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BA English Honours | Semester II | ENG2CJ101

Reading Fiction

Module 2: Narrative Techniques: Point of View, Stream of Consciousness, Backstory, and Hypertext • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 2: Structural Mechanics of Narrative Technique

Narrative technique forms the architectural scaffold through which fictional consciousness is generated, filtered, and conveyed to the reader. Far from being a neutral vehicle for plot progression, narrative perspective governs epistemological certainty, thematic tension, and ideological authority. Modernist and postmodern innovations—such as stream of consciousness, non-linear chronological backstories, and interactive digital hypertext—fundamentally challenge the classical illusion of objective omniscience, drawing reader awareness to the mediated reality of storytelling.

2.1 Unreliable Narration and Psychological Confinement: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 masterpiece "The Yellow Wallpaper" stands as a foundational text of feminist psychological realism and unreliable first-person narration. Presented as the secret journal entries of an unnamed woman diagnosed with "temporary nervous depression," the narrative documents her descent into psychosis during a mandatory "rest cure" prescribed by her physician husband, John.

Gilman employs first-person narration to immerse the reader directly inside the protagonist's disintegrating psyche. The oppressive nursery room, barred windows, and repulsive yellow wallpaper function as an objective correlative for the patriarchal medical surveillance confining late-Victorian women. As the protagonist becomes obsessed with deciphering the wallpaper's erratic arabesque pattern, she discovers a trapped woman creeping behind the design—a profound externalization of her own domestic imprisonment. The climax, in which she creeps over her fainting husband, achieves a terrifying symbolic liberation at the tragic cost of complete sanity.

> *"There are things in that paper which nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day."*

2.2 Irony, Social Satire, and Capitalism: Mark Twain's "The Million Pound Bank Note"

Mark Twain's 1893 satirical tale "The Million Pound Bank Note" exposes the absurd artificiality of Victorian financial capitalism, credit, and social class. The narrative centers on Henry Adams, an impoverished American stranded penniless in London, who becomes the subject of a wager between two wealthy eccentric brothers. They give him an uncashed Bank of England note worth one million pounds to determine whether a man possessing only the promise of wealth can survive thirty days without breaking the note.

Twain masterfully employs dramatic irony and third-person situational comedy. Henry never spends a single penny of the banknote; the mere visual display of immense potential liquidity compels merchants, tailors, and hoteliers to extend unlimited credit, aristocratic deference, and social acclaim. Twain brilliantly demonstrates how societal valuation is detached from intrinsic labor or human dignity, operating purely on performative spectacle and the collective hallucination of capital.

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2.3 Narrative Backstory and Creaturely Empathy: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (Chapter 13)

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) famously utilizes a nested Chinese-box narrative structure (Captain Walton's letters enclosing Victor Frankenstein's confession, which in turn encloses the Creature's autobiographical tale). Chapter 13 represents the emotional zenith of the Creature's backstory, detailing his secret observations of the De Lacey family in their forest cottage.

Through the Creature's focalization, Shelley interrogates the Enlightenment tabula rasa theory formulated by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As the Creature learns spoken language and observes Felix instruction of Safie through Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, he acquires sophisticated historical awareness. He witnesses the glory and cruelty of human civilization—colonial wars, vast disparities of wealth, and social prejudice. This embedded backstory transforms the Creature from an externalized Gothic monster into an articulate, philosophical subject whose eventual vengeance stems from systematic societal exclusion and parental abandonment.

2.4 Non-Linearity and Reader Agency: Naemie Breard's The Game of Life

The advent of electronic literature and computational narratives introduced hypertext fiction, wherein narrative progression is determined by hyperlinks and non-linear nodes rather than fixed codex typography. Naemie Breard's *The Game of Life* exemplifies how digital storytelling challenges traditional teleological causality.

In hypertext fiction, the reader transitions from a passive consumer to an active co-creator, choosing divergent navigational pathways that reshape character fate, ethical outcomes, and narrative closure. Breard leverages the interactive affordances of the digital medium to simulate existential decision-making, demonstrating how algorithmic structures reflect contemporary anxieties concerning agency, chance, and systemic determinism.

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Critical inquiry into Module 2: Narrative Techniques: Point of View, Stream of Consciousness, Backstory, and Hypertext reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

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3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

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