is certain that the figure she saw retreating from the scene had to be Robbie not because she has ocular proof but because that interpretation fits the narrative she is scripting on the basis of her earlier encounters with Robbie" (Phelan 328). The older Briony, however, turns from fairy tales to Virginia Woolf's work and its "modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. [...] [Briony] thought that a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a

new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change” (McEwan 281-282). The modernist influence is visible in the way the war is described in Part Two: “Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books?” (McEwan 227). Unlike Part One, Part Two does not have any chapters, which adds to the sense of confusion. As Ellam notes: “this Part shows the fragmentation of civilization and the gradual breakdown of Robbie” (28). Although Briony’s modernist ideas about fragmentation influence her descriptions in Part Two, she still seems to long for her previous sense of order: she sees Robbie again in Part Three, when she had been afraid he might have died in the war, but she thinks “it would have made no sense” if he had died (McEwan 338). That Briony gives Robbie and Cecilia a happy ending shows that “her wish for a harmonious, organised world” is still there, but is also undermined in the novel, as it is revealed as untrue (McEwan 5). This revelation has more impact because the distant omniscient narrator turns into a first-person narrator: the narrator is still the same entity, but her subjectivity as narrator is exposed.

In the first three parts there are already some clues that the narrator is in fact Briony looking back on her life, and that she is omnitemporal. These clues, like the ‘alternative versions’ mentioned before, hint both at what actually happened and what is going to happen. They keep the suspense up for the reader, but also make explicit the knowledge that the omniscient narrator has. For example, when Briony leaves Cecilia and Robbie at the tube station, the narrator describes that “they stood outside Balham tube station, which in three months’ time would achieve its terrible form of fame in the Blitz” (McEwan 348). After Briony has accused Robbie, the narrator reflects that “her memories of the interrogation [...] would not trouble her so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn” (McEwan 173). These mentions of the future show that the narrator is omnitemporal, but the mention of ‘fragmented recollection’ also indicate how that

knowledge is undermined: because the omniscient narrator is the older Briony looking back, she does not remember everything as it precisely was. This can also be seen in the way the narrator confuses certain details, the way a person remembering her youth would: “But if she was there being consoled by her mother on the Chesterfield, how did she come to remember the arrival of Dr McLaren [...]?” (McEwan 174). Briony has invented many other details of the novel, but here she deliberately adds her confusion so that the reader starts to doubt her knowledge as narrator.

Briony’s love for modernism -as touched upon briefly- can also be seen in the way the narrator focuses on the individual thought processes of characters, not only what they are thinking in a particular moment, but also how their memories influence their thoughts. For example, Robbie thinks Briony accused him out of revenge, and he reflects back on a memory from years ago, when Briony told him she loved him. This shows that the narrator not only focuses on thoughts, as omniscient narrators in realist fiction might do, but on a character’s flashback to earlier times, and how that memory continued to influence his view of Briony. The fact that the narrator has the ability to read minds is clear from the very first chapter, as the narrator stays very close to Briony’s thoughts and her perception of the events. For example, when Briony and her cousins rehearse her play, it is described as: “and so they went on, the cousins from the north, for a full half an hour, steadily wrecking Briony’s creation, and it was a mercy, therefore, when her big sister came to fetch the twins for their bath” (McEwan 17). Briony’s own sense of self-importance becomes apparent in this description. That the narrator describes Briony this way on purpose is clear from a comment the narrator makes: “she [Briony as writer] would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologising, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone” (McEwan 41). At other points in Part One, Briony also sees herself as the ‘hero’ of the story, protecting her sister. The ironic tone, used here to describe Briony, is typical for postmodernism (Birch).

As Ellam argues: “*Atonement* signals ironically the dangers of the literary imagination. As well as being an encrypted warning against being drawn into the realist narrative of Part One, it is also a playful and unsettling interpretation of how the fantasist, that is the writer, has the power to order lives” (32). Although the narrator remains covert throughout the first three parts of the novel, a comment like this indicates that there is a heterodiegetic narrator, and not a homodiegetic third-person limited narrator. Briony’s interest in modernism clearly influences the narration of the first three parts and how the narrator describes the thoughts of different characters. This is noticeable for the reader even before it is revealed that Briony is the narrator: the narrator shows several scenes in Part One multiple times, from different perspectives. For example, Robbie’s and Cecilia’s argument over the vase is repeated three times. The first version is from Cecilia’s perspective. Her version focuses on the awkwardness between Robbie and her, and she reflects on her memories of some past conversations. When the vase breaks, she blames him. At this moment in time, she has not yet realised that their awkwardness in conversation has been because they have both repressed their feelings about each other, as she later thinks. Briony watches the scene from the window and interprets that “[Robbie] had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia’s hand. It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance” (McEwan 38). When she sees Cecilia take her clothes off, she thinks that Robbie has ordered her to do so. Robbie, meanwhile, has realised during this scene that he is in love with Cecilia and hopes that “even in anger, she had wanted to show him just how beautiful she was and bind him to her” (McEwan 81). All three perspectives are influenced by the characters’ memories and hopes and none is completely true. This is directly related to the modernist idea that “any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives” (Habibi 5). By describing the thoughts of these three characters in separate chapters, the narrator emphasises each character’s subjectivity.

Apart from the subjective perspectives, modernism's influence on the narration is visible in the style of the novel. This style seems to have been more modernist in the first version of Briony's novel *Two Figures by a Fountain*, as Cyril Connolly reflects that "all the fine rhythms and nice observations" are too numerous and "it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf" (McEwan 313; 312). However, the influence of Woolf can still be seen in some of the narrator's description of *Atonement's* setting, especially the Tallis house. For example, the light is described as: "[the windows] south-east aspect had permitted parallelograms of morning sunlight to advance across the powder-blue carpet" (McEwan 20). A description of the light like this is, as Robinson reflects, close to that of some of Woolf's fiction: "This idea of advancing and receding light, of the sun outlining geometrical shapes within interiors, is characteristic of *The Waves*" (478). Although modernist description is still part of Briony's style as writer, Connolly's commentary and Briony's gained experience as a writer cause her to shift towards 'psychological realism'. This can be seen in the narrator's continued focus on the focaliser's thoughts, but without any attempt at more modernist techniques that *Two Figures by a Fountain* must have had. Both the apparent realism and the modernism are undermined, however, by the novel's fourth part. Although he leaves out the realist elements of the novel, Phelan's argument that "the accomplished novelist has been writing not a straight modernist novel in Briony's mode but a more self-conscious, self-reflexive, novel" seems true. He continues by pointing out that "In its self-reflexiveness, McEwan's surprise ending acknowledges *Atonement's* postmodern moment" (Phelan 334). The metafictional layer of the fourth part, does not only fit Briony's lost sense of order –as mentioned before- but also Briony's shift in narrative style.

While the novel's fourth part, with the revelation that the covert omniscient narrator is in fact Briony, can be regarded as postmodern, the novel's first three parts show a modernist preoccupation with subjectivity, as seen in inclusion of the multiple perspectives, and

fragmentation, visible in the novel's confused description of the war and Briony's limited remembrance of events in her youth. The subjectivity of characters is revealed on two levels: in the repetition of scenes so that multiple characters give their perspectives and by the revelation that Briony is the narrator of the novel, and has thus influenced the depiction of events. Briony as a narrator is omniscient, but her omniscient knowledge is undermined by her subjectivity and her imperfect account of past events.

5. Conclusion

After close readings of *Slaughter-House Five* (1969), *White Teeth* (2000) and *Atonement* (2001) the research question ‘how has omniscient narration in twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction been influenced by modernism and postmodernism?’ can be answered.

Vonnegut’s “All this happened, more or less” summarises the attitude of the omniscient narrator in each novel: the narrator relates the events of the novel to the reader, but all three undermine their own omniscience in different ways (1). The influence of modernism and postmodernism on the narration of these novels is visible in their focus on subjectivity, metafictionality and fragmentation. This chapter will describe these three elements in relation to the four characteristics of omniscient narration used to analyse the novels, as well as discuss possible future research on the subject.

The omnipotence of the omniscient narrator is established in all three novels. The way *Slaughter-House Five* does this is by the narrator’s first-person narration in the first and last chapter. In *Atonement*, the last chapter’s first-person narration reveals Briony’s omnipotence. *White Teeth* establishes the narrator’s omnipotence by her continuous intrusive comments. By drawing attention to their omnipotence, the novels also emphasise their own fictionality. In *Slaughter-House Five* and *Atonement*, the narrator’s omnipotent authority is undermined by their unreliability in describing events: both novels have subjective narrators. Throughout *Atonement*, Briony’s interest in a modernist style of describing surroundings is emphasised.

The influence of modernism and postmodernism on the novels’ omnitemporality and omnipresence is visible in *Slaughter-House Five*’s unchronological fragmented narrative. The Tralfamadorians’ fiction mirrors this: their stories are disjointed as well. *Atonement* shows fragmentation in the form of Briony’s incomplete memories: despite the fact that, as narrator, she invents large parts of the novel, she shows her uncertainty about the true events of the past. This point is emphasised by her love for an ordered world, although the novel’s ending

reveals that her ordered world was a fantasy. *White Teeth* uses the narrator's omnipresence to support the magical realism of Maggid's and Millat's connection, which is a part of the novel's *recherché* postmodernism.

In both *White Teeth* and *Atonement*, the narrator adopts the language of the focaliser to emphasise the individual's perspective. In each novel, the narrator alternates focalisers per chapter. In *Atonement*, the narrator relates how Briony, Cecilia and Robbie have a radically different interpretation of the events. The narrator of *Slaughter-House Five*, on the other hand, keeps his detached tone in describing characters' thoughts, emphasising the novel's understated and ironic tone.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the narration is that the narrators of all three novels have a tendency to question their own omniscient knowledge. The novels undermine the narrator's authority in different ways: *Slaughter-House Five* by concealing whether or not the episodes on Tralfamadore are real, *Atonement* by its reliance on the narrator's memory and *White Teeth* by its focus on the narrator as observer. As Dawson also notes, this is part of a larger tendency in novels to question their omniscient narrator's authority. This authority is defined as an ability to "pass judgement on the fictional world, and the authoritative resonance of these judgements in the extradiegetic or public world of the reader" (Dawson "Return of Omniscience" 146). Where in nineteenth-century fiction, the narrator declares accepted truths of a "general consciousness", contemporary fiction no longer focuses on a general consciousness, but instead on subjective individuals (Miller qtd. in "Return of Omniscience" 149; Sebald 6). In this way, the three novels are examples of twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction's movement towards (post)modernist subjectivity. The overtness of the narrators, established through their intrusive observations or ironic tone, is also a general characteristic of omniscient narration in the last fifty years (Dawson "Return of

Omniscience” 143). This illustrates the influence of postmodernism on the omniscient narrator.

Dawson sees a shift from the narrator and novelist as knowledgeable about society as a whole to a narrator and novelist who poses as a public intellectual, someone who speaks to society with specific expertise to convince the reader of the novel’s value in the debate about the death of the novel (“Return of Omniscience” 150). However, none of the novels discussed in this thesis display these anxieties about the death of the novel: although *Atonement* –with Briony’s (and McEwan’s) historical research- and *White Teeth* –with its observations on society- fit Dawson’s trend of public intellectuals, they do not seem to try to assert the cultural authority of novels. Omniscient narration in these novels does not show any anxieties about the death of the novel.

In all three novels, parts of the narrative are historical. Historiographic metafictional concerns are visible in the omniscient narration, in *Slaughter-House Five* due to its ironic tone used in describing history, in *White Teeth* by its use of different textual formats and in *Atonement* by showing that Briony as narrator has constructed much of the war narrative. However, the theme of history’s subjectivity is also visible in other aspects –unrelated to the narration- of the novels. Historiographic concerns are evident in many contemporary novels (Gauthier 1). By showing the novels’ historiographic metafictional concerns, this thesis has contributed to this larger debate about historiographic issues in contemporary fiction. In future research, the ways that omniscient narration is used to support historiographic metafiction (or other themes) could be an interesting subject. Another important part of any future research would be to do close reading of more novels, as it is difficult to draw definite conclusions about twentieth or twenty-first-century fiction with such a limited number of novels. Furthermore, this thesis studied the influence of modernism and postmodernism on fiction of the last fifty years, but certain modernist and postmodernist elements, such as the

omniscient narrator speaking in first person, are also seen in nineteenth-century realist fiction. Other studies, focusing on differences between nineteenth-century fiction and more contemporary fiction could reveal how different the omniscient narration is, for example by focusing on why the omniscient narrator switches to first-person narration.

Answering the research question helped to establish in which ways the omniscient narration in late twentieth and twenty-first century novels display modernist and postmodernist elements and ultimately, how omniscient narration relates to the current debate about the death of the novel. Recent articles on omniscient narration tend to focus on the theoretical debate around it and how to define omniscience or discuss older novels. Through close readings, this thesis has given a more practical account of omniscient narration in *Slaughter-House Five*, *White Teeth* and *Atonement*.

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