

## **TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY AND *YEAR OF WONDERS***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

A new genre of fiction can be constructed by analysing narratives in a pragmatic level. A literary work can be labelled as "Finitude Narrative" if it is found having two basic requisites. The first of these conditions would be that the syntagm of the narrative should be a collection of signs(words) that stem to convey the thought of death. The syntagm is of primary importance to deliver a particular impression upon the reader. The "Finitude Syntagm" is fundamental, yet, the syntagm can be given a proper context only when it is accompanied by an "Unbiased Machinery of Death" which would be the required second condition. The various of machines of death include war, plague and all terminal causes of death. Thus, the research paper would attempt to establish a working genre with these set of conditions. The novels of Geraldine Brooks take precedence in this hypothesis. Her novel *Year of Wonders* seem to be found with all the above-mentioned conditions to be crowned as a "Finitude Narrative". The primary objective of the hypothesis, on being proved, will be to catalogue the psychological response of the reader on coming across such narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** Syntagm, Pragmatics, Psychoanalysis, Genre Study, Reader Response, Mortality Salience.

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The psychological effects of reading a narrative genre that attempts to use its structure to reverberate the thought of death require extensive research. These works are known as "Finitude Narratives," and this genre is defined by two distinct conditions. These conditions are established in order to form a hypothesis to demonstrate that narratives that contain the aforementioned conditions can indeed produce Mortality Salience. Creating a classification for this genre can aid in the development of didactic literature. This new genre of writing, hypothetically speaking, has the potential to stimulate the reader in strengthening his world views. Death is viewed as a horrible negation in the grand scheme of things. Many people fail to recognize death as a valid and all-encompassing finitude. This proposed hypothesis tends to construct a narrative genre that stimulates the reader's thought of death. "Mortality Salience" refers to this reminder of death.

A genre is defined by the language and vocabulary used in the story. Words are potent tools for conveying meaning. The "Finitude Syntagm" is the first condition that must be met for the proposed hypothesis to work. A syntagm is a collection of signs that are built on a pattern. Daniel Chandler tells that a syntagm is ". . . an orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text . . ." (Chandler 81). The "Finitude Syntagm" is a collection of words that constantly and consistently remind the reader of death. The narrative's syntagmatic structure is critical in providing the reader with an overall effect or impression. The narrative strives for an effect, and in order to accomplish this, the narrative employs a specific palette of words that it prefers over others. This could be a syntagm. The importance of analysing the role of the syntagm in expressing the overall effect of the narrative is emphasised by pragmatic analysis. The syntagm is taken from Geraldine Brooks's novel *Year of Wonders*, a historical novel. The novel's "Finitude Syntagm" would remind the reader of the concept of death.

The syntagm of the narrative *Year of Wonders* is as follows: “death”(Brooks, 9), “soul”(9), “pulsing flesh”(42), “Illness”(42), “died”(44), “sickroom”(45), “death”(68), “ill”(81), “suffering”(95), “sickening”(97), “plague”(101), “body”(140), “died”(159), “agony”(189), “Plague”(212), “disease”(215), “body”(Brooks, 263). The above mentioned syntagm is merely a sample and does not represent the entire syntagm of the book. As one could see, it is a chain of words that stretch throughout the novel, always reinstating the stress on mortality.

The second condition is very much important for giving the “Finitude Syntagm” both context and meaning. The context to the syntagm is provided by the “unbiased machinery of death”. Death can be found in almost every plot of a literary work. Yet, unbiased machines of death like war, disease, plague or any other calamity that should terminate humanity on a major scale are more effective. Freud says that human beings in general do not accept death. They know it exists and they have witnessed them. But death of the self is something that is unconsciously denied. Death when applied in this unbiased way could really make it much probable. Freud says that, “Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, many, often tens of thousands, in a single day.” (Freud, *The Standard* 291). When it comes to war (unbiased machinery of death) death is no longer seen as a chance event but a realistic inevitability.

The conditions could be used as the parameters to test and categorise all narratives. The language used in a genre defines it. Pragmatic analysis is the careful examination of the words used in a narrative. The collaborations formed by the narrative's various parts elicit meaning and effect. Thus, it is settled that if a narrative is found with a "Finitude Syntagm" accompanied by a "unbiased machinery of death" can be termed as "Finitude Narrative".

Geraldine Brooks wrote her first novel, *Year of Wonders*. Brooks has based this novel on a historical period in the seventeenth century. The novel revolves around the Great Plague of 1666. Brooks has meticulously depicted the period's dark times based on extensive survey and research. It is written from the viewpoint of the protagonist, Anna Finch. Brooks employs the voice of Anna Finch to explain the various episodes in which the villagers face death. People react negatively to the plague. Elinor Mompellion appears to be the mother figure Anna seeks to fill the void left by the death of her own mother.

At first the story took on a strong catholic route to salvation and survival. But those who were keen in making such religious virtues as tools to peace, seem to give up on it entirely in the end. This loss of faith is caused by various tragedies that befall these characters throughout. The plague kills a member from each family and the novelist has described in brief, the various ways in which the people cope with it. Anna was married at a very young age and she was gifted with two sons. Sam, Anna's husband, was a miner who was very much loving towards Anna. He died in a mining accident after which she becomes a single mother. On the outset of the plague she eventually loses both her children Tom and Jamie.

Soon Anna's father Josiah Bont became so greedy enough to dig graves and bury the living. He was punished accordingly and was tied to a pole to be let prey for the animals of the night. This incident marks the psychotic overtone that reaches its peak in the character of Aphra. She loses all her children but for her daughter. The plague finally ends and in the midst of a happy gathering Aphra slices the throat of Elinor in rage. This is the turning point of the story. Michael could not get over his grief that filled his being after his wife's death. The only person who stuck around him was Anna. It was unexpected to find Anna and Michael giving vent to their lusty passions after such a tragedy.

Anna decides to raise the baby herself and she is helped by Michael to go to Liverpool to the estate of Elinor's father. Anna decides to take a different route and she lands in a gulf country filled with Arabs. Anna gets herself married to Ahmed Bey, a practitioner of herbal medicine known far and wide. She gets to become one of his many wives, but they only seem to have a relationship that is of a student and master. At the end of the novel Anna seems to have found meaning in her life with the ability she has to save the lives of people. Brooks ends the novel with the description that Anna will continue her life with Aisha (the bastard child of Mrs. Bradford) and Elinor (born to Michael Mompellion).

The psychological impact of reading such narratives are to be documented in order to deem this genre didactic. Death is mostly seen as something more pessimistic rather than anything that could be moralizing. It is a topic that is often avoided as to save people from discord and fear. But understanding and realizing the concept of death is beneficial to have a better understanding on life. In Terror Management Theory, a product of social and evolutionary psychology was developed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski. "... all human behavior is motivated by the fear of one's own demise, giving rise to a state of anxiety that arises when we confront the awareness of our own mortality (MS: Mortality Salience) with the desire to survive." (Fernando Gordillo, Lilia Mestas, José M. Arana, Miguel Ángel Pérez, and Eduardo Alejandro Escotto). Mortality Salience is aroused in the reader when he or she is reminded of death. "In supporting terror management theory, mortality salience research demonstrates that unconscious concerns about one's own death motivate a wide range of judgments and behaviors to bolster the individual's faith in his or her worldview and self-worth." (Greenberg). Having acquired Mortality

Saliency, people could immerse themselves in stronger self-worth due to a heightened sense of self-esteem. Thus, it could be a possible inducer to change one's worldview as well as way of life.

The ultimate question this hypothesis is prone to answer is whether the "Finitude Syntagm" present in the narrative could possibly influence Mortality Saliency on the part of the reader. If it should, then this hypothesis should help to generate a newly working genre. The genre of "Finitude Narrative" is not entirely new. There are works that belong to other genres that focus on the implications of death like the "Quest Narrative", "Tragedy", "War Poetry" etc. The narratives that exclusively deal with death can cause Mortality Saliency in the reader.

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