

Tracing the development of metafiction

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ABSTRACT

Overall, the history of metafictional writing spans across centuries, with examples found in some of the oldest works of literature. From the Bible to Shakespeare to Cervantes, the use of metafictional techniques has evolved and grown more complex over time. In the 20th century, metafiction reached its peak of creativity and experimentation, with authors like Nabokov and Barth leading the way in deconstructing and parodying traditional literary forms. Today, metafictional writing continues to be a popular and influential style, with contemporary authors using it to explore themes of identity, authorship, and the nature of storytelling itself.

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The techniques of metafiction have a history that dates back to some of the oldest samples of fiction from the UK, Europe, and America. Although using the term ‘metafiction’ to some early texts is often problematic, such examples do show the extended history of this form and so constitute an important insight into understanding metafiction in literature. To begin with the genesis of metafictional writing, as it is suggested by Stephen Prickett and Robert Barnes, we should start from Judeo-Christian Bible, since it the first work displaying metafictional devices:

“..... the Bible is 'metafictional.' That is, it is a book about other books. The text makes constant and repeated reference to events or sayings in previous books, either to confirm their significance, or to reinterpret them as part of a new pattern.”¹

Further examples of metafiction in later works include “Lonesome wife” and “Slaughterhouse five” by Willie Master and “Divine comedy” by Dante Alighieri. These are the early works with the trope of the author in the text, being narrated by, and starring the writer himself. Next, in chronological order follow such works as “*The Canterbury Tales*” by Geoffrey Chaucer, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which include the author as narrator in the novel. The most prominent work of the later period is “*Don Quixote*” by Miguel de Cervantes, whereby metafiction obtains its primary literary production. The next significant work worth mention while talking about the history of metafiction is the one which presents one of the earliest examples of historiographic metafiction- Paul Féval’s *Vampire City* (1864). The text is notable in its description of a factual historical figure and the attempt to fictionalise their life, the main premise of the historiographic metafiction of the latter centuries.

Moving to the 20th century, it should be noted that metafictional experimentation and techniques reach their peak of creativity with the most recurrent production of metafictional novels of any previous time period. The first text to appear in this period, and a definitive addition to the metafictional canon, is *Pale Fire* (1962) by Vladimir Nabokov, which presents a scholarly publication of the final poem of fictional poet – John Shade – composed by his self-appointed editor Charles Kinbote. The work mostly features Kinbote’s personal notes

¹ Stephen Prickett and Robert Barnes, *The Bible - Landmarks of World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 80.

and analysis of the poem, though the text structurally subverts the traditional novel by presenting the 'plot' within the seeming analysis and footnotes to the poem. So, this was a period when metafictional techniques, deconstructive and parodic of the growing postmodern ideology, experienced initial flourishing. Later the first works of metafictional literary analysis started to appear, probably the first example being John Barth's 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' published in 1967. Barth's work depicts novelists playing with the traditions of literature trying to invigorate a form which has presumably experienced a period of stagnation, literature which actively fights against the exhaustion of modern literary production, through the creation of '*novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author,*'² and serves as one of the first recognitions of the metafictional impulse within contemporary writing.

In 1970 we reach one of the most significant moments in the history of metafiction, with Gass's publication of 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction' in his *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, which includes the following significant description in which the field receives its name:

*And then there is the monster of present-day metafiction. These are works which contain, one way or another, explanations and references to themselves. They are fictions about fiction; not in the obvious sense in which one of the characters is a writer, for that can be taken up in the traditional form. Rather metafiction is a fiction in which the content of the work being structured is the structure of traditional fiction.*³

At this significant period in the history of metafiction, Gass coins the term, marking it as the name for such fictions in which forms of fiction directly impose upon other forms, which take the conventional structure of the novel and subsequently alter it. Along with Fowler, Alter, Scholes and Gass, an important defense of the metafictional form, came with the publication *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* by Patricia Waugh, whose works compete with that of Gass. Waugh's text presents the reader an analysis of the techniques, practices, and critical reception of metafiction, prior to suggesting a discussion on the technique that neither defends nor defames it. In her work she states that although metafiction as a term and practice is more obvious in the fiction of the 20th and 21st centuries and the practice is quite old. Additionally, what she states through the book is that metafiction is a function traced in all novels, hence, by studying it one can get deep philosophical insights of the identity of the novel. Noteworthy, Waugh claims that metafiction is an indispensable part of all novelistic production, that it is '*not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels.*'⁴ She further claims that metafiction alters the worn out notions of literary tradition into productive social criticism.

Waugh connects metafictional practice to an almost modernist inspirational wish for reconstruction of the old ideologies; *metafiction is the salve against which the 'sense of crises' in postmodern society is both established and expunged, in a manner contrary to certain postmodern depthless ideals.* In fact, although the reconstructive elements of metafiction are rather obvious, and linked to the postmodern, there is a certain element which Waugh outlines as peculiar to metafictional intent, which shows authorial desire to move beyond worn forms and into something new. What is more, sustained opposition is what characterizes metafictional novels: the conflict between fictional world and reality. That is the author at the same time creates fiction and makes comments on the creation process of that fiction. This, in turn, entailed much confusion both for writers and critics, hence, some writers expressing fear about anticipated misinterpretation on the part of a reader. While the writer tried to demonstrate artificiality of a fictional work by using metafiction, a reader would comprehend the work based on expectations of the traditional novel.

However, moving to the twentieth century this fear of sixties and seventies slowly faded away giving way to an optimism of the discovery of new forms of fantastic realism. Although metafictional works are still attacked by critics who claim that such works lack a fixed identity and, thus, leave novels vulnerable, metafictional writers argue that there is a need for the novel to theorize about itself.

² Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 72.

³ William H. Gass, 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction', in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 7.

⁴ Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) p. 14.

Further cultural pluralism of the modern era brought unprecedented options for literary imagination for the writers of post-modernism as opposed to clear-cut forms that modernist writers had to follow. However, it took much time for the shared aims and objectives of the new direction to develop. As for the changes fictional novels witnessed through eighteenth to twentieth centuries, it can be noted that while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an individual in fictional works was always integrated into social structures like family relationships or marriage, in modernist fiction a person has to overcome struggle with existing social institutions which would end in alienation from society. While, in the modern world, with more diverse structures of society post-modernist writers came across with dilemma of the object of opposition which was solved by metafictional writers who presented their own way of expression analyzing relationship between fiction and reality. Metafiction presents opposition not to facts of reality but to the language of realistic novel. Since metafiction is a way of writing within a cultural movement called post-modernism, it would be wise to dive into the term and the period.

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