Akshara: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Literature and Language
ISSN: 0975-5373; E-ISSN: 2583-4738
Vol. 16, May 2024, pp. 60-67
Edited by Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.waoar.org/akshara/

Double Scope Stories and Blended Narratives: A Cognitive Literary Analysis of Updike's "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?"

*Mandeep Kaur**

Abstract

This research delves into the cognitive approach within literary analysis, focusing on John Updike's short story "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" Drawing upon Merlin Donald's cognitive theories and Mark Turner's concept of double-scope stories, the paper applies these frameworks to analyze the narrative. It explores how the cognitive abilities of human brain contribute to the creation of art, particularly in stories that embody Turner's notion of double blend, which extends to a global scale. The analysis reveals how Updike blends multiple narratives - those of the father storyteller, the author's own experiences, and the child listener - allowing the emergence of deeper insights into themes of identity, self-acceptance, and the complexities of parenthood. Through the character of Roger Skunk, Updike invites readers to ponder tolerance and acceptance of perceived flaws, which parallel his own struggles with childhood bullying. The child Jo's evolving perspective reflects the development of moral reasoning and independent thought in childhood cognition. Meanwhile, the father Jack's preference for escapist fantasy highlights the uncertainties and ennui of adulthood. The open-ended conclusion prompts introspection on the balance between parental authority and nurturing a child's autonomy. Employing Turner's framework, the paper demonstrates how the story exemplifies blending of disparate conceptual arrays, allowing invention of abstract notions like justice and retribution. This cognitive approach illuminates the deeper psychological truths and "forbidden wisdom" embedded within Updike's ostensibly simplistic children's tale, ultimately underscoring

*Research Scholar, Department of English, Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, Sector 36 A, Chandigarh - 160036, India. Email: mndp7930@gmail.com

© 2024 The Author. Published by Paragon International Publishers. Open Access Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0).

profound capacity of literature to shape human cognition and cultural worldviews, as posited by Donald's theory.

Keywords: Cognitive approach, narrative blending, double scope stories, metacognition, self-reflective art

Introduction

The cognitive turn began in around 1950s, influenced by developments in computer science, linguistics, and artificial intelligence that challenged the prevailing behaviourist approach in psychology (Czachesz 1). It brought a new focus on studying mental processes, representations, and structures. In the 1990s, the cognitive approach gained traction and spread to other disciplines, including literary studies, giving rise to the field of cognitive literary criticism. This interdisciplinary approach explores the intersections between literature, psychology, and neuroscience, raising relevant questions about how the mind works in engaging with literary texts and how art functions as a cognitive activity. Cognitive literary criticism examines mental phenomena beyond just thinking, such as feeling, perception, memory, and embodied experiences, in order to provide insights into readers' interactions with literary works (Park 68). Foundational to this cognitive approach are Merlin Donald's theories on the evolution of human cognition and the function of art as a form of "cognitive engineering" that affects how individuals comprehend and interpret narratives. Donald posits that artists significantly influence worldviews and mental models by strategically preserving and modifying symbolic representations. Literature, as a potent artistic medium, thus holds the capacity to rewire readers' cognitive processes and conceptions of reality. Complementing Donald's theories is Mark Turner's work on double-scope stories and blended narratives. Turner discusses the human ability to simultaneously activate and merge distinct, even conflicting, mental narratives into emergent blended spaces rife with new meanings and metaphorical wisdom. This cognitive flexibility, Turner argues, is fundamental to human cognition and facilitates sophisticated reasoning about abstract concepts like justice, revenge, and morality. This cognitive literary lens is then used to examine and showcase blending of multiple embedded narratives in the short story "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" by John Updike. The story explores profound themes of identity, self-acceptance, moral autonomy, and the complexities of parenthood.

Cognitive Aspect of Art

An article titled "Readers build vivid mental simulations of narrative situations, brain scans suggest" argues that when readers immerse themselves in a narrative, they

create vivid mental simulations of the scenes described in the text. This process involves engaging brain regions linked with processing similar experiences in real life. Essentially, readers mentally recreate the sights, sounds, tastes, and movements depicted in the text, drawing from their personal knowledge and past experiences, this is how cognitive approach works. Cognitive literary criticism engages the contemporary psychology and neuroscience of reading, consciousness, imagery, social behaviour, decision making, empathy, and perception in order to provide new insights into literary works and creativity. Merlin Donald discusses features that make art a cognitive activity in "Art and Cognitive Evolution". According to Donald, art serves as a form of cognitive engineering that influences how readers perceive and interpret stories in certain ways. Artists shape and preserve symbols and images associated with the cultural identity of a society, thereby influence cognitive processes. Donald states that,

> ...human culture is essentially a distributed cognitive system within which world view and mental models are constructed and shared by the members of a society. Artists are traditionally at the fore-front of that process, and have a large influence on our world view and mental models (5).

It shows how art is basically constructivist in nature. Art is self-reflective, thus is metacognitive in nature and is a source of cultural identity in which artists have the power to frame the culture and influence the cognition processes. Though different cultures project different world views.

Cognitive aspect of art not only depends on the artist but also on the technology. He says, "Technology affects the kinds of cognitive networks artists can construct, in part by setting limits on the kinds of ideas and images that can be represented and created" (Donald 6). Donald suggests that the human capacity for symbolic thought, which underpins art, arises from evolutionary changes in the prefrontal cortex. These changes are enhanced attention, metacognition, and memory capacities, enabling hominids to navigate complex social environments. He concludes that what drove brain expansion were not the cognitive demands of toolmaking or spatial mapping of the environment, but the growth in the size of the social group, that imposed greater demands on memory. Donald proposes three stages of human symbolic capacity development: Mimetic, Mythic, and Technological. Each stage builds upon the previous one, reflecting the deep roots of art in human expression and culture. He argues, "... the new is always and inevitably scaffolded on the old, and as a result, art is ultimately a reflection of the deepest and most ancient form of human expression, mimesis"

(Donald 9-10). He believes art or any activity for that matter is essentially cognitive in nature, thus invokes brain activity,

> ...which can be broken down into various component functions, such as perception, working memory, spatial attention, lexical search, episodic recall, and so on. Any complex mental task, including the production and viewing of art, is made up of chains of these cognitive components (Donald 10).

Mimesis, the imitation or representation of reality in art, plays an important role in shaping human cognition. By engaging in mimesis, humans develop metacognitive abilities that distinguish them from other species. Art, as a form of mimesis, influences cognitive processes and contributes to the development of expressive culture. "We are the species that made cultures into distributed cognitive systems, and those systems have reshaped our brains" (Donald 18). Thus, the cognitive approach lends more importance to how literature is more leaned on to the side of mimesis in order to look and explore the cognitive processes that go behind while reading a text, than the language.

Blending Multiple Narratives

Mark Turner in "Double-Scope Stories" explores the fascinating ability of the human brain to simultaneously activate and blend two different simultaneous stories, leading to the creation of new insights and wisdom. He argues that this capacity is fundamental to human cognition and is evolutionarily significant, allowing individuals to navigate complex situations by drawing on past experiences while remaining grounded in the present. He also references an experiment by Michael Jouvet, demonstrating how mammals possess the capacity to engage with entirely distinct scenarios from their current experiences, thereby reinforcing his argument. To illustrate this phenomenon in humans, Turner draws on the concept of dreaming, where individuals can experience entirely different scenarios from their waking lives. He suggests that even in mundane activities like brushing teeth, the mind can wander to unrelated events or imagined stories, demonstrating the ability of the brain to maintain multiple narratives simultaneously. Turner provides an example of a man about to marry who inadvertently calls out the name of another woman he has been thinking about. This slip of the tongue highlights how individuals can run two distinct stories in their minds simultaneously and potentially blend them, leading to unexpected outcomes or regrets. He ponders on this ability of humans to run two different stories in the mind at the same time and also blend them. In *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, Fauconnier and Turner propose that blending

is a fundamental aspect of human nature and cognitive modernity. They argue that humans share rudimentary forms of blending with other species but possess an advanced ability to blend incompatible conceptual arrays, contributing to cognitive sophistication. Turner goes on to relate this process of blending narratives with relation to several literary texts and shows how new meanings develop as a result of this blend which reveals a deeper truth or which he calls a 'forbidden fruit of wisdom' about the actual human situation. The process of blending involves mapping elements of two stories and selectively projecting them into a blended narrative. This leads to a new formation that combines elements from both stories, resulting in the invention of concepts like punishment, revenge, and retribution. In his analysis of literary texts, he lays down some standard features of blending:

> Mapping between elements of the two stories. Blending two stories always involves at least a provisional mapping between them. The mapping typically involves connections of identity, analogy, similarity, causality, change, time, intentionality, space, role, part-whole, or representation...Selective projection, Different elements of the stories are projected to the blended story (Turner 11).

It results in emerging of a structure common to both the stories that make the blend possible. Through this he explains how "Human beings are able to invent concepts like punishment, revenge, and retribution. These concepts are the result of blending" (Turner 12). Through their analysis of literary texts, Turner and Fauconnier demonstrate how blending narratives can bring to light the deeper truths about the human mind, offering insights into concepts that are otherwise beyond our grasp. This double scope of blending extends to the human scale, elucidating the cognitive aspects of readers' experiences with narratives.

Analysis and Discussion

Based on the above observations, an analysis of the short story "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" by John Updike is presented. John Updike was an American writer known for his detailed portrayal of everyday life in small-town America ("John Updike"). He wrote novels, short stories, poetry, and essays, often exploring themes like fidelity, religion, and sexuality ("John Updike"). His most famous works include the "Rabbit" series, which follows the life of its protagonist through societal changes. He is often perceived for the sharp wit, keen observations and lightness in his themes.

"Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" by John Updike might seem to be a simple children's story, but its depth lies in its blend that deals with the exploration of innocence

and complexity within both children and adults. The narrative revolves around Jack, a father who repetitively tells his daughter Jo the tale of Roger skunk's quest for acceptance. Despite the story's predictability, Jo remains engaged, showcasing her keen mind by pointing out even a small lapse on the father's part promptly. However, it is Jo's probing question about the moral dilemma of the story that leaves Jack, and readers, grappling for answers. On the surface, the story of Roger skunk seeking acceptance through a wizard's magic appears straightforward. Yet, beneath the surface, it delves into the themes of self-acceptance and the influence of parental guidance. Jo's demand for a different ending, where the wizard hits the mommy skunk back, challenges the notion of parental infallibility, sparking a reflection on the balance between parental authority and a child's independent thinking. Jack's identification with Roger skunk and his own childhood experiences mirror Updike's own struggles with identity and acceptance. Jack, while reciting the story, is reminded of his own influences as a child. He is presenting himself through Roger skunk and puts the point how her mother helped him in dealing with it. And Jack in turn is the alter ego of the author too. Updike's childhood was clouded by psoriasis and stammering due to which he was an object of ridicule of his classmates (Updike, "At War"). This in turn, also makes the reader understand and relate with Roger Skunk. This is a double blend. Author, Jack and Roger skunk they all stand for the natural beings that we are. Story, in this way, transcends and adopts a human scale as talked by Turner. Through Jack's character, Updike explores the complexities of adulthood, including guilt, uncertainty, and the desire to escape into fantasy. The open-ended conclusion of the story leaves Jack and readers alike in a state of discomfort, confronting the uncertainties of parenthood and self-acceptance. The ending of the story leaves the narrator caught in "ugly middle position" of uncertainties (Updike, "Should Wizard" 82). The disagreement raised by his daughter whether children should retain control over their lives or their parents awakens a guilt complex by opening up wounds of childhood in Jack, alongside with his inability to make his daughter sleep and also to help his pregnant wife with painting furniture downstairs, makes him feel like he is trapped in a cage with his wife and now he proceeds on to project his hatred on her as the story ends with the remark, "he as well felt his wife's presence in the cage with him, he did not want to speak with her, work with her, touch her, anything" (Updike, "Should Wizard" 82). Story not only shows the working and developments of a child's inquisitive nature as she grows but also the adults. And this in turn makes the readers self-reflect, thus adding the dimension of metacognition. Jo, a child of four is surrounded with reason and logic, she is critical

of magic spells being real in life. However, she cannot bear the unjust treatment caused to the wizard by the mother skunk and wants him to hit her back on the head, showing how a human brain becomes capable of independent thinking and frames their own view points about certain things. While, father Jack connects much with a modern man, he is a victim of ennui and seeks escape from dreary life by talking about magic and fantasy. Father is firm in his opinion that all mothers are supreme and cannot err. Just like he faces an ugly middle position surrounded with uncertainties so do readers. Updike's narrative also prompts introspection, inviting readers to ponder the complexities of parenting and the importance of self-acceptance. Through the character of Roger skunk, Updike advocates for tolerance and acceptance of oneself and others, regardless of perceived flaws. The dynamic between Jo and Jack highlights the evolving nature of childhood cognition and the importance of fostering independent thought in children. Jo's rejection of the story's fantastical elements in favour of justice reflects her growing understanding of morality and fairness. Conversely, Jack's reliance on magic and fantasy serves as a way to cope with his own existential struggles. Though the view point of a child wants no injustice, no evil and no suffering. A child understands things at a surface level, responsive to the visual dimension that the fantasy world offers, but an adult's vision is pragmatic, introspective and even psychological; it depicts the stark reality.

John Updike underlines the idea that children begin to develop their cognition that frames their notions of identity, views and attitudes; it is wrong on the part of adults to thrust their will on them. Once a child is able to express himself or herself, one should not ignore his queries, suggestions and opinions. If the adult finds the child's approach to be erroneous one should appeal to his reasoning rather than force him to see the adults' view point by using threat and coercive methods. The author has yet another message to convey that we should honor value and accept all creatures high or low, gleefully the way skunk was eventually received by the woodland creatures despite its foul smell and skunk himself rose above his inferiority complex. The blending of stories reveals the 'forbidden fruit' that Turner discusses about. The story shows a conventional blend often found in children's literature, mainly to impart an understanding to children "...in the hope of leading the child to make the present story conform to a favored event in the blend, namely, the child's pleasant willingness to go to bed" (Turner 24). Nonetheless, it appeals to human ability to comprehend a narrative, by imparting an understanding to present environment which plays an important part in cognitive process.

Conclusion

Literature has the profound ability to shape human thought and conceptions of reality through the creative act of blending disparate ideas. The blending of multiple narratives within the text allow for new meanings to emerge. Both children and adults develop a better understanding of complex issues like identity, morality, and parenthood. Overall, Turner's exploration of blending sheds lights on the complex workings of the human mind and its role in shaping perception and understanding.

Works Cited

Czachesz, István. *Cognitive Science and the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research.* Oxford UP, 2017.

Donald, Merlin. "Art and Cognitive Evolution." *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, edited by Mark Turner, Oxford UP, 2006, pp. 3-20.

Everding, Gerry. "Readers Build Vivid Mental Simulations of Narrative Situations, Brain Scans Suggest." *The Source*, Washington University in St. Louis, 13 Jan. 2016, source.wustl.edu/2009/02/readers-build-vivid-mental-simulations-of-narrative-situations-brain-scans-suggest-2/.

Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and The Mind's Hidden Complexities*. Basic books, 2008.

"John Updike." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14 Mar. 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/John-Updike.

Park, Sowan S. "The Dilemma of Cognitive Literary Studies." *English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Niall Gildea et al., 2015, pp. 67-81. DOI: 10.1057/9781137478054.0011.

Turner, Mark. "Double-Scope Stories." *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by David Herman, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003. SSRN, 2009, pp. 1-27, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1399811.

Updike, John. "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, Random House Publishing, 2012, pp. 74-82.

_____. "At War with My Skin." *The New Yorker,* vol. 61, Sept. 1985, p. 39, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1985/09/02/at-war-with-my-skin.

❑❑❑