Modernist Techniques, Postmodern Concerns: Mark Haddon's The Red House

Ida Pöcking

Student at the Faculty of Philology, University of Leipzig, Germany.

Abstract:

This essay argues Mark Haddon's The Red House (2012) addresses postmodern concerns through modernist writing techniques, blending the introspective depth and fragmented narrative of modernism with the thematic exploration of identity, multiplicity, and existential uncertainty and scepticism towards metanarratives typical of postmodernism. First the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is clarified, highlighting modernism's confidence in progress and metanarratives, contrasted with postmodernism's questioning of objective truth and its critique of grand narratives. Through textual analysis, the essay demonstrates how The Red House employs intertextuality, not merely as a literary device, but as a reflection of the hyperreality of postmodern culture. Furthermore, the fragmented narrative and stream of consciousness are analysed to reveal how they contribute to the novel's exploration of multiple, often conflicting, perspectives, challenging the notion of a single, objective reality. The essay concludes that The Red House effectively recontextualizes modernist techniques to articulate the uncertainties and complexities of the postmodern condition, prompting readers to confront ambiguity and question the nature of truth itself. The novel's focus on internal struggles and its lack of traditional plot underscores its postmodern nature, emphasizing the significance of small, seemingly insignificant moments in relation to larger narratives.

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1. Introduction

"You should not read **The Red House**. Tell your friends not to read it. If people suggest taking it on holiday, don't. If you find it in your holiday home, leave it there. It's not a good holiday book. It's not good literary fiction. No, it's not lightweight, and yet it also doesn't seem to mean anything."

This is one of the numerous negative reviews out there on *The Red House* by Mark Haddon first published in 2012. In this particular review from the "Stuckinabook" website, the novel is portrayed as confusing, fragmented and not what one expects when reaching for contemporary literature. In this essay, I will explore what makes the novel so confusing and different. I argue that it addresses postmodern concerns through modernist writing techniques, blending the introspective depth and fragmented narrative of modernism with the thematic exploration of identity, multiplicity, and existential uncertainty and scepticism towards metanarratives typical of postmodernism. Before proceeding with my analysis, I will elucidate the terms modernism and postmodernism as they are central to the discussion. I will explore the following literary techniques of modernism: fragmented narrative and stream of consciousness, intertextuality and the creation of psychological depth. My methodology will be exploring these techniques, showing how they are applied in the novel and explaining how they are utilised to portray postmodern concerns and ways of thinking. I picked these techniques because they are the most prevalent modern techniques employed in the novel and because it is

especially those techniques that address postmodern concerns. I will intentionally exclude autobiographical context to maintain an objective literary analysis and avoid conflating the work with the author's biography. Instead, I will focus on a textual analysis of the novel, situating it within its broader historical and cultural context.

2. Talking about Modernism and Postmodernism

2.1. Modernism

One must always see postmodernism's relation to modernism (Husseyn in Nicol 2002, 60), which is why I will begin talking about Modernism first. These periods have to be defined in context to their time. As for modernism, it saw meaningful societal, political and economic changes that influenced modernist thinking and writing[1]. Literary modernism is defined by its innovations in literary technique and language and reflects the impressions of culture and society at the time.

It is also seen in opposition to dominant social and cultural forces within the modern world, either as a point of resistance to modernity's fragmentation and incoherence or as a compensatory aesthetic, and even ethical, alternative

[1] For more insight into modernism and when important political and cultural changes happened (such as rise and reign of fascism, technological developments etc.), look at "The Modernism Handbook" by Alex Murray and Phillip Tew (2009).

(Shiach 2007, 3-5). Modernism has confidence in the progress of its time which is achieved through science and rationality. Modernism embraces metanarratives[2]. During Modernism, the literary works that were created explicitly represent the realities of their time and how they are experienced[3].

2.2. Postmodernism

As Jean-François Lyotard[4]put it: the 'post' in Postmodernism not only "indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one" (Malpas 2005, 42) "it was in the late 1970s, the 1980s and the early 1990s that the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' became pervasive in European new direction and North American culture." (ebd. 5). Postmodernism can be defined in many different ways and is approached differently by a number of scholars, one could say there are several postmodernisms (Nicol 2002, 279). Trying to make out what postmodernism is and finding one coherent definition is hardly possible, especially because postmodernism in its attitude often seeks

[2] Metanarrative is a term coined by postmodernist literary theory and defines the narrative about a narrative or narratives, it aims to explain a society and why everything happens (such as capitalism or socialism) (Malpas 2005, Nicol 2002).

[3] These experiences can of course be positive or negative and the criticism that modernists exerted looked different, for example: while Fillippo Tomasso Marinetti portrayed fascist ideologies in his "The Founding and the Manifesto of Futurism" or Ezra Pound in his works (Murray and Tew 2009, 61) other writers such as Djuna Barnes or Virginia Woolfe produced literature that can be regarded as a critique of social structures and even feminist.

[4] Jean-François Lyotard was a French philosopher who is a crucial figure in the postmodernist debate and wrote works that are important in the debate such as "The Postmodern Conditon" (1979) and other, he was especially critical of metanarratives (Malpas 2005, Nicols 2002).

to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them." (Malpas 2005, 4).

"For both Laclau and Lyotard, then, the postmodern is not simply a move beyond the modern but is rather a mode of critique that is immanent to it. It does not provide final answers or set up alternative grand narratives. Instead, postmodernism in art, theory or culture generally sets out to demonstrate the fractures and silences that have always been part of the grand narratives, to present the violence that emerges from foundational thinking as its categories are imposed on the refractory world of experience, to find means to give voice to those subjects or aspects of subjectivity whose uniqueness is occluded or silenced by the discursive totalities of the modern." (Malpas 2005, 131).

In this quote we can make out what differentiates postmodernism from modernism: the objectivity of truth is questioned and metanarratives are criticised. "some critics celebrate the postmodern as a period of playful freedom and consumer choice, some see it as a culture that has gone off the rails…" (ebd. 4). The debate on metanarratives is especially concerned with capitalism, "feminism and queer theory, postcolonialism and the politics of globalisation, as well as with such areas as environmental studies, history, philosophy and literary criticism. "(ebd. 6). A major point of debate in postmodernism is truth and how objective it can be. Postmodernism disputes modernism's belief in objective reality, contending that truth is subjective and created by cultural, social, and linguistic context. Postmodernism looks at perspective which I

believe especially fragments the nature of reality and how we all experience it so differently. How this applies to *The Red House* will become clear in my next part.

3. Analysis

Intertextuality as a modernist technique features references to other works in the text. To give an example: Daisy reads "The Wind in the Willows"[5] to Benjy. Its themes align with themes prevalent in *The Red House*, such as family, home or belonging (Haddon 2015, 30). The way intertextuality is used in postmodernism is very different from how it was in modernism. Even if it may have its roots in modernist methods, postmodernist ideas eventually guide its implementation. Therefore, we may say that although intertextuality has its roots in modernist tradition, in its finished form it is recontextualised and becomes postmodern. And this I could not put into better words than Guy Debord did: "[...]All that was once lived has become mere representation "(Nicol 2002, 124). Images and simulations become more immediate, more apparently real, more seductive and more desirable as they produce rather than reflect the reality in which we exist: contemporary subjectivity and society is not the producer of simulations, but the product of them. In the order of simulation, meaning 'implodes' and we move from reality to

[5] "The Wind in the Willows" is a children's book about animal tales by Kenneth Grahame published in 1908 (Britannica 2025).

hyperreality. (Malpas 2005, 124). In *The Red House* we see a lot of referencing of cultural products from popular consumer goods, to books, music or films and TV shows. This is done in a way that suggests knowing these is general knowledge. If we look at cultural products today we can see that every song, every movie, every Tv Show etcetera are the result of the cultural products preceding them, so almost all of these cultural products reference other cultural products[6]. This goes on up to a point where in our reality references play a huge role. The ways in which intertextuality is applied in *The Red House* reflects the mere abundance of cultural products in postmodern culture. Another modernist technique applied in *The Red House* is the fragmentation of narrative. The storytelling is not linear and jumps between different narrated situations. The author switches from one situation to another: In the 3rd chapter 'Sunday' on the first page the first paragraph is about Alex going for a run and thinking of how "He'd made a tit of himself" referring to him regretting having kissed Melissa. The next paragraph is about Louisa and Richard then. This makes the stream of consciousness really hard to follow, because it is strongly fragmented in this novel. What is interesting is that Mark Haddon often introduces the situation of the paragraph and who it is about in the first sentence and ends the paragraph in a way that leaves the reader curious. Such as on page 94 the paragraph starts with the sentence: "Daisy and Melissa are sitting in the back seat of the bus talking…" and ends with Christian symbols and references

[6] To name an example: the show "Family Guy" references a different cultural product such as movies in each episode basing its storyline, characters, scenery and themes on it.

which makes the sentence hard to comprehend. The characters interact with each other and talk to one another but a lot of the plot consists of the interior monologue of the characters, which is indeed very modern. This interior monologue "focuses on the characteristic grid which each mind imposes on the outside world, or through which it assimilates the outside world. "(Nicol 2002, 289). The postmodern character can be seen again here in the fragmented narrative, which makes it possible to look at different characters which enables an abundance of perspectives. This is done in a way where not only do we switch from reading about one character and then another it creates a bigger context that lets us look at different perspectives, this multiperspectivity is postmodern because it is in contrast to objectivity which would be the case, for example, if we would only read about one character only from one perspective only.

What this fragmentation does is enable the reader to get a deeper insight into the characters as well as the narrator focusing on one or a few characters at a time. The psychological depth created in *The Red House* is modern in a way where not much action is happening; it is much more about feelings. The reader can experience the character's complexities and internal conflicts. The modernist character in this is naming the thoughts that characters have, which then dig up existential questions, societal critiques and postmodern struggles. Modernism is usually concerned with the subject of reality and how it is perceived personally whereas in this novel the characters reflect more which makes it postmodern. The postmodern notion that reality is subjective and

multifaceted is reflected through the characters internal world not consisting of a single narrative but emphasizing diverse and often conflicting experiences and thoughts. The characters grapple with questions of identity, faith and purpose which is particularly postmodern.

Daisy struggles with her faith as well as her sexuality: In the beginning of the novel she is highly religious, she always says grace when the families are eating a meal on the table, she says things like: “We can make all our actions holy. We can cook a meal for our family and it becomes prayer. We can go for a walk in the park and it becomes prayer.” (Haddon 2015, 7). Until she kisses Melissa and it rattles her whole idea of herself, she asks herself whether she has a “…longing for a girlfriend, or for God, or simply for those everyday discomforts….”(ebd. 210) She is torn between trying to figure out what she wants and accepting herself and being afraid what others might think of her.

A recurrent topic in *The Red House* is Angela's battle with grief after the passing of her daughter Karen and her quest for purpose. One noteworthy instance may be seen in chapter ‘Tuesday’, as Angela considers how much Karen's passing has influenced her life. This chapter offers a thorough examination of Angela's existential doubts, her sense of loss, and her inner struggle. What we see in these examples is a constant quest for self-reflection in the characters, questioning their identity and also them trying to broaden the

horizon of their own

In the chapter ‘Thursday’ Richard tries to work over issues with Angela, he had been inconsiderate towards how she might have felt in the process of their father dying and her grief and tries to understand her point of view even though it is hard for him. While throughout the novel one could sense a sort of apathy towards Angela and her family, at the end of the vacation he comes to the conclusion that he actually really likes the others: [...]shrew. He simply hadn’t thought. But he liked them, he really did like them.”, that he could have been nicer to them: “Daisy, Alex, Benjamin, he had managed to upset all of them” (ebd.222)

In other instances we can see that the characters are critical towards metanarratives such as Richard reflecting the emptiness of his professional success and financial stability which has led him to a place of emotional isolation and dissatisfaction (s.a.). Other metanarratives addressed and questioned are Religion, as Daisy struggles with her faith and her faith being criticized by Melissa, Angela and Richard in many instances but also metanarratives of morality or war. The unreliability of the narrator only adds to this questioning of how objective truth can be through even making the reader second guess.

4. Conclusion

In *The Red House*, Mark Haddon utilizes modernist literary techniques to portray postmodern themes, creating a novel that addresses complex questions

of identity and meaning while critically engaging with metanarratives. Through the use of intertextuality, fragmented narrative and psychological depth the novel mirrors postmodern concerns of scepticism towards metanarratives, fluidity of identity and the multifaceted nature of reality - all of which are portrayed through multiple perspectives. This is why opinions about the novel are so divided, while some readers enjoy this unusual style connected with existential concerns others are confused by it. In essence, *The Red House* demonstrates that while the techniques of modernism continue to shape contemporary literature, they are recontextualized to address the uncertainties and complexities of the postmodern condition. The novel's introspective focus and fragmented structure as well as its unreliability challenges the reader to embrace ambiguity and question the objectivity of truth. It addresses huge concerns and debates within little content, there is no climax or plot twist as such, and therefore lays focus on the small things in life that can be connected to bigger narratives - which is quintessential postmodern nature. This novel opens pathways for future analysis particularly in going into more detail on the elements analysed in this essay or even looking at how contemporary fiction negotiates the boundaries between literary modernism and postmodernism. Future research might investigate how Haddon's approach of dealing with identity and personal connections mirrors the cultural anxieties of the 21st century in literature. The Red House emphasizes the significance of postmodern themes and their changing influence on literary discourse by tackling major philosophical issues in the context of daily life..

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6. Authors Note

Ida Pöcking

Student at the Faculty of Philology, University of Leipzig, Germany

This essay was prepared as part of my academic research at the Faculty of Philology, University of Leipzig, Germany. I am currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Anglistik (English Studies) and Ethnologie (Social and Cultural Anthropology). This work reflects my ongoing engagement with interdisciplinary approaches to language, culture, and society.