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Rewriting Hi(S)stories: A Postmodern Study of Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*

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*“To my parents, who are my biggest inspiration.
I hope you are proud to have me as your daughter,
because there is not a day I am not proud to have you as my parents.”*

*“To Luna, who is everything I am not.
I hope we are sisters in every universe.”*

*“To my chosen family who have made these years an unforgettable experience.
Thanks for showing me what real friendship is.”*

*“And finally, to little Bea, who was brave enough to keep fighting,
look how far we have come.”*

*“Sometimes, you gotta move forward.
Just take it step by step and then you'll notice
you've found your place” - Enough, Ateez*

Abstract

This dissertation examines Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as a postmodern work, addressing the lack of academic analysis of this novel within the framework of postmodernism. Through the close reading and analysis of "The Stowaway" and "Parenthesis" with established postmodern theories, this paper reveals how Barnes employs fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality and unreliable narrators. The findings demonstrate how the novel's deconstruction of linear narratives and objective realities serve to dismantle grand narratives and question universal truths. The study demonstrates that the novel is an accessible entry point to postmodern literature. Ultimately, this dissertation concludes that Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* stands as a postmodern novel that invites the reader to question the veracity of history and construct meaning from multiple perspectives.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Postmodernism, Historiographic Metafiction, Fragmentation, Intertextuality.

Resumen

Este TFG examina *Una historia del mundo en diez capítulos y medio* de Julian Barnes como una obra postmodernista, abordando la falta de trabajos académicos sobre esta novela dentro del marco teórico del postmodernismo. A través de una lectura detallada y el análisis desde teorías postmodernistas de "El Polizón" y "Paréntesis", este TFG revela como Barnes emplea fragmentación, metaficción historiográfica, intertextualidad y narradores no fiables. Los hallazgos demuestran cómo la deconstrucción de las narrativas lineales y realidades objetivas en la novela sirve para dismantelar las grandes narrativas y cuestionar las verdades universales. Se ha demostrado que la novela constituye una introducción accesible a la literatura postmoderna. Por último, este TFG concluye que *Una historia del mundo en diez capítulos y medio* de Barnes es una obra postmodernista que invita al lector a cuestionar la veracidad de la historia y a construir significado desde múltiples perspectivas.

Palabras clave: Julian Barnes, *Una historia del mundo en diez capítulos y medio*, Postmodernismo, Metaficción Historiográfica, Fragmentación, Intertextualidad.

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1. Introduction

I have always been someone who questions everything, I only trust what I can see with my own eyes. This leads me to think about why we all blindly believe whatever we see written in a history book. For me it is obvious that history is not what happened, but what they say that happened. This distinction sits at the core of the British author born in 1954 in Leicester, Julian Barnes's 1989 novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. The first time I read this novel, I was fascinated by how Barnes presented Biblical and historical retellings from the most unexpected points of view. This project will explore the moment when literature stops documenting history and starts questioning it. This dissertation originated from the question of how Barnes's novel represents characteristics of postmodern literature and how it contributes to the understanding of the postmodern narrative that challenges the traditional comprehension of history and truth. Despite Barnes's successful career as an author, I found a lack of academic analysis of his novels as postmodern texts, with the exception of *Flaubert's Parrot*. The absence of papers related especially to *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* feels unjustified as he uses numerous postmodern tools to question how history should be retold. This project seeks to highlight this novel's significance in Barnes's retelling of historical narratives and universal truths, as I feel he is the perfect author to enter the postmodern world with as his work is more accessible, in contrast to denser theoretical texts, while keeping postmodernism's key ideas.

The main objective of this research is to analyze *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* through a postmodern lens. The methodology employed to achieve this objective involves a close reading of two specific chapters of the novel; the opening chapter "The Stowaway" and the personal interlude "Parenthesis". The ruling assumption guiding this dissertation is that the novel is positioned within the postmodern tradition due to its structure and content. The chosen methodology combines a comparative reading in which Barnes's novel is connected with established postmodern theories and an analytical interpretation of the text. Sources were selected in regard to three main conditions: the contributions they grant to postmodern literary theory, academic papers that engaged with Julian Barnes and critical analysis of historiographical metafiction in contemporary literature.

This paper will be divided into four chapters, starting with an introduction in which the basic facts of the research area are provided, along with the contextual and theoretical background and the methodology used. Section two will provide the reception of the novel and the analysis through the postmodern theory of the chapters “The Stowaway” and “Parenthesis.” The third section will consist of a discussion of the data obtained in the analysis in addition to suggestions for future studies. Finally, the last section will gather the conclusions obtained after the research made this dissertation.

This final year’s dissertation aims to situate Julian Barnes’s novel within the tradition of postmodern literature by explaining how specific postmodern approaches, such as metafiction or pastiche, are used in Barnes’s novel to create a deeper meaning in the text. By analyzing how understandable and entertaining the novel is, this paper will situate *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as a useful text to introduce people to postmodern literature. Finally, this research will try to expand the reach of Barnes’s overshadowed novel by his other works like the Booker Prize-winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011).

Julian Barnes’s works exemplify Postmodernism since he is one of the most versatile and significant authors of British contemporary literature. His works portray a wide range of literary styles, which led the critics to give him the name of “the chameleon of British letters” (Stout). His novels are known for their stylistic experimentation due to Barnes using a variety of genres and themes. His friend, the American author Jay McInerney, in an article for *The New York Times*, was asked about the English writer to which he responded: “A lot of novelists set up a kind of franchise, and turn out a familiar product, [...] what I like about Jules’s work is that he’s like an entrepreneur who starts up a new company every time out. He does not cultivate a recognizable voice whose sentences are instantly a signature; Julian submerges his personality in the work. He reinvents the wheel; I’m always fascinated to see what shape it’s going to be next.” (McInerney in Stout) This is particularly evident in his 1989 novel, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, which represents postmodern fiction perfectly despite relatively few studies having situated it within this framework. For instance, Peter Childs addressed the theme of historiographic metafiction in the novel but paid more attention to *Flaubert’s Parrot* as a better example of the theme. Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction, fiction that self-consciously interrogates the writing of

history, offers a lens through which to examine Barnes's narrative. As Hutcheon puts it, "Historiographic metafiction attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction* 108). Barnes does exactly this, blending together facts and fabrications so that readers are left to question whether those distinctions really matter at all. From the beginning, Barnes demonstrates his intentions to challenge unquestioned truths. More recently, scholars such as Vanessa Guignery have explored postmodern aspects in Barnes's narratives. However, her focus is on issues of identity and ethics rather than a vigorous analysis of the postmodern techniques in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism started as a response to the dissatisfaction that was caused by the events of the Second World War, the horrors of the Holocaust and the influence of mass media. It embodies a deep skepticism, and in some cases rejection, of the grand narratives and absolute truths that once supported modernist ideals. As the Nobel prize winner, Harold Pinter stated: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false” (Pinter) which represents perfectly what the postmodern authors try to portray.

In literature, this philosophical stand is manifested in a number of distinctive ways. Postmodern texts tend to blur the lines between fiction and reality, mixing playfulness with introspection. Formal experimentation, irony, self-referentiality and narrative fragmentation are some of the key features of postmodern literature. Intertextuality is another significant characteristic of postmodern literature, where texts reference and rewrite other texts resulting in a questioning of the meaning of originality. These characteristics illustrate the idea that reality cannot be perfectly narrated and literature cannot be totally original. Roland Barthes’s essay, “The Death of the Author”, reinforces that “the text is [...] a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (Barthes 146), which challenge the notion of a singular, authoritative reality. To understand postmodern literature’s relationship with history, Umberto Eco says: “the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently” (Eco 67) This ironic return is not about dismissing history, instead it is about interrogating how it is told. Such fiction frequently blends together facts and inventions, giving attention to its own narrative construction and thus challenging the objectivity of historical records. Frequent indicators of postmodern literature include non-linear storytelling, unreliable narrators, parody, intertextual references, and a pastiche of genres. These elements are frequently used to disturb fixed meanings and readers’s expectations. Authors like Julian Barnes engage with these techniques not out of a mere stylistic literary display, but to invite readers

into a more active and questioning stance, one that demands both critical and emotional awareness. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* exemplifies the movement with its fragmented structure, philosophical doubt, metafictional asides, and the refusal to present history as a unified story. Alongside contemporaries like Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and John Fowles, Barnes contributes to British postmodernism with their historical consciousness and skepticism of universal truths. His works can be compared with other postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut and Paul Auster, as all of them violate narrative conventions like introducing themselves in the novel, directly confronting the reader or blurring the distinctions between reality and fiction.

Throughout this research major sources have been obtained from specialists' texts in postmodern studies, including works such as Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) and mainly Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction* (1996), that focuses on historiographic metafiction as a central form for postmodern narrative. Her work joins the discourse of how historical events should be presented and literary theory showing how novels, like Barnes's analyzed in this last-year dissertation, destroy the conventions of historical representations. Hutcheon asks for a portrayal of history from a point of self-reflexivity and an ironic engagement with the past forming a narrative construction. Secondary sources such as critical essays on Barnes and British postmodernist literature of the late 20th century are also used to provide the necessary contextual background for this project. By placing Barnes's work within these sources, this study is created with the goal of analyzing *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as postmodern literature while searching for more attention to this novel as is given recognition within this context.

2. Analysis

Julian Barnes is one of the most significant authors of British contemporary literature. Born in 1957 in Leicester, he was the son of two French language teachers and brother to eventual philosopher, Jonathan Barnes. Graduate from a degree in Modern Languages with honors from the City of London School and Magdalen College in Oxford; Julian Barnes, initially, worked as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary before transitioning into journalism and fiction writing. Several novels are written under his name, along with four detective thrillers published under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. (Groes) Julian Barnes has always been interested, as Frederick M. Holmes says: “[...] in exploring different models of English identity that have come under pressure during an era dominated by global capitalism and what Frederic Jameson calls its postmodernist cultural logic” (Holmes) He married Pat Kavanagh in September 1st 1979 to whom dedicate most of his books, just like in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* and its “to Pat Kavanagh”. She passed away in 2008 after a battle against a brain tumor. Her death impacted Barnes deeply and lead him to write *Levels of Life* (2013) a memoir dedicated to Pat. His most recent books are dedicated to his new partner, Rachel Cugnoni.

Barnes’s first novels are *Metroland* (1980), *Before She Met Me* (1982) and *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), the latter of which was nominated for the Booker Prize, gaining him recognition due to his disruption of the traditional limits between the novel and other written forms. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* was his next novel, published in 1989, and that is the central piece of this dissertation. Upon its release, the novel received a mix of responses from the critics. Jonathan Coe for *The Guardian* stated that “[...] while hardly a ground-breaking piece of experimentalism, succeeds to the extent that it is both intelligent and reasonably accessible. Where it falls down is in denying its reader any real focus of human attention or involvement” (Coe) However, Coe admits that overall, the readers, through the range of concerns and great storytelling, will be impressed. The critic Gregory Salyer expresses that “what Barnes has done is to bring to speech the voices of history that have been silenced by the one voice that passes itself off as the voice of God” (Salyer 224). Salyer treats the novel as part of the postmodernist movement stating that as “Umberto Eco has said [...] the only way to

speak seriously to the world today is with irony. If he is right, Julian Barnes is one of the most serious authors writing today.” (Salzer 232-233) Meanwhile, David John Taylor explains how “*A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is not a novel, according to the staid definitions; it possesses no character who rises above the level of a cipher and no plot worth speaking of. [...] Like a great deal of theoretical literary criticism — to which it bears a strong resemblance — *A History [of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters]* expends vast ingenuity on proving something that might be regarded as an axiom. Tous les significations sont arbitraires, [that it means “all significations are arbitrary”] as a French theorist once put it. Well, we knew that” (Taylor)

Postmodernists are doubtful of the conventional notions of truth, identity, history and grand narratives (Davis). Consequently, postmodernism is a style that reflects this belief through various techniques. Barnes’s novel has been hard to categorize due to its multiple interpretations. As the critics noted there are no conventional chapters in which they tell the same story along the progressive chapters. Instead, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* can be seen as a compilation of different short stories that share some common characters. This characteristic of the novel is known as fragmentation; a feature frequently found in postmodern works. “Fragmented narratives comprise of the events jumbled together and the readers are expected to make sense of the sequence of the story by collaborating the different components of story” (Sunayna) Barnes’s non-linear novel makes the readers piece together the meaning during the 10½ chapters, reflecting the idea that reality is constructed rather than inherent.

Another frequent feature in postmodernist literature, which is also found in the novel analyzed in this dissertation, is intertextuality. A literary technique that implies referencing, implying or borrowing literary texts inside a new work. (Almaarroof) Intertextuality is prevalent throughout Barnes’s novel, referencing and retelling the Biblical stories, Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, and multiple historical events. However, Barnes uses intertextuality not as a matter of quoting and referencing previous works but as a reintroduction of cultural and known texts into a new meaning. As previously stated, intertextuality is found all throughout the novel; just like in chapter four, “The Survivor”, where Barnes engages with the literary tradition of shipwreck narratives evoking tales such as *The Lord of the Flies* (1957) by William Golding and Daniel Dafoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) while introducing a contemporary perspective

through the inclusion of psychological studies and post-traumatic narrations. The main character of the chapter, Kathleen, claims she has survived a major nuclear disaster and escaped to a remote island, she writes in a fragmented and disoriented tone that is explained by the trauma she has suffered. Her experience, although deeply personal, could be a fabricated reality according to her therapist who introduced the term “fabulation” that defines as “make up a story to cover the facts you don’t know or can’t accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them.” (Barnes 112) Kathleen’s recounts are shaped by trauma which creates a narrative that is in conflict with the external facts, and this blurs the line between objective reality and psychological truth. This is further explored in chapter four, “The Mountain”, where Colonel Fergusson and his daughter, Amanda, interpret the same natural phenomena and historical events through radically different points of view, one scientific while the other from the religious. Amanda to this says “there always appear to be two explanations of everything. That is why we have been given free will, in order that we may choose the correct one” (Barnes 153) which matches with a relativistic view of the world. The last chapter of the novel “The Dream”, is a deep exploration of what subjectivity is. The narrator is sent to Heaven after death, his experience there is presented as totally customizable as everyone “get the sort of Heaven they want.” (Barnes 290) This chapter pushes the subjectivity of reality to its limits as it is suggested that, even in the afterlife, truth is shaped by individual desires and expectations rather than a universal standard. By showing how the characters form their own realities, Barnes implies that truth is more about an internal construction not an external verification. This makes the reader acknowledge the role they have in the interpretation and construction of meaning, which follows the postmodern rejection of universal truths. Through these different narratives, Barnes tore down the idea of a singular objective history. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* stands as a perfect example of postmodern literature. Its fragmented structure breaks the illusion of a linear history as it presents a combination of different narratives that challenge the idea of a singular account. The continuous use of metafiction reminds the reader that the novel has a constructed nature that blurs the lines between fiction and reality. This novel deconstructs traditional forms and challenges the possibility of a singular reality.

2.1 The Stowaway

A History of the World in 10½ Chapters starts with “The Stowaway” a unique retelling of the biblical Noah’s Ark narrative. From the beginning Barnes makes clear his intention of dismantling established grand narratives such as the ones in the Bible, inviting the readers to think about the credibility of such narrations. This initial chapter, which shows a darker and humorous reimagining of the biblical flood, serves as a presentation of the postmodernist elements that will be found all throughout the novel. Barnes challenges universal truths by exposing how there are biases in the recounting of all histories.

“The Stowaway” presents a new version of the Noah’s Ark account from the perspective of an unexpected narrator, a woodworm. The perspective offered by this narrator contrasts with the traditional human or deity version of the tale, as this narrator gives a darker and more cynical revisit of the Great Flood. The woodworm, a stowaway in the Ark who should not have survived, details a completely different reality of what was happening in the boat contrasting with the biblical version. The narrative presents Noah as a “puffed-up patriarch” with a drinking problem, “bad-tempered, smelly, unreliable, envious and cowardly” (Barnes 20-24), and the Ark not as the only salvation but as a prison ship where the space distribution for the animals was decided by Noah’s classification “of beasts: the clean and the unclean.” (Barnes 19) The woodworm explains that the Ark was a flotilla, not a single boat, where multiple vessels got lost and with them the animal species inside. The narrator, who presents himself as an *anobium domesticum*, positions himself as the most reliable witness due to his status as a stowaway given that he has no obligations or feels any gratitude not like the rest of chosen species. Noah is not the only human onboard as his closest family is with him, the woodworm is witness to the injustices and absurdities inside the voyage in the hands of the humans, such as the consumption of mythical creatures due to jealousy like the unicorn, or the rewriting of history like how “the raven always maintained that *he* found the olive tree; that *he* brought a leaf from it back to the Ark; but that Noah decided it was ‘more appropriate’ to say that the dove had discovered it. Personally, I always believed the raven.” (Barnes 23) The questioning of human evolution and truth-telling is

the culmination of the woodworm account which suggests that humanity, directly descended from Noah after going ashore, will become naturally flawed. The chapter concludes with the woodworms feeling ennobled as a species by their independent survival as they were able to navigate the dangers of the Ark without “fishy covenants” (Barnes 26) for human or divine assistance.

Julian Barnes employs several key postmodernist characteristics in “The Stowaway,” these elements work together to dismantle traditional notions of universal truths and narrative authority. Postmodern literature often rejects linear, cohesive narratives in favor of fragmentation that better reflects our world which we perceive as disjointed and chaotic. (Lyotard) Fragmentation is present all throughout the chapter, not in its structure as it presents a continuous narrative from the perspective of the woodworm, but with its challenge to single authoritarian historical accounts. The whole chapter is a fragment that later makes up the history of the novel. By presenting the novel through the point of view of an insignificant creature such as a woodworm, who presents the voyage from his own biases, Julian Barnes is fragmenting the universally accepted biblical narrative into an experimental incomplete anecdote. Details given by the narrator, including the “real” five and a half years duration of the flood, the loss of Varadi as a Biblical character along with his boat, and the real events and personalities of the Ark’s occupants, are all revelations that contradict the accepted version of the Bible. Even the narrator textually highlights that: “Now, I realize that accounts differ. Your species has its much-repeated version, which still charms even skeptics; while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths.” (Barnes 13), acknowledging the multiple competing accounts which emphasize the fragmented nature of historical recounts.

Metafiction, another postmodernist trait, involves narratives that draw attention to their own status as an artificial construct. (Waugh 4-5) While reading “The Stowaway”, Julian Barnes employs metafiction by constantly reminding the reader that they are engaging with a planned fabrication, a *story*. The woodworm is constantly addressing the reader directly as a human, as a “you”, breaking the fourth wall in the process. There are explicit acknowledgments of the fact that the novel is a storytelling with phrases like: “You presumably grasped that the ‘Ark’ was more than just a single ship?” (Barnes 13) or “I don’t know how best to break this to you, but Noah was not a nice man.”

(Barnes 20) The narrator evaluates his own credibility declaring that “[his] account you can trust.” (Barnes 13) Furthermore, the woodworm criticizes human historical narratives, “Your species has always been hopeless about dates. I put it down to your quaint obsession with multiples of seven.” (Barnes 13), which functions as a metafictional criticism of historiography. This chapter is not just a story about Noah’s Ark but a story about how stories, especially historical ones, are told, shaped and modified. During the narration of “The Stowaway” there are even allusions made by the woodworm to author notes when he says: “*We weren’t in any way to blame (you don’t really believe that story about the serpent, do you? – it was just Adam’s black propaganda),*” (Barnes 15) hinting that, just like in this story, decisions and interpretative biases made by the author can underpin any historical account.

Intertextuality as Julia Kristeva explains is “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.” (Kristeva 37) “The Stowaway” is deeply intertextual as it engages with the biblical narrative of Noah’s Ark from the Book of Genesis. By the retelling of this canonical story from an unexpected perspective, Barnes highlights how the biblical tale is a cultural construct rather than an immutable truth. The whole chapter is a reinterpretation of a widely known and sacred, for some, text. The woodworm’s account directly challenges what Genesis tells, such as with the duration of the flood, in which the insect suggests “it rained for about a year and a half, by my reckoning” (Barnes 13) not the commonly believed 40 days and 40 nights; or the number of animals aboard the Ark as “Seven animals were welcome on board, but five were destined for the galley.” (Barnes 19) The criticism of the dove and raven incident is a notorious example of an intertextual revision as it exposes the original version as a manipulation of the facts that happened. By twisting this myth, Julian Barnes is demonstrating how narratives are not fixed but are being continuously reinterpreted, reflecting the postmodern skepticism toward universal truths. (McHale)

Postmodernism emphasizes how truth has a relativistic nature and the obvious role subjectivity has at the time of perceiving something. In “The Stowaway”, the woodworm has a perspective that demonstrates that there is not a single objective truth but rather multiple, both equally valid and flawed, interpretations. The narrator ironically states that his account can be trusted (Barnes 13), as his perspective is biased

due to his own marginalization and resentment towards Noah, which influences his historical retelling. The woodworm's reevaluation of human evolution is another example of relativism: "That Voyage taught us a lot of things, you see, and the main thing was this: that man is a very unevolved species compared to the animals. We don't deny, of course, your cleverness, your considerable potential. But you are, as yet, at an early stage of your development. We, for instance, are always ourselves: that is what it means to be evolved." (Barnes 36) This is a contradiction of the hierarchical view of humanity's place in the world which highlights the subjective nature of judgment. This chapter continuously presents contradictory views like the believed definition of Noah as a "sage, righteous and God-fearing" while later describing it as a "hysterical rogue with a drink problem" (Barnes 16), which forces the reader to understand that truth is relative to the observer.

The choice of a woodworm as the narrator is crucial to the postmodernist agenda of the novel and this chapter. An unreliable narrator is the one whose credibility is compromised, meaning that a "narrator [is] reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work [...] [and the] unreliable when he does not." (Booth 158-159) The narrator's unreliability comes from his obvious biases, which limit his perspective. However, this lack of reliability has several functions. Firstly, it challenges the reader's expectations and assumptions of historical authority. The use of a humble, even parasitic, creature to present such a grand and sacred narrative, forces the reader to question how history is mostly told from a single point of view that is considered the "truth" and who is actually allowed to present such history. The woodworm's disdain towards human naivety as "[we] aren't too good with the truth, either, [our] species. [We] keep forgetting things, or [we] pretend to." (Barnes 36) is ironically the clue of its own biases while exposing how human historical accounts are constructed. Secondly, the narrator introduces humor, pastiche and irony, essential for Barne's postmodern critique. The humor appears from the incompatibility of a woodworm, a parasite, offering theological and social comments. The descriptions of the Ark's condition in which "you can imagine the stench. And there was no-one to muck out" (Barnes 12) or the comparison of Noah's appearance to the one of a gorilla (Barnes 25) create a comedic effect. Pastiche is well evident in the woodworm's imitation of human historical discourses, employing formal language and authoritative

proclamations while simultaneously deconstructing the idea of such an authority. There are several quasi-scientific observations about *xestobium rufo-villosum* and *anobium domesticum* (Barnes 26-27) that can be considered a pastiche of scientific writing, which at the same time gives a false air of credibility to the narrator's fantastical account.

The whole chapter is full of irony, particularly the woodworm's declarations of trustworthiness that contrast with his evident prejudices against Noah and humanity. However, the ultimate irony lies in the woodworm, an animal whose only nourishment comes from wood, thriving on the vessel meant to preserve life, hence becoming a symbol of the chaos that follows any divine plan. The choice of a woodworm as the narrator also emphasizes the marginalized perspective. Historically, grand narratives have been a privilege to only the powerful and victorious ones. By giving voice to the "specifically not chosen" (Barnes 13), Julian Barnes is offering an opportunity to the "underdog" to tell his truth. This reevaluates the traditional hierarchy, suggesting that even the smallest, at first glance insignificant, creatures hold a unique and valid insight into the world. The woodworm's continuous emphasis on humanity, the believed superior species, as naïve and unevolved is a satire on anthropocentrism¹. Finally, the narrator's narrative style is in a conversational tone, in which he is directly addressing the reader while integrating personal anecdotes. By doing this, the novel makes the sometimes-abstract concepts of postmodernism accessible and engaging to a vast public. The woodworm, through its own existence as a stowaway and its continuous critique of the official Great Flood narrative, embodies the postmodern spirit of questioning and the recognition that history at the end is a story told from a particular perspective. "The Stowaway" is a suitable introduction to Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as it effectively presents the novel as a piece that dissects and reexplains historical events explaining that history is not fixed and there is space even for the smallest voices who can offer an entirely different, yet important, version of events.

¹ Anthropocentrism, a philosophical viewpoint arguing that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. (Boslaugh)

2.2 Parenthesis

Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* consists of ten numbered chapters and an unnumbered third to last chapter, "Parenthesis", that offers a completely different essence from the fictional stories that are before it. Deliberately positioned unnumbered between the eighth and ninth narratives, this chapter is a self-conscious metafictional meditation on love, truth and the human need to make sense of emotional experiences. It functions as an interlude and a philosophical reflection, making "Parenthesis" a mirror of the postmodernist concerns: the lack of stability of the narrator, the blurring of the line that divides reality and fiction, and the rebellion towards literary conventions. The prose during this chapter shifts from a variety of historical fabulations to an introspective essay-like style in which the boundaries between the author and the persona are blurred. "Parenthesis" is deeply personal and moves out from the expected style according to the rest of the novel.

The chapter commences without the formal structure of conventional storytelling, lacking an introduction to the setting or characters; instead, it is presented as a rather intimate essay that oscillates between fiction and nonfiction. The narrator, who speaks in the first person, reflects on the nature of love, taking as an example his lover: "Let me tell you something about her. [...] She's lying on her side, turned away from me. I can't see her in the dark, but from the hushed swell of her breathing I could draw you the map of her body." (Barnes 218) By giving such an introduction to the chapter, Barnes creates an emotional and introspective narrative that makes the reader feel a proximity, almost voyeuristic, to the narrator's consciousness. Associating the narrator with Barnes while reading this section of the novel is tempting, especially given the autobiographical tone. However, the text gives no explicit confirmation of Julian Barnes being the narrator. This ambiguity leads to a postmodernist move, the destabilization of authorship. The narrator of "Parenthesis" can be difficult to categorize between real or fictional; however, it can be seen as a composite figure that functions together, possibly reflecting of Barnes while also being a representation of the human consciousness confronting love, mortality and time. This blurring is reminiscent of Ronald Barthes's concept of the death of the author, in which he explains how the voice of the text goes beyond the biography of its writer and leads to multiple interpretations. (Barthes 148)

Postmodern elements are constantly used during this chapter, such as metafiction as Julian Barnes directly addresses the reader, breaking the fourth wall. The narrator, for instance, remarks that “when I say ‘I’ you will want to know within a paragraph or two whether I mean Julian Barnes or someone invented.” (Barnes 220) This serves to dismantle the illusion of a seamless, objective narrative as it is a reminder to the reader that they are engaging with a constructed reality. This technique, Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* highlights the “problematic nature of its own making and reception.” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory* 92) Barnes questions the traditional authority of the omniscient narrator, inviting the reader to become an active participant in the interpretation of the meaning, rather than a passive recipient of a fixed truth. The self-awareness of the text is a feature of postmodern experimentation, which causes a departure from realistic conventions and a deeper engagement with the mechanics behind storytelling. The nature of the narrator in this chapter is in its own a postmodern characteristic, as previously mentioned, as he embodies the instability and the blurring of boundaries. The voice is the first person “I”, seemingly Barnes, engages in personal reflections and direct philosophical discourses. The narrator is not simply Barnes but a metafictional construct, a device that challenges the traditional contract between author and reader. This narrator resists any easy categorization as he operates as a conduit for Barnes’s postmodern agenda of questioning universal truths and fixed identities.

During “Parenthesis”, the narrator compares how love is presented in prose with love presented in poetry, lamenting that prose writers lack the poets’s ability to hide emotional experience in ambiguity. This intertextual gesture towards the literary genre is used as a critique and celebration of the limitations of the novelistic form; Barnes writes “Poets seem to write more easily about love than prose writers. For a start, they own that flexible ‘I.’ ” (Barnes 220) The meta-awareness² of the narrator’s own narrative position is a defending postmodern strategy. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, characterizes this technique as “historiographic metafiction” where the narrative form becomes the subject of reflection, addressing the nature of historical knowledge and its representation (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction*)

² Meta-awareness, a state of deliberately attending to the contents of conscious experience (Chin & Schooler)

“Parenthesis” actively questions the possibility of an objective historical truth declaring that “we all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history [...] But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable.” (Barnes 238) This statement is an assault on the notion of a singular verifiable past. The narrator points out that history is not a factual recovery but a fabulation, a term that connotes fabrication, a collection of storytellings driven by human needs, biases and desires. The example of the “medieval paintings which show all the stages of Christ’s Passion happening simultaneously in different parts of the picture” (Barnes 238) illustrates this point by highlighting how seemingly factual representations are shaped by an interpretative framework. Julian Barnes, through this narrator, suggests that historical accounts are always subjective interpretations, “a charming, impossible fake” (Barnes 238), which must still be believed in to avoid succumbing to “beguiling relativity.” (Barnes 238) The acknowledgment of this doubt aligns with theories such as the ones from Jean-François Lyotard, who argues that postmodern knowledge is characterized by an incredulity towards grand narratives (Lyotard xxiv). Here, Barnes does not reject the truth outright but rather complicates it. He mixes the impossibility of objective truth with the necessity of belief in it, an echo of the paradoxes of love itself. Just as love might be doomed to fail but must nevertheless be pursued, so too much truth be believed despite its inaccessibility. This blend of love and epistemology is a postmodern gesture where traditional distinctions between emotion and theory collapse.

Moreover, “Parenthesis” incorporates elements of pastiche, which Frederic Jameson identifies as blank parody or imitation of unique styles with satire and mockery (Jameson). Barnes employs pastiche not as a direct imitation of a specific author’s style but as in blending different genres and discourses. The chapter easily transitions from a philosophical essay to an intimate personal reflection. The analytical rigor used in the poetic quotes contrast with the casual intimacy of the narrator’s thoughts on love or human nature. Intertextuality as previously mentioned is the reference and rewrite of other texts inside a new writing. This chapter’s structure is built from the engagement with existing literary and philosophical works, as the quoting of poets such as Philip Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb” and W. H. Auden’s “September 1. 1939”. The narrator

analyses Larkin's conclusions on love asking: "Is it true? Is love what will survive of us? It would be nice to think so." (Barnes 221) This poetic inquiry starts a broader philosophical questioning of the durability of human connections amidst inevitable decay and chaos already documented by history. The narrator confronts the inherent skepticism suggested by such a romantic declaration while contrasting it to the hard reality of the world and human nature. Then the narrator continues W. H. Auden's "September 1. 1939" and its quote "We must love one another or die." (Barnes 225) These two quotes are not mere allusions but the narrator's own philosophical inquiries in which Larkin's cautions hope and Auden's pragmatic imperative, form the emotional and intellectual core of the chapter, creating a confrontation with the reader about the necessity and fragility of love in a world that constantly is on the brink of self-destruction. Barnes engages with a form of literary conversation that acknowledges the continuous evolution of meaning and the connection between all the narratives, as new stories are always built upon the foundations of old ones, constantly reinterpreting and repurposing them; which reinforces the postmodern notion that originality is a complex and often elusive concept.

The structure of "Parenthesis" itself is a postmodern innovation. As its name suggests, the chapter is a grammatical aside, an interruption in the flow of the text as it operates outside the narrative arc of the other chapters. In this way, it embodies the nature of parenthesis as a digression, clarification, or afterthought. The positioning of the chapter between the eighth chapter "Upstream!" and the ninth "Project Ararat" further enhances its liminal³ quality. It is neither a story nor an essay as it is neither fully fictional nor fully nonfictional. Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, identifies this blurring of genres as central to the postmodern condition as it "deploys strategies which foreground ontological questions" (McHale 9). "Parenthesis" makes the reader question what is real, what is actually remembered, what is loved, and who is the narrator. A further postmodern feature is Barnes's use of fragmentation and aphorism. The chapter is structured not as a sustained argument but as a compilation of impressions, confessions and philosophical meditation. Sentences like "It will go wrong, this love; it probably will." (Barnes 238) stand as it will anticipate a quotation, in which its bluntness mimics

³ Liminal, of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition: in-between, transitional. ("Liminal")

the epigrammatic⁴ tendencies of modern digital culture. The syntax is fractured while still being emotive, capable of embodying a contradiction without demanding a resolution. Barnes uses the rupture of the form to mirror the brokenness of love and truth in a fragmented world. However, the culmination of the chapter suggests that love is the only hope even if it fails us, and is offered as a necessity, not a salvation. “Still we must believe in love, just as we must believe in free will and objective truth. And when love fails, we should blame the history of the world.” (Barnes 238), this proposition is both sincere and ironic as it echoes the nature of postmodernism where meaning is layered and never fully resolved. The idea of love being sabotaged by history serves as a metaphor and a literal comment on political, social and cultural forces that disrupt personal narratives. On this matter, Barnes continues the postmodernist tradition of politicizing what is personal.

The narrator’s closing image feels delicate and intimate with his “I sense the map of her body beside me in the dark. I turn on my side, make a parallel zigzag, and wait for sleep.” (Barnes 239) This return to the bodily, the tactile, the here-and-now, acts as a defiance against the abstract of human consciousness. Even in the face of postmodern doubt, this physical presence of the loved one remains anchoring. This moment is where the narrator most resembles Barnes himself, as if the “Parenthesis” were not just a stylistic pause but a personal revelation. Biographical readings of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* often link this chapter to his late wife, Pat Kavanagh, to whom the book is dedicated, just like all of Barnes’s books until her death when he started to dedicate to his current partner. The tenderness and emotional precision of the prose seem to bear the weight of lived experiences, offering the reader a rare moment of sincerity. In this sense, “Parenthesis” acts as the emotional and philosophical center of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, despite not following the structure of the rest of the novel. It does not simply reflect on love; it embodies the contradictions inherent in such a human sentiment. Barnes’s postmodernism is not cold or alienated but human, confronting the disorientating multiplicity of the truth with persistent hope that love, even with all its flaws, might still matter. Ultimately, “Parenthesis” stands as a captivating argument for the value of interjection, for a moment of pause amid all the

⁴ Epigrammatic, relating to a short saying or poem that expresses an idea in a clever, funny way (“Epigrammatic”)

chaos, for the necessity of believing in what may undo one. It is postmodern not because it abandons meaning, but because it dares to reconstruct it from fragments, from whispers in the dark, from the memory of a touch, as Barnes gives the wisdom that comes from the honestly expressed doubt.

3. Discussion

The main inquiry has revolved around how Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* embodies characteristics of postmodern literature and how it contributes to a better understanding of the postmodern narrative that challenges traditional notions of history and truth. The premise that guided this dissertation has been that Barnes's novel is situated within the postmodern tradition due to its distinctive structure and captivating content, positioning *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as an accessible and significant text to be introduced into postmodern literature. The detailed analysis of "The Stowaway" and "Parenthesis" provides direct evidence to support the hypothesis, demonstrating that Barnes used postmodern techniques to overthrow the conventional understandings of history, truth and narrative authority.

The theory used for this analysis is based on the studies of known postmodern scholars. Some of these experts are Jean-François Lyotard with his skepticism towards grand narratives, Roland Barthes and his concept of the death of the author, Linda Hutcheon's exploration of historiographic metafiction, and Fredric Jameson's articulation of pastiche, all of whom helped with the understanding of the novel. These theories highlight postmodernism and its rejections of universal truths, blurring of the lines between fiction and reality and its embrace of fragmentation, metafiction and intertextuality. This paper has highlighted Barnes's remarkable accessibility as a gateway to the postmodern point of view. Julian Barnes has an ability to introduce readers to the complexities of postmodernism which makes *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* the perfect novel to extend postmodernism beyond specialized academic discourses. The engaging storytelling, coupled with a distinctive humor, makes otherwise complex theoretical concepts enjoyable for a wider audience. Accessibility is a crucial finding which elevates the novel as it can turn into a powerful pedagogical instrument to introduce postmodernism to a wider audience. The analysis made in this dissertation demonstrates how Barnes's fragmented narrative structure reinforces the deconstruction of grand narratives, which are the main theme of the novel. In the same way, metafiction is found all throughout the novel as a key structural element that serves to question the nature of truth.

“The Stowaway” is one of the several individual stories that forms the novel’s broader postmodern plot. It confronts the reader with a radical reevaluation of the foundational grand narratives, the biblical account of Noah’s Ark. The significance of this chapter lies in its deconstruction of historical authority and objective truths through a marginalized and unreliable narrator. Barnes’s intent is to dismantle established grand narratives by inviting readers to examine established stories. The narrator who is a woodworm offers a completely different reality of the Ark’s voyage which contrasts with the traditional biblical version. The woodworm’s testimony deconstructs the biblical tale of the Great Flood as he illustrates the inconsistencies in the retelling due to the introduction of alternative voices that were previously marginalized by canonical texts. The narrator questions the reliability of human’s official histories as it “has its much-repeated version [...] while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths.” (Barnes 13) This comment supports Hutcheon’s claim that historiographic metafiction “interrogates the writing of history [...] both thematically and formally” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction* 108). This chapter, like the rest of the novel, reaffirms the idea that history is constructed and puts the spotlight on who gets to tell the story, from which perspective and with what authority. In contrast, “Parenthesis” shifts from the mythic narrative to the intimate. In this interlude, Barnes confronts love and mortality in self-reflexive and essay format, moving from the fictional narrative to a more personal one that further blurs the lines between genres and weakens the traditional boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. The findings after the analysis affirm Ronald Barthes’s notion of the death of the author. He argues that a text cannot be original as it is created from diverse writings that blend together to form a multi-dimensional space. (Barthes 146) Barnes does this by combining styles, formats and different perspectives to introduce a narrative that leads to multiple interpretations. Although such a multiplicity could seem chaotic, it is not as each chapter in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* can be read independently. However, reading them all as a collection creates a fragmented recapitulation of experiences across time while reflecting on the complexity of these historical and emotional experiences.

Moreover, Julian Barnes’s novel has similarities to other postmodern authors such as Salman Rushdie and John Fowles as all of them engage in a playful critical revision of grand histories. Like in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) where post-colonial India

is presented through the fantastical experiences of Saleem Sinai who was when India got its independence; and Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) which critiques Victorian society using metafiction to narrate the story of Charles Smithson, a Victorian gentleman, and Sarah Woodruff who is victim of her past. Barnes uses postmodern elements like irony, parody and metafiction to question historical consciousness and be skeptical of universal truths.

However, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* received a mixed reception from critics. The plurality of voices gives a better questioning of the truth, yet it can also lead to detachment or ambiguity as noted by critics such as Jonathan Coe (Coe). The lack of a unified plot or a main character throughout the whole novel can make the readers lose interest. This tension is common in postmodern literature as the techniques used to criticize the dominant ideologies can also lack emotional connection and narrative cohesion. An alternative interpretation of the findings might suggest that the playfulness in Barnes's novel can minimize the seriousness of the historical trauma. Though critics like Gregory Salyer saw the novel as a vindication of those whose voices were historically silenced (Salyer).

4. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes through the postmodern approach, demonstrating how its distinctive structure and content can be used to understand postmodern narratives as it challenges the traditional notions of history and truth. The analysis has positioned the novel as an accessible starter to the postmodern thought, a crucial finding that demonstrates Barnes's ability to render complex theoretical concepts into engaging.

The analysis of "The Stowaway" provides evidence of Julian Barnes's postmodern agenda with his rewriting of the biblical tale of Noah's Ark. This chapter breaks the established idea of grand narratives by presenting the story from the point of view of a marginalized narrator, a woodworm. By doing this, he is exposing the bias in historical recounts, making the reader question the credibility of universally accepted accounts. The woodworm testimony contradicts the version given in the Bible which illustrates the constructed nature of history and the importance of who has the authority to narrate it, which aligns with Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographical metafiction. In contrast, "Parenthesis" moves away from the mythical retellings to an intimate and self-reflexive essay. In this chapter, there are metafictional direct addressing to the reader and the explicit questioning of objective truth that dismantles the illusion of a unique narrative and invites the readers to participate in the creation of meaning while reading. There is also a philosophical inquiry that shows how an objective truth can be unattainable but there is a human need to believe in some kind of stable reality. The study of the novel gives it a broader importance. By positioning *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as postmodern literature, it is not seen as an academic lecture but as a crucial part of contemporary literature that makes its readers aware of the "histories" they encounter daily.

The process of creating this dissertation had its limitations. First, as it centers mainly on two chapters, "The Stowaway" and "Parenthesis", although representative, they do not present the diverse thematic and stylistic range of the novel. Future studies could benefit from a broader analysis that includes chapters such as "The Wars of Religion", "The Dream", or "Project Ararat" as they could offer further insights into Barnes's

engagement with utopia and historical memory. An analysis comparing, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* with other postmodern novels could be of help to locate Julian Barnes's work within a broader literary context. Another possible research could explore how the novel engages with non-human and ecological histories, considering the narrator in "The Stowaway". In a time marked by climate crisis, the marginal voice of a woodworm presents an opportunity to rethink the anthropocentrism of historical narrations. Another potential future research is to study the reception of the novel across different cultural contexts as Barnes is a British man and there is prominent Western framing in many of his historical references. Considering this one might ask how readers from postcolonial and non Western backgrounds interpret his postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives as many of them present the silenced voices in history.

Ultimately, this dissertation reveals that *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is a significant postmodern text that deserves more attention. By using several postmodern features, Barnes is not just questioning the validity of historical truths but also invites readers to take an active role in giving their own meaning to the novel. In an era where historical accuracy is more often being questioned, the relevance of Julian Barnes's novel becomes even more relevant. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* does not give definitive answers but rather a base to start questioning the narratives we inherit and the validation we assign to them without a second thought. This novel deserves more academic recognition as it gives what is necessary to start the reflection on how stories continue to shape our understanding of the world.

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