

## Postmodern Elements in William Golding's *Rites of Passage*

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### ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to study William Golding's *Rites of Passage* to shed light on the demonstration of postmodern to conclude that the amplitude of the facets which the novel suggests, can lead to a *chaotic* aspect in *Rites of Passage*. Besides, the concept of "edge of chaos" can be touched in the novel as well. In fact, the novel exposes the reader with different faces of the postmodern in such a way that each face, recurring simultaneously, aims to express diversity of probabilities in the interpretation of truths by offering paradoxes as well as changes in the narration process. In portraying the incidents on a ship board, the narration aims to suggest itself as an epistolary novel while paradoxically parodying the order and style of the epistolary. Nonetheless this parody not only shakes up the epistolary but also helps the narration to anchor in diversity of texts such as history or different literary ancestors in order to mirror a self reflexivity. By this diversity in its structure the narration brings up a chaos in its intertextuality in a way that by each literary face that it opens to the readers' eyes, a new aspect of truth is revealed like a free play of interpreters and interpretations. This chaos is palpable in its characterization as well as in its presentation of diverse courses of storytelling. In other words the narrators, being involved in such a chaos, invite the confused readers to engage in the course of narration and fill in the gaps in the text and in their interpretations.

**KEYWORDS:** Parody, Self Reflexivity, Intertextuality, Polyphony, Chaos and Edge of Chaos.

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### INTRODUCTION

#### Parody

In Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's words, 'postmodern' paradoxically refers to what is after ('post') the contemporary ('modern'). How can something be *after* the contemporary? Consequently, because it is paradoxical, the postmodern resists definition and resists the totalizing gesture of a metalanguage, the attempt to describe it as a set of coherent explanatory theories (1, p178). However, to try to follow the traces of the 'postmodern' in *Rites of Passage*, it can be a good start to mention parody, to which J. A. Cuddon refers, as one of the "discernible features of postmodernism"(2, p690). M.H. Abrams in a definition of parody states that:"A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre and deflates the original" (3, p36). Considering the stated explanations above on 'parody', first of all it is notable that in *Rites of Passage* the first person narrator, Edmund Talbot, declares that the narration takes the form of letters to his godfather in order to make a journal of his travel experiences in the ship. So at the first sight, it seems that *Rites of Passage* is imitating epistolary novel in which, as Abrams asserts, the narrative is "conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters" (3, p228). But the prominent point is that, this epistolary novel happens to have two different narrators. In fact, as the novel gets closer to its end, it happens to employ another narrator, Colley, whose narration is the embodiment of his letters written for his sister before his death. This new voice gives the reader completely different view on the incidents and the characters. Thus Golding's innovative style in parodying the epistolary novel gives us a fragmented form of narrative style. Also, Marita Nadal, in her article *William Golding's Rites of Passage: A World in Transition*, claims that it is logical to deduce *Clarissa* as a close influence on Golding, since both are epistolary and also the causes of both deaths, Colley and Clarissa, have a great deal in common(4, p87). On the other hand what seems outstanding is that, there is lack of order of time and chronology in *Rites of Passage*, which needs to be a crucial feature to epistolary genre. This absence of unity of time becomes palpable by considering the playful mode of chaptering and ordering, by which it seems that this is to treat time, which is a serious subject, in a playful and humorous way. He happens to elapse suddenly from chapter '5', a cardinal number, to chapter 'X', a Roman number, making five chaptering gaps in between. Chapter 'X' ends on page '61'; however the next chapter starting on page '62' is chapter '12' missing chapter 11; and the next chapter is '17'. Besides, in numbering his chapters the use of different marks as '?' on page 72, 'Y' on page 85, 'Zeta' which is the sixth letter of Greek alphabet, on page 93, or Ω which is the last letter of Greek alphabet are distinguishable. So it can be asserted that, *Rites of Passage* while imitating the epistolary mode of

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Epistolary novel, it aims to parody it by subverting its time and narration treatment. This may evoke Talbot's statement as he says: "I cannot get one tenth of the day down!" (5,p32)

### Self Reflexivity

Indeed, by considering the sentence above by Talbot it can be claimed that the narration's treatment of time and narratology reveals a matter of self-conscious text. In Richard Gill's words in metafiction or reflexive novel, "narrator comments on his own writings. He writes of how characters act independently, he adjusts his style to imitate nineteenth-century novelists, and he provides several endings for the book. And the novel becomes a kind of game played with the reader, who in order to enjoy the work, must have a sense of history" (6, p39). So it can be claimed that self-conscious narrator informs the reader that the narration is just a work of fictional art. Talbot begins his description of the narration as he states: "I have placed the number "2" at the beginning of this entry though I do not know how much I shall set down today; Circumstances are all against careful composition" (5, p11). The self-reflexivity becomes more obvious when the first narrator, Talbot, makes comments on his own narration process or difficulty of writing about his experiences. "There is such a crowd of events at the back of my mind, tongue, pen, what you will, that my greatest difficulty is to know how to get them on the paper!" (5,p27)

Besides, as it was told above, the innovative headings and treatment of time helps the process of narration to make it self-reflexive as well. There are the moments when the reader faces with the distracting strange letters among the sentences or words as if the narration wants to disrupt the narration language by using for example Latin to increase the self-reflexivity of the text and participate the reader in the stream of narration; for an instance on page 34 of the novel Talbot states: "Well sir" said I to Willis, "we are certainly *ἐπ' εὐρέα νοῶ θασσῆς*, are we not? Willis replied that he did not know French. "What do you know then, lad?" (5,p34)

In addition, many references have been made to the theatrical feature of the narration and Talbot seems to make these allusions intentionally, as he says: "I cannot prevent the whole ship from indulging in theatricals!" (5,p104). Talbot emphasizes on the theatrical condition of the narration, when he writes about making love to Miss. Brocklebank, and says: "we were now . . . in about act three of an inferior drama. She was to be the deserted victim and I the heartless villain" (5,p88). As another instance, he states: "Or may I stay with the Greeks? It is a play. Is it a farce or a tragedy? Does not a tragedy depend on the dignity of the protagonist? Must he not be great to fall greatly? A farce, then, for the man appears now a sort of PUNCHINELLO. His fall is in social terms" (5, p104).

On the other hand, Marita Nadal states that, "*Rites of Passage* is "historically aware, hybrid and inclusive": characteristics that define Postmodernism in Linda Hutcheon's view". As Nadal claims, this novel can be taken as "an example of 'historiographic metafiction' by virtue of its ingenious combination of history, parody, and reflexivity" (4, p85). Linda Hutcheon claims that "Historiographic metafiction, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge. (7,p67). It might be claimed that, in *Rites of Passage*, history does not appear as an objective and independent reality, but as a human construct which seems to be intertextually related to previous texts and incidents. Nadal states that:

the historical sources of *Rites of Passage*, refer to an incident that occurred in 1797 on board a ship bound for Manila, involving Wellington, then Colonel Wellesley, and a young clergyman. Golding sums up the episode as follows: "the book (*Rites of Passage*) is founded on an actual historical incident. There was a man, a parson, who was on board. A ship, in a convoy that was going from the east coast of India to the Philippines... There was a regiment of soldiers going, and there was a parson... a very respectable man. And one day... either he got drunk and went wandering naked among the soldiers and sailors, or else, put it whatever way you like. But he came back, he went into his cabin and stayed there and no matter what anybody else said to him, he just lay there until he died in a few days." It appears that although Wellington kindly tried to cheer him up, the parson forced himself to die. Significantly, Golding's impulse to write the novel originated in his desire to recreate the past in a critical way as postmodernism does (4, p86).

Accordingly it can be asserted that, the narration of *Rites of Passage* has amplitude of facets; like an epistolary novel it is in form of letters while subverting the epistolary style's narration and time treatment. Also it seems like historical novels which as Abrams claims it "not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative" (3, p230). Besides, as a postmodern work it recreates the past in an innovative contemporary style by the means of self-reflexivity and parody to create a collaboration of literature and history. Thus this novel while being written in 1980, borrows the past and takes both historical and literary sources into its collage structure.

### Pastiche and Intertextuality

It is noteworthy that, in *Rites of Passage*, there are many allusions to different literary works. For instance, Talbot talks about Laurence Sterne and *Tristram Shandy*, when he points out: "My entries are becoming short as some of Mr. Stern's chapters" (5, p72). In fact both *Tristram Shandy*, and *Rites of Passage* include modes of self-reflexivity, parodying time elements, using strange letters and headings. In J. A. Cuddon's view, a patchwork of words, sentences or complete passages from various authors signifies a work of 'pastiche' which is a kind of imitation or may be a form of parody (2, p644). Bennett and Royle recognize 'pastiche' as one of the 'postmodern vocabulary' and assert that it is like an eclectic juxtaposition, hybridization, intertextuality, a mixture of forms and genres in which boundaries are dissolved (1,p184). So it might be asserted that, *Rites of Passage* is an intertextual novel by its very playful combination of not only historical incidents but also literary sources. As Nadal in the article *William Golding's Rites of Passage: A Case of Transtextuality* states:

Evidently, Golding has used Richardson's and Sterne's literary technique as a basis for his novel. The parallels between Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Talbot's journal are inescapable: both include digressions, sudden starts and stops and share irregularities in the chapter headings. Precisely, these irregularities point to another type of transtextuality: paratextuality, which describes the connections between a text and the title, or subtitle, preface, epigraph, notes, illustrations... of another one. Similarly, both narrators are chronically self-conscious, "anticipating" the time-manipulating devices of modern literature: "Good God! Look at the time! If I am not more able to choose what I say I shall find myself describing the day before yesterday rather than writing about today for you tonight!... I find that writing is like drinking, a man must learn to control it"

To illustrate another example related to the intertextual quality of the novel, there are references to Coleridge and *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* as it says: Alone, alone, all, all alone,/Alone on a wide wide sea/And never a saint took pity on/My soul in agony. And Talbot, very playfully and it seems that intentionally, uses the verses in his narrative as he asserts:

We were a single ship. We were a single ship. We were, as she said in thrilling accents,

–alone, alone,

All, all alone,

Alone on a wide, wide sea!

Anything more crowded than the teeming confines of this ship is not to be found, I believe, outside a debtor's goal or a prison hulk. But yes she had met Mr. Coleridge (5, p59).

He even happens to ridicule Coleridge when there is an allusion to shooting Albatross:

"In fact I found that Mr. Coleridge had been mistaken. Sailors are superstitious indeed, but careless of life in any direction. The only reason why they do not shoot sea birds is first because they are not allowed weapons and second because seabirds are not pleasant to eat"(5,p87). It can be stated that considering all the stated aspects above, 'Intertextuality' seems to become an appropriate term to define as one of the main qualities of *Rites of Passage*. M.H. Abrams, in definition of 'intertextuality' states that any literary text is in fact "made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions" (3,p364). Therefore, it can be asserted that intertextuality as one of the overt features of *Rites of Passage*, characterizes the novel's text, made up of mosaic of quotations, absorption and transformation of other texts. Talbot narrates: "He (Colley) was muttering some nonsense of *fol de rol* or the like. Then, as if seeing his audience for the first time, he heaved himself away from his assistant, stood on splayed feet and flung out his arms as if to embrace us all. 'Joy! Joy! Joy!'"(5, p117). In fact these words can be a reference to lines from Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*:

Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,  
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,  
Life, and life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,  
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,  
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower,  
A new Earth and new Heaven,

### Polyphony and Relativity of Truth

Furthermore, it can be stated that the narration uses the aristocrat and the parson to represent different forces within another crucial moment in history. In Nadal's view with its use of the dual narrative perspective, *Rites of Passage* can be viewed as a novel which is structured around the conflict between Augustanism and Romanticism (8,p3). In fact the novel seems to be displaying a clash between the Enlightenment and Romantic ideas within the characterization of Talbot and Colley. Thus it can be said that the events on board are represented by two different

narrative voices coded by two different value systems. The narratives suggest a clash between the learned and urbane against the naive, or socially oriented against the nature-worshipping. Of course this characterization does not seem to be in favor of publicizing any of these value systems. Indeed, the characterization of Talbot and Colley has portrayed them with their shortcomings, in a way that it seems to help the 'parody' aim of *Rites of Passage* as a postmodern novel, in which "Undecidability", as asserted by Bennett and Royle, 'takes the place of search for truth' (J, p179). Talbot is educated and snobbish. His diary begins with his observation of the ship in detail. He is curious about everything on the ship and asks questions to Wheeler. He starts to comment on everything through his reasoning. He has laid *Falconer's Marine Dictionary* by his pillow because he wants to 'speak the tarry language as perfectly as any of these rolling fellows' (5, p8). He happens to explain the theory of Copernicus to Willis during the sun shooting ritual: "Do you not know of Galileo and his 'Eppur si muove?' the earth goes round the sun! the motion was described by Copernicus and confirmed by Kepler!" (5, p37). Class and manners happen to be so crucial for Talbot. He refers to Aristotle's theory of orders of society: "Colley was a living proof of old Aristotle's dictum. There is after all an order to which the man belongs by nature though some mistaken quirk of patronage has elevated him beyond it" (5, p67)

On the other hand Colley stands for the naive and the demotic, as Talbot states: "his schooling should have been the open fields, with stone collecting and bird scaring, his university the plough" (5,p67). Moreover, Colley's admiration of the beauty of seamen, especially the beauty of Billy Rogers, is related to a Romantic inclination, love for human beauty. In comparison to Talbot's cold depiction of his environment, Colley seems to have an emotional attitude toward the voyage as his narrative voice appears in the ending parts of the novel:

It is an earthly, nay, an oceanic paradise! The sunlight is warm and like a natural benediction. The sea is brilliant as the tails of Juno's birds (I mean the peacock) that parade the terraces of Manston Place!...Enjoyment of such a scene is as good as a medicine as a man could wish for when enhanced by that portion of the scriptures appointed for the day. (5,p187)

Thus Talbot is standing for reasoning force and Colley for emotions. Therefore it can be supposed that the clash of the opposite forces is like the clash of Apollonian and Dionysian forces. As J.A. Cuddon states:

Terms derived from the names of the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo was the messenger of the gods, and presiding deity of music, medicine, youth and light, and was sometimes identified with the sun. Dionysus was the god of vegetation and wine and, it might be said, of 'permissiveness'. Nietzsche used the terms in *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). He was making a distinction between reason and instinct, culture and primitive nature; possibly brains as opposed to loins and heart. (2, p49)

It might be claimed that in *Rites of Passage*, Talbot stands for Apollonian, while Colley is identified with Dionysian. While Talbot is being interpreted as a character in stance of ordered, rational and thinking, Colley is the one for feeling, passionate, intoxication and celebration of nature and beauty. His 'beastly drunk' shouts of Joy! Joy! Joy and his love for Billy Roger's beauty can be a confirmation for the claim. Also Summers, draws the parallel between Colley's attitude and that of savage tribes: "They are able to lie down and die" (5,p153). Actually the relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian and their juxtaposition in *Rites of Passage* seem to create the tragic fall of Colley who struggles to make order of his unjust and chaotic (Dionysian) fate. However, not only William Golding does not seem to be advertizing any two systems on the board, but also the narration happens to be 'decentring' them since the novel in this view just brings up a state of 'alterity' and challenge of 'logocentric'. Talbot's reasoning and snobbishness result in a limited point of view and similarly Colley's naivety causes errors of judgment and turns him into an object of ridicule. Therefore, truth which has been expressed through dialogism of voices happens to become a matter of 'relative'. Indeed, owing to self reflexive and self-conscious quality of the text, there is no a certain kind of search for truth in the novel. Events happen to become expressed through different perspectives which emerge from different characters in a 'polyphonic' way. Cuddon, in definition of polyphony notes that, novels are dialogic or polyphonic which allow characters to speak 'in their own voices'. In Bakhtin's words, they are liberated to speak "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices"...which are not subject to the authoritative control and authority of a single voice (2. p219). *Rites of Passage*, starts with Talbot's narration in which the captain, officers, the common people, emigrants and Colley, are all represented through his (Talbot's) perspective. For him the ship is like a play, or as he states a "floating society" in which Anderson is the king, emperor, or even the tyrant of this microcosm, "But you are, after all, the king or emperor of our floating society" (5 p144). He even happens to compare Anderson with 'Noah' (5 p140); Colley has been presented as a "drunken crab": "There emerged from our lobby into the wind and rain of the waist, a parson! I suppose he was the same fellow who had tried to ask a blessing on our first dinner and been heard by no one but the Almighty... He held his hat and wig crushed on with both hands and he staggered first one way, then the other, like a drunken crab" (5, p15). The narration continues through Talbot's perspective and his

narrating voice on Colley, the people, and the events on the ship till there happens a turning point for the reader in the course of the narration and of course an 'edge of chaos' for Colley, which brings up Colley's death and the revelation of his voice through the letter written to his sister. Thus it seems feasible to assume polyphony as one of the other aspects of *Rites of Passage* by its shifts and delays in presenting the narrative voices along with bestowing opposite views for the same incidents happening in one microcosmic sample.

Also it might be supposed that, this 'delay' assists the novel to show relativity of truth and uncertain state of it. Rimmon Kenan claims: "Delay consists in not imparting information where it is 'due' in the text, but leaving it for a later stage" (9, p125). According to Rimmon Kenan, the past oriented delay consists in keeping alive question 'what happened?' Story may go on, but the reader's comprehension of the narrated events is impeded by the omission of information, that is the creation of gaps. When the events are presented through Colley's point of perspective and his narration, actually 'relativity of truth' comes along. The text enables Colley to speak and narrate through his letter, now Colley is not just 'the parson!' and is no longer Talbot's caricatured social misfit but emerges as a man of sensitivity. Then so far interpretations from Talbot become in state of suspension (9). For instance, Colley thinks that Talbot is a religious man and calls him "True friend to religion"(5, p211). He thinks that Talbot is waiting for the suitable moment to meet Colley, and he interprets that Talbot is in hesitation to meet Colley as he is respectful; however through Talbot's narration the reader knows that Talbot does not hesitate but avoids the parson. The novel, in fact, blurs the distinction between appearance and reality through many gaps and uncertainties which become clear or remain unexplained during the story. Thus these delays and gaps turn the reading process into 'a guessing game' (9,p126), in Rimmon Kenan's words. In the novel, nature and psychology of the individuals affect the nature and interpretation of truth. As Talbot decides to write a letter to Miss Colley, he says:"it'll be lies from beginning to the end. I shall describe my growing friendship with her brother. I shall describe my admiration for him" (5, p277). This letter, if written, may cause another question about the nature of Talbot's narration and his entire journal. In fact it brings up another aspect of 'Undecidability' called 'Cretan liar paradox' (1); that means: "if someone says 'I am a liar', how can we tell if that person is lying or not? Our ability to make a decision about the validity of such a statement is, at least temporarily, suspended".

### Chaos

Considering the discussed elements, *Rites of Passage* demonstrates to be a complex text in which the narration challenges our thoughts about 'the truth' by revealing paradoxical nature of truths like the paradox in the question 'How can something be *after* the contemporary?' which reminds us the 'postmodern'. *Rites of Passage* is a novel in which both history and fiction seem to be rewritten by means of pastiche, parody, intertextuality and metafiction. Thus, for an interpretation there would be amplitude of signifiers and amplitude of attractors. While one can see the events through a historical view it is possible to treat the text through different literary interpretations and sub-interpretations, since the novel presents us different points of view by the *chaotically* intertextual text. *Rites of Passage*, presents a world in which identity becomes a matter of Lyotardian 'svelte' where a fixed and predictable personal identity happens to be challenged. It is the world where our interpretations from the same characters change by the different depictions from different voices through one story. It is a world where an 'edge of chaos' alters Colley's identity and destiny. Stuart Sim in his article *Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory and Criticism*, asserts that: "The edge of chaos is where systems are at their most creative as well as most unpredictable...it means we can never know ahead of time whether a small perturbation or a complete avalanche is to be our fate"(10,p94).

Colley is a parson for whom religion seems to be the main criterion in defining a character; however in the course of the narration it is his drives and his romantic character that drive him to be in love with Billy Rogers and the act of fellatio with him. It can be asserted that the moment is his 'edge of chaos' when he experiences his most critical point in his life. It is the time when he discovers about the possible multiple realities about his sexuality and his identity. On the other hand his religious signifiers have always been opposing and restricting his inner attractors. But while he becomes drunk for the first time in his life and his 'symbolic' consciousness is away, Billy Roger acts as his most strange or inner attractor in causing Colley's edge of chaos which reveals his 'another possible identity'. However since he has religious signifiers, after he comes to his conscious mind this edge of chaos pushes him toward suicide and death. It can be stated that if Colley had not been a parson, he could have had another life, another identity and of course another destiny. His sexual desires, especially expressed as homosexual, became represented as serious threat to the religious world that Colley had been living all his life along; because traditionally he thought of himself as an individual, as an entity with a predictable and unique essence to express and realize his activities and desires, while it was his drunkenness and unconsciousness that opened another page of his identity and probabilities of becoming. When all those previous logical and religious predictions reappear this collapse of 'wave function' and his effort to ignore the other possible identities in his life, causes his edge of chaos to be a fatal one leading to his death.

In fact, truth has been criticized so harshly in Golding's *Rites of Passage*. Talbot as the main traitor to the concept of truth puts the reader exposed to gaps, delays and a playful selection of mosaics from different literary texts as if he wants to prove that bravely has eliminated his Bloomian 'anxiety of influence'. Moreover this criticism of concept of truth gets more significant when two completely different voices get to portray two different pictures from the same incidents. If Talbot's voice, as embodiment of Augustan age, is too much rational, too much smart then Colley's entity is too much emotional and naïve. Colley can be seen as personification of Romantic Movement, or as the incarnation of his historical source, the parson who had committed suicide for being drunk and naked, or even as a voice just to mock the reader and waking the reader up to suggest that there can be multiple truths at the same time.

## Conclusion

Therefore, *Rites of Passage* is a novel by which the reader gets exposed to different states of truths. The novel seems to use an intentionally chaotic and intertextual representation of its incidents to challenge the notion of wholeness or uniqueness of a text. In this way the narration passes through the storm of parodies, self-reflexivity, pastiche and polyphony to lead the readers' mind on the edge of an amplitude of interpretations, or to put the reader in questioning the main causes of events by giving the reader an experience of amplitude of meanings and possibilities, along with involving the reader in the process of narration as if allegorically the text is reading the reader. This style of narration in *Rites of Passage* might be even understood as a harsh criticism on efficiency of language in conveying 'truths' as if every truth expressed by an individual becomes subjective and doomed to create gaps; like in this novel that the chaotic intertextuality seems to have caused an amplitude of signifiers or attractors in the readers' mind who is trying to make an interpretation of the text.

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