Creative Metacriticism: The Portrayal of Literary Theory in Contemporary Fiction

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
CREATIVE METACRITICISM: THE PORTRAYAL OF LITERARY THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Advisor: Allen Webb, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2009
CREATIVE METACRITICISM: THE PORTRAYAL OF LITERARY THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2009

Some modern creative writers have shown a talent not only in writing tales, but also in philosophy and theory as they examine questions and problems in fiction-making and the very act of reading. This dissertation examines the role the metafictive novel plays in the development of literary theory and fiction. I explore how writers of this type of novel emerge as creative metacritics who overtly and/or covertly, through their fiction, respond to and critique literary theory. The inquiry examines the reciprocal relationship between the fiction of creative metacritics and important movements in literary theory in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. All four novelists discussed in this study assert the right to participate in the interpretation of their fiction, and in the discourse about how fiction itself should be understood.

Creative metacritics have different intentions and use several narrative techniques to address literary theory. Alain Robbe-Grillet and Tim O’Brien use covert narrative strategies while Italo Calvino and John Barth represent a more direct and overt treatment of theory in fiction. The metacritical writers under consideration explain, correct, and modify critical interpretations of the novel genre. Alain Robbe-Grillet prefigures the principles of post-structuralism while examining the limitations of structuralism. Italo Calvino experiments with gaps in existing critical views of the role of the reader and
author in interpretation and proposes a more inseparable bond between them in interpreting fiction. Tim O’Brien employs techniques of narrative theory to elaborate his philosophy about truth. John Barth modified his and other critics’ attitudes towards the postmodern novel. These creative metacritics not only respond to literary theory and criticism, but, in so doing, extend the range of the novel itself.
DEDICATION TO:

My parents, Ali and Nawal
My wife, Sabha
My children, Rami, Natalie, Lara, and Ali
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of my dissertation and subsequent Ph.D. has been a long journey. I could not have reached this point without the invaluable support of several people whose presence in my life has made a big difference. Without these supporters, especially the select few I am about to mention, I may not have gotten where I am today.

I like to express my deepest and sincere appreciation to Dr. Allen Webb who stepped in as a dependable and supportive friend long before I was fortunate to have him as a director for my dissertation. His patience, flexibility, genuine concern and caring, and faith in me enabled me to attend to life while pursuing my Ph.D. He has been motivating, encouraging, and enlightening. He has never judged or pressured as he understood I needed to juggle priorities. When many doubted me and let me down, he remained loyal and supportive. His vast knowledge and experience in research, academia, and life provided insight and direction right up to the end of my long journey. For all this, I cannot thank him enough. I am forever grateful. Thank you Dr. Webb.

I also express my profound appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Jil Larson who literally took me by the hand and recommend me for teaching at the English Department. Because of her, I managed to survive some of my most dire financial circumstances while pursuing my degree. I also had the chance to enjoy the wonderful experience of teaching literature at Western Michigan University. With her knowledge in narrative theory and literature, Dr. Jil was a helpful reader and good advisor. Her meticulous reading of
Acknowledgements-Continued

Chapters Three and Four was invaluable as her significant comments developed my theoretical thinking.

Dr. Charlotte Thralls deserves my sincere thanks. Her vision and experience in research enabled me to improve my research methodology and ideas. Her helpful ideas and comments contributed in strengthening my dissertation.

Having Dr. Cynthia Running-Johnson on my dissertation committee is a great honor. Her knowledge in French literature and theory were very helpful to me in writing my second chapter. I deeply appreciate her invaluable suggestions and directions.

The faculty and staff at Western Michigan University are the most dedicated and generous people that I have ever met, and I feel honored to have worked with them. Their guidance has served me well and I owe them my heartfelt appreciation. As an International student, I found all the support I needed. I express my deepest gratitude to one of the most wonderful people and chair of department I’ve ever known, Dr. Arnold Johnson who is currently enjoying his retirement. I also like to thank Dr. Richard Utz for his kind support of me. I would also like to thank Bethlynn Sanders, the kindest secretary I’ve met. And a special thanks to my dear friends and professors, Dr. Gwen Tarbox and Dr. Jon Adams. I owe them a lot.

No words can express my deepest gratitude to my parents and family. My father, Dr. Ali Al-Shara, whose strong character, intelligence, resilience, and self-confidence has
Acknowledgements-Continued

been a model for me since my early years. I am indebted to him for he instilled in me a great passion for literature and criticism. And my mother, Nawal Al-Zu’bi, whose lovingly personality, patience, wit, and dedication to her family have given me the strength and patience to survive the toughest moments in writing this dissertation. And a heartfelt thanks to my brother, Muhammad, for his generous support.

There are many challenges and obstacles in life, and indeed this dissertation is one of them. Without doubt, I would not have been able to complete my journey without the patience, understanding, and unconditional love of my wife, Sabha, and my four wonderful children, Rami, Natalie, Lara, and Ali. Thank you for tolerating the long hours I spent sitting in front of the computer and in the library.

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................... ii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF STRUCTURALISM IN
    ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET'S JEALOUSY .............................................. 17

III. THE TEXT, WRITER, AND READER TRIANGLE:
    THE PORTRAYAL OF READER RESPONSE THEORY AND
    THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR IN ITALO CALVINO'S
    IF ON A WINTER NIGHT A TRAVELER ........................................... 40

IV. UNCERTAINTY IN FICTION:
    TIM O'BRIEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH NARRATOLOGY IN
    IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS ....................................................... 69

V. CRITICAL SELF-REFERENTIALITY IN
    JOHN BARTH'S CHIMERA ............................................................. 94

VI. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 120

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 129
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a revolution in the novel genre as postmodern authors have challenged the traditional relationship between the literary critic and the creative writer. In this emerging tradition novelists have shown a talent not only in writing tales, but also in philosophy and theory as they examine questions and problems in fiction-making and the very act of reading. Expressing their convictions about their understanding of literary criticism and literary theory, these authors support, criticize, parody, and interact with literary critics.

These postmodern writers have adapted the experimental, metafictive novel to express their philosophical convictions and theoretical analysis because of the self-referentiality and flexibility this type of fiction allows. In using metafictive techniques some novelists manage to both express and put into practice their philosophies and theories about literature and literary criticism. They bring together multiple creative and intellectual traditions, and, to use Italo Calvino’s term from The Uses of Literature, they can be classified as “philosopher-writers” (39). According to Patricia Waugh in Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction, metafiction is fiction which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and realism (2). Unlike other metafictive writers, whose major purpose is to “pose questions about the relationship between fiction and realism,” the creative metacritics discussed in this dissertation take the role of metacritics who overtly and/or covertly, through their fiction, respond to and
critique literary theory and scholarship. Their fictional works can be perceived as criticism of criticism. According the Doryjane Austen Birrer in a dissertation, “Metacritical Fictions: Post-War Literature Meets Academic Culture,” “[just] as metafictional texts help expose the constructed nature of reality, metacritical texts help expose the constructed nature of criticism through the negotiations with the “reality” of our own world and the world of the literary text” (42). Birrer also emphasizes that “criticism, like the fiction it explores, is a constructed narrative activity, and (also like fiction) has been constructed in a variety of new ways in post-World War II academia” (2). Understanding the creative and philosophical work of this emerging tradition is important to the scholarship of contemporary fiction, to our understanding of the reception of contemporary literary scholarship, or to the ongoing development of literary theory.

Metafiction and metacriticism, strictly speaking, are not new ideas – they go back at least as far as Cervantes and can be traced in a wide variety of literary forms. Yet, in the postmodern era, metacriticism has become more developed and sophisticated. According to Suresh Ravel in Metacriticism, the term “metacritics” can be given to scholars critics who “engage in philosophical analysis of the problems of criticism and critical theory” (239) through nonfiction. But what I intend to explore and examine here is the creative writer who acts as a metacritic, and uses his or her own fiction as a place to express his or her ideas about literary theory, responding to and critiquing literary critics.

Questions of interpretative power will be of continued interest as I examine novels by Allain Robbe-Grillet, Italo Calvino, Tim O’Brien and John Barth. This group of postmodern Western writers sees their creative work as an attempt to, if you will,
remove the “third wall” between literary work and critical reader, creating opportunities for fiction to wrestle with and respond to academics and literary critics.

Although metacriticism is a prominent postmodern trend, it has roots that extend back to literature from the Renaissance era. Perhaps, the best example of metacritical literature is Miguel de Cervantes’ eminent metafictive novel Don Quixote. Intriguingly, in part two of the novel, Cervantes criticizes Alonzo Fernandez de Avellaneda, the man who wrote a phony “Volume Two” of Don Quixote. After Don Quixote’s success with part one, Avellaneda wrote “Volume Two” in which he vilifies and insults Cervantes in the preface. Cervantes gets furious and writes the true “Volume Two.” He also discovers that Avellaneda has written a false version of his life story. Cervantes shows that the character is conscious of the author and is desperately searching for answers and refuting many of the events in the false version as he meets characters who have read both the Cervantes “Volume One” and the Avellaneda “Volume Two” (Keller and Server vi).

In the late Victorian age and early twentieth century a new type of metacritic evolved. Writers such as Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf represent the modern philosopher-writers who not only create art, but also explain, comment on, and critique their own art as well as other critics’ and creative writers’ literary heritage. Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist” and Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, for instance, can be seen as serious examples of creative works that attempt to criticize and respond to literary critics and other writers.

In “To Criticize the Critic,” T. S. Eliot, both a poet and an important literary critic, argues that the “criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism” (30). James Joyce’s fiction is also
considered by some critics as theoretical. According to Mark Currie in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Joyce’s dramatization of the artist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be considered a discussion of narrative techniques which might present the novel as a theoretical text. As a matter of fact, Joyce is seen as a different kind of theoretical creative writer who, instead of dealing directly with theory in his fiction, covertly theorizes about narrative. Narrative techniques in his fiction have influenced literary theorists. Currie in *Postmodern* says:

Joyce is a fascinating example partly because several poststructuralist theorists in the 1970s and 1980s looked to his work as a kind of inspiration and an origin for their theoretical insights. In other words, Joyce was a writer of theoretical fiction not in the sense that he defected from theory to fiction, but in that he was perceived afterwards as a writer who was exploring the theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction. If some novels are more theoretical than others, Joyce’s writing has repeatedly been represented as the ultimate theoretical fiction, not because academic theory has been imported into his fiction, but because academic theory has in a sense extracted the theoretical implications of his fiction. Poststructuralists in particular have identified Joyce as a proto-poststructuralist in a way that seriously confuses the relationship between cause and effect, fiction and criticism, or a narrative and its reading (55).

Whether or not Joyce’s fiction is poststructural, it impacted poststructuralist critics including Jacques Derrida who admits in an interview that one of the writers who had a significant influence on his critical career was James Joyce (Salusinsky 22).
Many of these writers have chosen fiction over essay as a vehicle for ideas and theories, perhaps because narrative fiction is more appealing to readers than a pure theoretical discourse. According to Currie in *Postmodern*, "There have always been philosophers and historians who have forsaken theoretical discourse for the advantages of fiction, for its subtle mechanism of persuasion, for its ability to explore ideas or historical forces as they are lived by individuals" (51).

In fact, the advantage that postmodern creative writers have over literary metacritics is that most of them are academics and literary critics who understand literary theory and criticism. Indeed, many of these writers are also scholars and critics responsible for developing theory and criticism. Through their fiction they have the opportunity to experiment with the theories that literary critics form and explore their validity or failure. In the experimental metafiction under consideration, creative writers also find opportunities to elaborate their own theories about literature and fiction writing.

Unlike literary metacritics, creative metacritics are dedicated to both creative writing and critical reading, exploring issues and difficulties that writers face in producing literature. They are interested in exploring the relationship between literary theory and literature as they consider the validity and applicability of criticism and critical theory in practice. As Currie in *Postmodern* says, “[a] writer-critic may personify the boundary between fiction and criticism, but a theoretical fiction has to be seen as a discourse which dramatises that boundary or uses it as an energy source. Sometimes this might involve the dramatisation of academics in fiction” (53). The difference between the creative metacritic (who uses fiction as a place for discussing theory) and the literary critic (who uses non-fictional discourse to discuss theory) is that the former, according to
David Lodge in “Crosscurrents in Modern English Criticism,” “is less disinterested than the academic, more concerned to work out in the practice of criticism the aesthetic principles of his own art, and to create a climate of taste and opinion favorable to the reception of that art. He writes in the first place for fellow-artists, but as there are never very many of these he has to draw on wider audience, either the academic one, or the ‘general reader’” (247). Lodge contends that the creative writer-critic makes a significant contribution to literary criticism because he or she has the liberty of movement, the capability to step in both fields, literature and criticism, and convey to the reader the strengths and weaknesses of literary theory.

It can also be said that creative metacritics have a special freedom to express their critical views without worrying about the validity of their theories. For instance, if they discover that their critical views are inaccurate, their texts remain fiction which will still tell a story. As Currie, who prefers to use the term ‘theoretical fiction’ rather than ‘metafiction’ in Postmodern, says: “The theoretical fiction is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning that it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative” (52). Literary critics on the other hand are condemned to the objectivity of theory’s scientific discourse. Their ideas need to be systematic and proved with evidence from literary texts. Unlike the creative metacritic, if literary critics lack accuracy in presenting their theories, they can face criticism from other critics and readers as to the validity of their theories. As Wallace Martin puts it in Recent Theories of Narrative “[treatises,] essays, and nonnarrative poems at least organize their materials around thematic assertions; they accept the burden of saying what they mean, even if they
fail to state the truth. But narratives, no matter how peppered with generalizations, always
provide more information or food for thought than they have digested. Either they aren’t
worth interpreting (mere entertainment) or they engender too many interpretations” (187).

In spite of the differences between creative metacritics and academic metacritics, in many ways their goals are congruent in relation to the continued development of literary criticism and theory, where both can play a role. As literary theorists struggle to establish clear and distinct approaches to interpreting meaning in literary texts, there certainly remain disagreements, and gaps. Thus, academic metacritics, according to Ravel in Metacriticism, “[concentrate] our attention on the connections and parallels and complexities that are often ignored by critical theorists in search of neat distinctions and tidy criteria” (248). In this broader discussion creative metacritics can participate and perhaps take the discussion over interpretive processes in directions that serve the creative writer’s intention as well as the critic’s.

A relevant question is why would creative writers use theory in their fiction or “contaminate their fiction with criticism” (62), as Currie’s puts it in Postmodern? There might be several reasons for their “contamination” of fiction with criticism. First, the very plurality and diversity of literary theories create openings for creative writers to address theory in their fiction, especially when they are triggered by literary critics applying theories to their own literary texts. The variety of interpretive approaches, which many may consider productive and opening additional avenues of interpretation, has also caused a sense of distrust and unreliability in literary interpretation. As Ravel points out in Metacriticism, in “view of the plurality of the modes of criticism some
critical theorists consider it absurd to identify the truth (about literature and criticism) with any of them” (239-40).

Submission to the evaluation of literary critics has led some imaginative writers to seek a voice in the interpretation of their own works and in the literary heritage as a whole. In the diverse and conflicted field of literary interpretation, creative writers, considering themselves the legitimate “owners” of their texts, may feel themselves marginalized in the struggle to interpret meaning. Commenting on the emergence of criticism of criticism, Philip Smallwood in Modern Critics in Practice says:

The first is the fact that, with the growth, in those same institutions, of an international ‘market’ in critical ideas, the opportunities for misunderstanding in critical discourse have never been greater. The second is that, with the advance of particular linguistic communities within the academic world, each devising a critical vocabulary of its own, critical antagonists are often using different terms when what they are talking about is the same. ...Sometimes these approaches operate together in loose alliance. Sometimes they compete one with another, Marxist with feminist criticism, for example. At other times they may be chronologically conceived, as poststructuralist follows structuralist, in which case they appear in onward progress, inexorable succession, as a March of Theory (2-3).

In order to have a voice in these debates, creative writers may find it necessary to join literary critics and participate as literary metacritics in an effort to shift narrative authority from literary critics to imaginative writers.
David Lodge, in *After Bakhtin*, argues that the traditional relationship between critics and writers has evolved to a more sophisticated level. While in the past “[n]ovelists wrote novels and critics criticized them” (11), postmodern novelists have become so involved in theory that they start to question whether what literary critics claim about literature is valid or not. Thus these authors examine the credibility and practicality of some literary theories. As both a creative writer and a critic, Lodge carries us into the author's mind to explore how writers experiment with ideas and theories about literature. Lodge gives examples from his own writing experience to debate what literary critics, such as Roland Barthes and Paul de Man, have to say about fiction. Lodge chooses “The Death of the Author” to examine Barthes' ideas about the role of the author in his or her literary texts and “Criticism and Crisis” to examine de Man’s explanation of realism in fiction. He wants to determine how accurate these two critics are when it comes to writing fiction. Lodge seems to reject Barthes’ idea of the modern scriptor, as Lodge in his own literary texts strongly asserts his authorial presence. Interestingly, Lodge believes that the “reception of new writing has in fact probably never been more obsessively author-centred than it is today, not only in reviewing, but in supplementary forms of exposure through the media -- interviews and profiles in the press and on TV, prizes, public readings, and book launches and so on” (15-16). To de Man’s denial of the existence of the mimetic connection between fiction and reality, Lodge contends that his own fiction is, to a significant degree, a representation of the real world. If his readers do not recognize in his novels truths about real behavior from his characters, he should feel he had failed.
Similarly, Alain Robbe-Grillet in *For a New Novel* states that it is necessary that an "artist should explain himself," a thing that critics "find hard to endure" (10). Robbe-Grillet tries to correct his critics who claimed that his novel, *Jealousy*, was an objective text and his writing style unrealistic. Contrary to what these critics claim, Robbe-Grillet explains to his readers that his texts were realistic and subjective; a topic which will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Another factor that has provoked creative writers to respond to, even retaliate against literary critics through their creative work, is what they consider the subjectivity, lack of experience, and irrationality of some literary critics. While dealing with literary texts, many young critics tend to jump to conclusions and severely criticize creative writers. In fact, the irrationality of these critics mainly stems from their lack of experience in dealing with literary theory and literature and also their subjectivity in expressing their critical views. According to Eliot in "To Criticize the Critic," critics go through different intellectual stages over their career, and their perceptions and understanding of literature evolve over time. As critics grow older and become more experienced, they gain objectivity in their criticism and "regard the enemy with greater tolerance and even sometimes with sympathy" (16).

Indeed, over the last century, literary critics have had a great influence on writers’ careers. Creative writers, especially fiction writers, have been greatly influenced by literary critics’ judgment of their literary work. Literary critics have had the power either to elevate writers and contribute to a flourishing writing career, or demean them and devastate their reputations. In *After Bakhtin*, Lodge describes the consequences of the growing tensions between critics, journalists and reviewers on one side, and creative
writers on the other. Lodge believes that critics and creative writers have complementary interests since novelists are “seen as the creative source without whom the critic would have nothing to criticize” (12) and that literary critics and reviewers play an important role in the readers’ reception of creative works. Nonetheless, Lodge believes that literary criticism can be “used to police the work of contemporary writing in a way that can be oppressive” (12). He treats this theme in his novella *Home Truths* in which a novelist’s writing career is devastated by a journalist who criticized his writing style and exposed personal secrets he revealed to her during a friendly conversation.

Another factor that encouraged many creative writers to retaliate against literary critics is the creative writer’s lack of trust in the critic’s intention. Many not well-known writers felt that their fiction was unappreciated, and in many cases rejected, by readers because of the lack of attention they received by literary critics who paid more attention to famous and conventional writers. According to Eliot in “To Criticize the Critic,” important and famous critics have shown an interest in the literary canon and a disinterest in and negligence of “authors who are sometimes forgotten or unduly despised” (12), and who may not have canonical status. In After Bakhtin, Lodge points out that contemporary creative writers realize that important literary critics and academic critics are more interested in and “have great respect for the canonical novelists, but not much for novelists who don’t seem to be interested in getting into the canon” (12). The writers most affected by literary critics’ unjust treatment and reception include women writers, writers of color, and young writers who experiment with new techniques in their fiction. Virginia Woolf, for example, expressed the notion that many women writers did not get the critical reception they deserve merely because they were not male writers. She used
the myth of Shakespeare’s sister in, *A Room of One’s Own*, to emphasize that if it was a woman who had written great plays instead of Shakespeare, she would not have had the same respect and appreciation, and in fact might have ended life in poverty and suicide. After writing *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet expressed, in *For a New Novel*, his need to defend his writing style against French critics who accused him of derailing traditional forms of representation. As they defend their work and the role of the author, these writers become not only the advocates and evaluators of their own texts and traditions, but also metacritics critiquing literary critics and theory.

In Chapter Two, I consider Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*, a text that covertly deals with one literary theory while prefiguring another. In this chapter I address structuralist thought and its relevance to Robbe-Grillet’s novel. Examining Robbe-Grillet’s narrative style, I show how he intentionally responds to structuralist thinking about language and realism, and how he questions the validity of structuralists’ ideas about objective language and its ability to convey knowledge and present reality. The question that Robbe-Grillet raises in *Jealousy* is whether or not realism and language can accomplish an objective point of view in literary texts. Robbe-Grillet, obsessed by the problem of realism, wants to examine the ability of language to provide the reader with adequate knowledge about the world that the writer is representing. In this experimental text, Robbe-Grillet embodies structural theories about the scientific nature of language and its objectivity in literary texts, and he shows the reader, in practice, the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of obtaining knowledge and accessing reality by depending on language alone without considering other contexts. In this he prefigures principles of post-structuralism.
In Chapter Three, I explore how in *If on a winter’s night a traveler* with its overt philosophical treatment of the process of writing and reading, Italo Calvino acts as a metacritic questioning the ability of either the author or the reader to ascertain truth and meaning about fiction. In this chapter I show how Calvino experiments with two critical views that attempt to replace the author with the reader: “the Death of the Author” and reader-oriented criticism. As a creative writer, Calvino appears to favor the idea of restoring the position of the author along with the reader to roles as active participants in the interpretive process.

In Chapter Four I discuss how Tim O’Brien engages with and examines major issues in narratology in *In the Lake of the Woods*. In his metafictive treatment of narrative in the novel, O’Brien covertly examines important narrative techniques in fictional texts. He explores whether using these techniques described by narratologists can demystify ambiguities in fictional texts. O’Brien emphasizes the narratologists’ belief that narrative theory offers tools and ways to understand fiction but neither interprets fictional texts, deduces meaning, nor ascertains truth. O’Brien experiments with narratological tools, including paratexts, prolepsis, and analepsis. Ultimately, his novel challenges interpretive modes including intentional reading, symptomatic reading, and adaptive reading.

Finally the study of John Barth in Chapter Five is focused on his own creative criticism of his widely recognized critical views in his essays “The Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Literature of Replenishment.” In this chapter I explore how, through *Chimera*, Barth acts as a metacritic as he self-consciously uses his creative writing to examine his critical and theoretical views concerning the problem of the
“exhaustion” of the novel and the related problem of writer’s block. In his discussion of the current situation of the novel genre and the major difficulties novelists face when confronted by postmodernity, Barth offers solutions that, he believes, guarantee the novel’s survival.

The order of the chapters follows for the most part the chronological order of publication of the works under examination, with the exception of the final chapter. Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy in 1957 (Chapter One), Italo Clavino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler in 1979 (Chapter Two), Tim O’Brien’s In the Lake of the Woods in 1994 (Chapter Three), and John Barth’s Chimera in 1972 (Chapter Four). In fact, these novels are arranged in accordance with the emergence of literary theories and critical views I relate them to: structuralism, reader response theory, narratology, and self-referentiality (which is not connected to any specific theory).

When Robbe-Grillet wrote Jealousy, structuralism was gaining ground in Europe not only in literary theory, but also in various aspects of life: social, political, and cultural. Its revolutionary ideas concerning language and the objective study of systems led some young critics and creative writers, including Robbe-Grillet, to question the validity of structuralism in demystifying literature. Emerging as a fiction writer and a theorist in the novel, Robbe-Grillet aptly dramatizes the major ideas in the philosophy of structuralism.

Calvino’s, novel discussed in the following chapter, treats some of the hottest critical issues in the 1970’s. During that period, literary theory started to emphasize the significant role the reader plays in literary interpretation, a topic that raised many questions especially among creative writers. My choice of If on a winter’s night a traveler
serves my theoretical discussion that covers two of the most significant concerns for creative metacritics during that decade: the death of the author and reader response theory.

My choice of O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods* as a metacritical text enables discussion of narratology, one of the most prominent literary theories in the eighties and the nineties of the twentieth century.

Finally, because Barth’s *Chimera* does not address a specific literary theory, I chose to discuss it last. Unlike the other creative metacritics studied in the preceding chapters who critique other theorists’ critical views, Barth critiques and dramatizes his own critical views related to postmodernism and the exhaustion of the novel genre.

The novels I address take different positions in their treatment of literary theory. For example in *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet appears to employ a covert treatment of literary theory in his narrative. Although he does not explicitly tackle critical issues in his novel, the ambiguity of *Jealousy* encourages the reader to abandon structuralism (the most prominent literary theory at the time) as an interpretive theory.

Unlike Robbe Grillet’s *Jealousy*, Calvino’s and Barth’s novels tend to show more defiance toward literary theorists in their overt treatment of critical issues than the other two novelists discussed here. Their straightforwardness in tackling literary theory and raising questions about major gaps in the study of the novel is apparent as both writers discuss different theoretical and narrative topics in their metafictive narratives. However, they take different approaches in presenting their views. While Calvino objectively portrays different viewpoints concerning the role of the author and the reader in the
interpretive process, Barth tends to be more subjective and critical (and sometimes cynical) in his treatment of some critical views.

Finally, O'Brien seems to occupy a middle ground between the covert and the overt narrative techniques in approaching the literary theories discussed in this study. Although O'Brien does not present a straightforward attitude towards narrative theory, the metafictive approach of the novel strongly encourages readers to consider narrative techniques and issues of interpretation. In fact, the issues O'Brien raises about the value of truth in the novel lead the reader to question the interpretive validity of literary theories that depend on the narrative techniques analyzed by narratologists.

In spite of the different approaches the four creative metacritics take in addressing literary theory in their fiction, they manage to make strong statements about their theoretical views and the way they want readers to read novels.
CHAPTER II

THE PORTRAYAL OF STRUCTURALISM IN ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET'S JEALOUSY

Since the birth of the fraternal twins, structuralism and post-structuralism, there has been debate, dispute, and controversy among writers and scholars about the terms and their relevance to literature and criticism. I use the term "fraternal twins" because since the inception of structuralism, the basic outlines of post-structuralism were also en utero. Perhaps one of the best literary examples of this dispute is Alain Robbe-Grillet's metafictive novel Jealousy, first published in French in 1957 and translated into English in 1959. Indeed, in Jealousy Robbe-Grillet engages with the major principles of structuralist thought. Although Jealousy was written before the emergence of post-structuralism, Robbe-Grillet's text appears to tackle and critique the major principles of structuralism that were later addressed by post-structuralist theorists.

In fact, Robbe-Grillet is an example of a writer who utilized structuralist philosophy and analysis in his creative work, but who, at the same time, questioned and challenged structuralist thought. In so doing Robbe-Grillet emerges as an important, indeed, outstanding example of the creative metacritic, the creative writer who engages with, challenges, and develops philosophy and literary scholarship. Apparently Robbe-Grillet does not directly address structuralism in his novel. However, his employment of structuralist's critical ideas strongly encourages the reader to consider this controversial literary theory as a major topic for discussion in Jealousy.

In order to manifest Robbe-Grillet's engagement with structuralism in his metacritical text, it is necessary to present a brief description of structuralism and post-
structuralism. Unlike previous critical theories, structuralism emphasized that the world is constructed, understood, and interpreted linguistically. According to Robert Parker in How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies, “[in] structuralist thinking, the world is not something that we discover. It is something that we produce, that we construct, through language” (45). Defenders of structuralism contend that it is not that there is no reality independent of language, but that reality can only be understood as culturally “constructed” through the language of the text. Parker claims that “[people] who do not ‘get’ structuralism sometimes suppose that the structuralist notion that the human mind produces the world we see means that for structuralism there is no reality” (46).

To construct a realistic point of view through language, structuralists consider their approach to language to be scientific as they assert its “claim to objective, systematic, and even scientific, analysis” (Murfin and Ray 459). As Northrop Fry suggests in “The Archetypes of Literature,” “criticism as we find it in learned journals and scholarly monographs has every characteristic of a science. Evidence is examined scientifically; previous authorities are used scientifically; fields are investigated scientifically; texts are edited scientifically. Prosody is scientific in structure; so is phonetics; so is philology” (693). Structuralists attempted to show systematically and scientifically that all elements of human culture, including literature, may be understood as parts of a system of signs. Although Ferdinand de Saussure predated structuralism, structuralists consider his work to support their scientific and objective approach to language as they were influenced by his theories in linguistics. In How to Interpret Literature, Parker explains that
Saussure, language is not, as we usually suppose, a list of words applied to objects. Instead, he saw language as a system of signs, with each sign consisting of a sound-image, which he called the signifier, and a concept that the sound-image represents, which he called a signified. For example, the signifier *cat* represents the concept of a cat. (The signified is the concept of cat. It is not the physical cat, which Saussure calls the *referent*. Saussure’s lack of concern for the referent may seem difficult to understand at first, ..., but the explanation is that he describes language as a process in the human mind, which generates sound-images and concepts but does not generate referents, physical objects like cats, dogs, or trees) (42-43).

Saussure’s rigorous attention to distinctions between words on the page, ideas that they bring forward, and things actually in the world can be seen as an attempt to objectify language and understand its function scientifically. Building his ideas on this notion, the eminent French critic Roland Barthes, in “The Structuralist Activity,” believed that “creation and reflection are not, here, an original “impression” of the real world, but a veritable fabrication of a world which resembles the first one, not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible” (872).

Although Saussure approached language scientifically, there is no evidence that he believed literature had to be scientific. Saussure, who died over four decades before the emergence of structuralism, did not actually publish his theories and make them accessible to his readers. His colleagues and friends gathered his lectures and notes and published them in articles. Saussure, himself, never passed judgment on whether or not his system of signs is applicable to literature. Nonetheless, many structuralists have
developed their analysis depending on Saussure’s theories in language and his system of
signs as an attempt to ‘scientify’ the study of language.

The other literary theory relevant to Robbe-Grillet’s metacritical novel, *Jealousy*,
is post-structuralism. Unlike structuralism, which is scientific in nature and attempts to
apply objectivity to the reading and writing of texts, post-structuralism, according to
Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory*, tends “to be more emotive, fixed on some ‘material’
aspect of language, such as a metaphor used by a writer” (62). Post-structuralists,
particularly deconstructionist critics, introduced the ideas of the uncertainties of language
and the arbitrary relation between words. Drawing on the belief that language can betray
us and express ideas we have never intended, Jacques Derrida, the most influential figure
of deconstruction, challenged structuralism’s scientific emphasis on the unified structure
and objective meaning of texts. Derrida focused on play and discontinuity, emphasizing
the contradictory relation between words. Derrida starts from the recognition that the
signifier (the word) and the signified (its reference) are not a unified entity, but rather an
arbitrary and constantly shifting relationship (Lynn 102). Therefore, it is impossible to
arrive at a conclusion in literary texts. As Derrida suggests in *Writing and Difference*,
it is impossible to explain what any sign or text means without producing another text,
which is a parallel set of signifiers. According to Derrida, any signified can be a signifier
to another signified which breaks the unity of signification. Derrida says:

as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or
privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no
limit, one must reject even the concept and word “sign” itself-- which is precisely
what cannot be done. For the signification “sign” has always been understood and

20
determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word “signifier” itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept (281).

Although both theories depend on language, post-structuralism considers other external factors in ascertaining meaning. In this way, post-structuralism challenges the structuralists’ fundamental dependence on language by insisting on the idea that “reality itself is textual” and it is almost impossible to obtain knowledge through language alone.

In fact, post-structuralists believe “that the language we use will express things we hadn’t intended, or convey the wrong expression, or betray our ignorance, callousness, or confusion … we are not in control of the linguistic system” (Barry 62).

These important ideas about the nature of language and text explored in structuralism and post-structuralism attracted some literary critics and creative writers to apply them to literary analysis and creative writing. Putting the major principles of structuralism and post-structuralism into critical and creative practice provides for the reader, and the writer as well, a kind of experimental field where the value of the theories, their validity or invalidity in interpreting literary texts, could be examined.

Robbe-Grillet’s centrality as a metacritic is all the more evident since his work was celebrated by some of the most important structuralist literary critics, such as Barthes, as embodying the values and methods of structuralism. Although Robbe-Grillet does not express an explicit objection to structuralism per se, his discussion of signification reflects a post-structuralists’ idea of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, prefiguring by that Derrida’s idea of the lack of unity between the
signified and signifier discussed in *Writing and Difference*. Robbe-Grillet, in *For a New Novel*, says:

> There remains, then, that immediate signification of things (descriptive, partial, always contested) -- in other words, the signification which takes its place within the story, the anecdote of the book, as the profound (transcendent) signification takes its place outside it.... From it, as a matter of fact, there can be no question of freeing oneself, or else we risk seeing the anecdote take over, and soon even transcendence (metaphysics love a vacuum, and rushes into it like smoke up a chimney); for within immediate signification, we can find the absurd, which is theoretically nonsignification, but which as a matter of fact leads immediately, by a well-known metaphysical recuperation, to a new transcendence; and the infinite fragmentation of immediate meaning thus establishes a new totality, quite as dangerous, quite as futile. Even within signification, there is nothing left but the sound of words. But the various levels of signification of language which we have just remarked have among them many interferences. And it is likely that the new realism will destroy certain of these theoretical oppositions (166).

The other important structuralist idea that Robbe-Grillet rejects in *For a New Novel* is the objectivity of the novel. In fact, Robbe-Grillet criticizes some of his contemporary critics’ insistence on the objectivity of the novel arguing that “the New Novel aims at a total subjectivity,” and “[not] only is it a *man* who, in [Robbe-Grillet’s] novels for instance, describes everything, but it is the least neutral, the least impartial of men; *always* engaged, on the contrary, in an emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind, to the point of often distorting his vision and producing imaginings close to
delirium” (138). Although Robbe-Grillet does not reveal who these critics are, the reader can infer that he might be referring to Barthes and the literary scholar and translator, Bruce Morrissette, who both perceived *Jealousy* as an objective novel.

Through his intriguing treatment of his creative narrative, Robbe-Grillet questions the objectivity of language and its ability to convey knowledge and represent reality, major pillars of structuralist theory. His novel *Jealousy* can be seen, in fact, to show the impossibility of structuralist objectivism and to demonstrate the critical and ethical limitations of this school of analysis. In effect, *Jealousy* anticipates criticism of structuralism made by post-structuralist thinkers.

Robbe-Grillet’s controversial text *Jealousy* is a literary work which has often attracted theorists and readers interested in structuralism and post-structuralism, whether defenders or opponents. I will argue that *Jealousy* in fact misled many critics including Morrissette and Barthes. Barthes, still a structural theorist and critic when *Jealousy* was written, believed that Robbe-Grillet’s novella was a revolutionary creative text that attempted to undo the classical concept of description by breaking the story’s unity and “giving it an exaggerated precise location in space, by drowning it in a deluge of outlines, coordinates, and orientations, by the eventual abuse of perspective, ... by exploding the traditional space and substituting for it a new space, provided, ... with a new depth and dimension in time” (Barthes, Objective Literature 20). In fact, Barthes saw the novel as a dramatization of structuralism and was impressed by Robbe-Grillet’s ability to make the theory’s “dream of scientificity” (Jackson 127) manifest in a literary text.

In *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet creates a novel that has no plot and includes only a few characters presented through the limited lens of an unreliable and motionless narrator.
This first person narrator does not refer to himself by using the pronoun "I" or "we" throughout the entire narrative and dedicates most of the novel to minute, geometric, and notoriously detailed, objective descriptions of the banana plantation and the house that he shares with a woman character simply named A... . Although it is not clearly stated in the narrative, the reader develops a sense of the story of an affair between Franck, a neighbor, and A... due, in part, to a brief reference to their trip to the port town in which they spend a night, a week or a month -- the narrator never specifies. Although the narrator does not even specify his relation to A... [his presumed wife], the reader can suppose a marital relationship exists, either from the title of the novel or the narrator’s position in the story. (Or the reader can depend on the author’s statement in which he demystifies the relation between A... and the narrator when Robbe-Grillet, who takes the position of the critic of his own fiction, uses the word “husband” as he talks about Jealousy in his For a New Novel) (192). To the reader’s likely disappointment, the novel has an open ending that provides no reliable information about the fate of Franck and A... aside from the narrator’s awkward reference to an imaginary fatal car accident with the cheating couple in it.

French critics were disturbed by Jealousy, arguing that the text violated the narrative and character expectations of the novel form, was alienating to readers, and was entirely not worth reading. Traditional critics, such as Andre Rousseaux and Robert Kemp, Morrissette mentions in "Surfaces and Structures in Robbe-Grillet's Novels," “hastened to denounce [Jealousy], and to assure the reading public that the so-called ‘new path’ for fiction promised by Robbe-Grillet in reality led nowhere” (2). Commenting on
the negative reception of his novel by many French critics, Robbe-Grillet expresses his frustration in *For a New Novel* by saying:

Not only was the book attacked, decried as a kind of preposterous outrage against belles-lettres; it was even proved that such an abomination was only to be expected, for *Jealousy* was a self-acknowledged product of premeditation; its author— O the scandal of it!-- permitted himself to have opinions concerning his own profession (11).

On the other hand, some French literary critics, such as Barthes and Morrissette, saw *Jealousy* as marking the emergence of the “*nouveau roman*” and embraced its form and narrative as the embodiment of structuralist scientific objectivity. Actually, Robbe-Grillet earned the title of the of the leader of the school of the New Novel in France after the widely recognized success of his first two novels, *The Eraser* (*Les Gommes*, 1953) and *The Voyeur* (*Le Voyeur*, 1955). Following these works, Robbe-Grillet published a series of articles in *L’Express* and two remarkable essays, “A Fresh Start for Fiction” and “Old Values” which revealed “his talent as a theorist of the novel form” (Morrissette 1). With the positive evaluations made by several young and open-minded critics, *Jealousy* came to be seen as Robbe-Grillet’s finest novel to date. These critics believed that Robbe-Grillet’s fiction made a powerful impression, that there is “something” in his work that needs to take its course to be revealed, though that “something” was not clearly determined.

If structural critics, as Peter Barry explains in *Beginning Theory*, believed that “structuralism is scientific in nature” and “that knowledge can be achieved through language” (62) thus reflecting an objective view of reality without revealing any emotion
in the text, *Jealousy* can be seen, despite Barthes’ reading, as calling into question realism and the role of language in accomplishing an objective point of view in literary texts. Through his intriguing treatment of narrative, Robbe-Grillet in fact explores the validity of the major premise of structuralism, the objective tone of language and its ability to convey knowledge and present reality. In so doing, Robbe-Grillet, among the first generation of postmodern writers, demonstrates the capability of the new experimental novel to defy the interpretation of literary critics.

To prove the difficulty of creating an objective point of view in fiction, Robbe-Grillet experiments with an unnamed narrator who applies “scientific language” where the “I” is removed and passive sentences displace personal action. Rather than addressing emotions or the internalizations of characters, there are detailed descriptions of the setting. While such strategies might make the novel appear “objective” or “scientific” and an embodiment of structuralist principles, this is not the case. Instead, the attentive reader continually encounters subjectivity in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* through the narrator. Robbe-Grillet depicts the narrator’s subjectivity in three different ways. First, in the kind of information the author allows his narrator to reveal to the reader. Second, through the narrator’s attempts to interpret certain actions and utterances in the novel. Third, through Robbe-Grillet’s use of language.

Apparently, the perplexity of Robbe-Grillet’s novel resides in the narrator’s insistence on concealing details and important information from the reader, including his emotions and reaction to his wife’s apparent intimacy with their neighbor, Franck. This specific technique led critics, such as Barthes or Roch C. Smith in *Understanding Alain Robbe-Grillet*, to describe Robbe-Grillet’s narrator in *Jealousy* as an objective

26
commentator on the events of the novel (43). But contrary to what these critics claim, the narrator’s concealment only intensifies the reader’s sense of the subjective narrative point of view in the novel. For instance, the narrator’s insistence on concealing his and his wife’s identities encourages the reader to believe that he is not being neutral in reporting his story. It ought to be conspicuous to the reader that the narrator is so tactful in choosing the information he could safely reveal without jeopardizing his reputation and embarrassing himself. Obviously, the issue the narrator is dealing with in his story is not the kind of issue that couples, especially a cuckolded male, want to be made public. Whether or not the narrator is jealous does not affect the impression which the author wants the reader to form about the nature of the relationship between A... and Franck on one hand, and between the narrator and A... on the other. The reader easily concludes that from the narrator’s description of Franck and A... hanging out together, and also from the many conversations they have without involving the ‘husband’ that, A...’s relationship with Franck is emotionally stronger than her relation with the narrator.

If the narrative point of view in Jealousy mimics the camera’s eye, the narrator would give all his characters the same degree of description without favoring one object over the other. In other words, the narrator would either need to mention all the characters’ names or conceal all their identities. But the narrator is not reflecting real life as a mirror does. Actually he is reflecting his own subjective point of view by deciding the kind of information that would best serve his intention.

Another example that reveals the narrator’s subjectivity in Jealousy is his continuous attempts to justify certain incidents and behaviors. Ironically, one major characteristic that structuralist critics assign to Robbe-Grillet’s fiction is a commitment to
maintain the objectivity of his narrative style in *Jealousy* by a rejection of psychological analysis. In describing *Jealousy*, Morrissette in "Surfaces and Structures" mentions some of the major characteristics that mark Robbe-Grillet's novel as a structuralist text, in particular the "absence of any attempt at psychological analysis or any use of the vocabulary of psychology, total rejection of introspection, interior monologues, 'thoughts' or descriptions of state of mind" (7).

Yet, Robbe-Grillet's narrator seems preoccupied with justifying the kind of relationship A... and Franck are having. For example, in *Narrative Consciousness*, George Szanto raises an important issue concerning the narrator's, or husbands' awareness of what is going on around him. Referring to an incident that brings Franck's and A...'s heads close together, the narrator explains that "A... is probably thanking him." Szanto suggests that the narrator's use of the word "'probably' forces the reader to doubt the explanation. The husband fools no one but himself" (183). Regardless of whether the husband is fooling himself or not, Szanto's reference to the word "probably" draws attention to the narrator's attempt to infer a certain explanation from the events that take place in front of him. This inference gives the reader the impression that the narrator is not being objective in representing the events of his story.

Another incident that accentuates the narrator's psychological involvement in the events of the story occurs when he sarcastically gives his opinion about A...'s and Franck's agreement on a certain topic they are discussing. The narrator says:

On the strength of his three years' experience, Franck believes that there are good drivers, even among the Negroes here. A... is also of this opinion, of course.
She has kept out of the discussion about the comparative quality of machines, but the question of the drivers provokes a rather long and categorical intervention on her part.

Besides, she might be right. In this case, Franck would have to be right too (47). In this statement, the narrator not only expresses his opinion about A..., but also reveals his attitude towards the kind of relationship that exists between her and Franck. To show the closeness and intimacy between the couple, the narrator reveals an important detail: the harmonie behavior and way of thinking of A... and Franck.

Moreover, the narrator cannot restrain himself from concealing his desire to interpret the events that take place around him. He seems eager, even if with restraint, to take an effective part in the events of the story. For instance his eagerness to get involved in the events is apparent when he intends to interpret the feelings of Franck’s wife, Christiane. When Franck and A... need to stay over night when they go to the port town, Christiane sends her servant to the narrator’s house to ask whether her husband and A... have returned. And when Christiane’s servant reports that his lady is angry, the narrator explains that the boy “uses this adjective to describe any kind of uncertainty, sadness, or disturbance. Probably he means “anxious” today; but it could just as well be “outraged,” “jealous,” or even “desperate” (119). Without doubt, the narrator comments on Christiane’s reaction to her husband’s relationship with A... by digging beneath the surface as an attempt to explain her state of mind. This attempt to explain other characters’ behaviors is in contrast to Morrisette’s claim in “Surface and Structures in Robbe-Grillet’s Novels” that Robbe-Grillet’s narrator in Jealousy totally rejects “description of states of mind” (7).
Perhaps the strongest example of the narrator’s subjectivity in *Jealousy* is his attempt to justify Franck’s and A...’s staying overnight in the port town. It is obvious that the narrator is not content with just stating the couple’s absence; in fact, he is eager to explain and imagine the circumstances that prevented Franck and A... from returning home the same night. The narrator exaggerates in prolonging his justification:

Nevertheless, there is no lack of probable reason for the delay. ... There is also the help that cannot be refused to another driver in difficulty. There are the various risks delaying the departure itself: unforeseen prolongation of some errand, excessive slowness of the waiter, invitation to dinner accepted at the last minute with a friend met by chance, etc., etc., ... (108).

Although the narrator might be depicted as naive when he tries to explain the events around him, he does seem to show an awareness of what is going on between Franck and A.... His awareness is revealed through the sarcastic remarks he makes now and then, and his repeating, many times, the excuses the couple presents for their delay, or even what the narrator himself has made up to justify their late return. In the above quotation, the narrator could think of almost every reason for the couple’s delay except that Franck and A... are having an affair.

The third method that depicts the narrator’s subjectivity in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* is the author’s use of language. In describing the events of the novel, Robbe-Grillet’s narrator uses particular symbols and figures of speech that dramatically influence the reader’s perception of the narrator, revealing personal obsessions, emotional states of mind, and individuality and subjectivity. In fact, *Jealousy* depends on symbols and images as significant milestones. In order to understand the function of these
symbols, we must pay close attention to the narrative style. Already, Robbe-Grillet’s novel is not easy to understand, so if readers do not take implied meaning into consideration, they may find themselves perplexed.

The narrator is preoccupied with repeating the description of the centipede (that Franck squashes on the wall of A…’s and the narrator’s house) and the green glass (in which the narrator watches Franck visiting A…, and later leaving with her to the port town), and they function as important symbols in the novel. The narrator exaggerates the significance of the centipede by repeating the scene in which Franck squashes it on the bedroom wall. In this way Robbe-Grillet establishes a comparison between the centipede and the narrator’s immobility, dignity, and masculinity. The narrator refers to the centipede as a creature that is “motionless, alert, as if sensing danger,” and “only its antennae are alternately raised and lowered in a swaying movement, slow but continuous” (112). Like the centipede, the narrator is depicted as a motionless creature, without a name, and someone whose role in the novel is to observe people and things around him in a slow and a continuous way. From the narrator’s description of Franck’s heroic reaction to A…’s cry when she sees the centipede, the reader can infer that Franck’s violence against the centipede stands for his violating the narrator’s authority in his house and interference in his marital affairs.

The narrator’s obsession with the centipede invites the reader to closely consider the significance of the insect. When the narrator tries hard to remove the stain of the squashed centipede, he says:

The details of the centipede have to be seen from quite close range, turning toward the pantry door, if its origin is to be distinguished. The image of the
squashed centipede then appears not as a whole, but composed of fragments distinct enough to leave no doubt... . Then come the other parts, less precise: sections of legs and the partial form of the body convulsed into a question mark (62).

The narrator decides to hide any trace of the centipede and is determined to conceal his resentment of Franck’s squashing of the bug. In the same way the narrator is careful not to arouse any doubt in Franck’s and A...’s minds to guarantee the secrecy of his own feelings or plans. It seems that the narrator fears exposing his jealousy or his desperation due to his squashed dignity. Perhaps the narrator is embarrassed to expose his inferiority to Franck or A... . Although it may be difficult to define with precision the narrator’s state of mind, it is clear that his reaction is powerful, emotional, and subjective.

Intriguingly, the narrator connects himself and the centipede through the repetition of specific words or expressions. For example the words ‘crackling’ and ‘motionless’ reoccur both when the narrator describes the squashed centipede and when he describes Franck crashing his car. If the centipede stands as a symbol that represents the narrator’s dignity and masculinity, then the emotional overtones of Franck violently violating the sanctity of the husbands’ marriage are readily understood. In the description of Franck squashing the centipede, the narrator depicts a minutely detailed scene of violence and eroticism.

In the silence, from time to time, the characteristic buzzing can be heard... Frank, without saying a word, stands up, wads his napkin into a ball as he cautiously approaches, and squashes the creature against the wall. Then with his foot, he squashes it against the bedroom floor.
Then he comes back toward the bed and in passing hangs the towel on its metal rack near the washbowl (113).

In “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet,” Roland Barthes is impressed with Robbe-Grillet’s use of language in his fiction. Barthes, still a structural critic when he wrote this essay, claims that Robbe-Grillet manages to maintain the objectivity of his fiction by using a scientific language that only has one function, merely a descriptive function. He also claims that Robbe-Grillet uses only one metaphor in his entire fiction, and that metaphor is not used in Jealousy. Yet Robbe-Grillet’s use of the centipede in the novel cannot only be seen as a symbol but as metonymy. While structuralists, such as Roman Jakobson, have emphasized the difference between metaphor and metonymy considering them two of the five distinct principle tropes (the others being simile, personification, and synecdoche), deconstructive critics believe that “all metaphors are really metonyms” (Murfin and Ray 264). In other words, if according to critics metaphors and metonyms are the same, then, Robbe-Grillet’s use of the centipede as a metonymy contradicts Barthes’ claim above that there are no metaphors in Jealousy.

The reference to the bed in the above quotation connects Franck with sexuality. The abrupt transition to the next scene of Franck crashing the car is connected with the goal that the couple wants to reach in haste. The expressions ‘speed’ and ‘jolt’ can also refer to the act of sex, especially when the reader knows that Franck has no desire to stop and continues to drive faster. As the narrator describes the crash, he compares the sound of the fire to the crackling sound of the centipede when it was squashed. It seems that the narrator implies that when Franck and A…’s car crashes and bursts into fire, it produces the same effect as that of his dignity squashed by their affair. The narrator says:
In his haste to reach his goal, Franck increases his speed. The jolt becomes more violent. Nevertheless he continues to drive faster. ... The car immediately bursts into flames. The whole brush is illuminated by the crackling, spreading fire. It is the sound the centipede makes, motionless again on the wall, in the center of the panel (113-14).

Apparently, only a symbolic reading of the above imaginary scene helps explain the abrupt reference to the crashing car with the couple in it.

Another symbol that allows the reader to understand the narrator’s state of mind is the color green. Robbe-Grillet aptly employs the symbol of the color green to open other possibilities of interpretation in his novel. In *Jealousy* the green color of the window glass should not simply be understood as the reflection of the banana trees. Smith in *Understanding Alain Robbe-Grillet*, points out that green is the traditional color for jealousy (45). When A... is preparing herself in her bedroom to accompany Franck to the port town, the narrator over emphasizes the green color of his wife’s eyes (92). The narrator’s jealousy is also emphasized when he finds the papers in A...’s room covering the green blotter. The husband seems anxious to explain what is written on the papers and then gets frustrated when he realizes that he cannot figure it out. The narrator says:

> Inside the writing-case, the green blotter is covered with fragments of handwriting in black ink: tiny lines, arcs, crosses, loops, etc....; no complete letter can be made out, even in a mirror ... (114).

As the narrator searches for clues to figure out what is written on the paper, the sentences become shorter and the narrator’s breath becomes faster indicating that he is losing patience and becoming nervous. The narrator’s jealousy is again suggested by using the
color green after the narrator removes the stain of the squashed centipede and looks through the window to see Franck’s sedan. When the narrator looks through the glass, he sees Franck’s car through the green color created by the banana trees (62). Apparently, the narrator’s reaction is neither neutral nor objective. In spite of his passivity, he is not in control of his jealousy and his obsession to discover the truth about A...’s secretive character.

This finely gained reading of emotional states from symbolic action can be seen as a form of deconstruction, and for this text deconstruction “is therefore particularly valuable because of its power to open up a text that we may have seen as limited or closed. ... But for most informed critics, deconstruction is not so much a way to obliterate the meaning of a text, as it is a way to multiply meaning infinitely. Deconstruction thus encourages us to resist a complacent acceptance of anything and to question our positions and statements in a particularly rigorous way, even reading texts against themselves” (Lynn 103). This kind of deconstructive reading moves us well past the objectivism of a structuralist understanding of the text.

Structural critics labeled Jealousy as an example of their theory. They believed the novel creates an objective point of view by employing a scientific approach of using language by avoiding the use of figures of speech, such as metaphor and symbols. According to Barthes, Robbe-Grillet creates in Jealousy a narrator who is capable of reflecting real life as it is without affecting the reader’s perception of the events of the story. Barthes claims that

Description for Robbe-Grillet is always “anthological” – a matter of presenting the object as if in a mirror, as if it were in itself spectacle, permitting it to make
demands on our attention without regard for its relation to the dialectic of the story (12).

Barthes’s major argument about the text’s ability to reflect reality contradicts Robbe-Grillet’s own analysis of his ability to capture real events. In his discussion of the New Novel Robbe-Grillet argues that the writer will never be able to represent objects and events as a camera does. He believes that there is no way that a writer could describe objects without transforming them into other objects through his or her imagination. In For a New Novel Robbe-Grillet asserts his failure to reflect reality by describing his writing process,

Like everyone else, I have been the victim, on one occasion, of the realistic illusion ... while I was trying to describe exactly the flight of sea gulls or the movement of waves ... . On the way I told myself: here is a good opportunity to observe things “from life” to “refresh my memory.” But from the first gull I saw, I understood my error: on the one hand, the gulls I now saw had only very confused relations with those I was describing in my book, and on the other it couldn’t have mattered less to me whether they did or not. The only gulls that mattered to me at the moment were those which were inside my head. ... they had been transformed, becoming at the same time somehow more real because they were now imaginary(161-2).

This illuminates Robbe-Grillet’s thinking about his method of reflecting reality. Apparently, according to Robbe-Grillet, his description of objects is susceptible to his state of mind at the moment he is creating his fiction. This further suggests that if the
reader is only to perceive the world through the narrator’s mind, as created by the author, it may be impossible to have, contrary to Barthes’ conviction, an objective point of view.

As a metacritic, Robbe-Grillet seems to address in his novel the gap between the structuralists’ understanding of the relationship between the signifier and the signified and the scientificity of language on one side, and the post-structuralists’ opposition to a complete reliance on language on the other.

Intriguingly, contemporary defenders of structuralism attempt to offer an explanation of the system of signs to try to bridge the gap between the structural interpretation of the signifier and the signified, and the post-structural interpretation of metaphor and metonymy. Post-structuralists and deconstruction critics consider the relationship between the word and the image, or concept (signified) as taking place in the writer’s mind. Drawing on the classical example mentioned above, the referent cat might stand for another symbolic entity, which post-structuralists and deconstruction critics will feel more comfortable to refer to as “metaphor,” -- a move which structuralists reject. Drawing on the explanation presented by Parker (above), the reader may have some difficulty in ‘scientifying’ the relationship between the signifier and the signified because if the signified is only a concept generated in the writer’s, or speaker’s, mind then that specific concept can be represented by any image including those other than that directly implied by the writer or uttered by the speaker. In other words, the writer might find another word for cat, “woman” for example, where the word “woman” serves as a metaphor. If we accept the post-structuralists explanation of the relation between the signifier and the signified, then the connection between the word and its referent is metaphorical.
By contrast, in his experimental text, Robbe-Grillet embodies structural theories about the scientific nature of language and its objectivity in literary texts and shows the reader, in practice, the difficulty, if not the impossibility of obtaining knowledge and accessing reality by depending on language alone. While creating a text that strongly appeals to structuralist principles and analysis, it would seem that Robbe-Grillet prefigures post-structural critics, who, according to Barry in *Beginning Theory*, believe that language often “betrays us” and that “we are never fully in control of the medium of language” (64). Our reading of *Jealousy*, then takes us to Derrida, who “would deny that any one ‘true’ meaning can be found. Those who seek to find a single, homogeneous, or universal meaning in a text are imprisoned by the structure of thought that insists that only one of various reading can be ‘right’” (Murfin and Ray 93).

If Robbe-Grillet created a scientific style of narration to provide, as his structuralist friend, Roland Barthes would have it, an example of a purely objective text, *Jealousy* also contains a critique of structuralism and its supposed scientific nature and objectivity. In so doing, Robbe-Grillet takes the role of the metacritic who examines major ideas in contemporary literary theories, makes a contribution to their critique, and experiments with the validity of theory through creative fiction. As we have seen Robbe-Grillet’s textual experiments are subtle and sophisticated, demanding close engagement with theories such as structuralism and post-structuralism.

Robbe-Grillet’s mastery as a creative metacritic does not only influence our understanding of literary theory, it also extends to develop the study of the novel itself. In fact, *Jealousy* represents the postmodern novelist’s ability to convey meaning and represent reality with an economic use of language. It can be said that Robbe-Grillet’s
understanding of literary theory enabled him to present an ambiguous text open to many possibilities for interpretation. By so doing he critiques the idea of the "self-enclosed system of rules that is composed of language" (Bressler 109) that structuralists emphasized in literary texts. Robbe-Grillet attempts to break the unity between the signifier and the signified inviting by that other contexts to influence the meaning of the text; an idea that is emphasized by post-structuralists.
CHAPTER III

THE TEXT, WRITER, AND READER TRIANGLE: THE PORTRAYAL OF READER RESPONSE THEORY AND THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR IN ITALO CALVINO’S IF ON A WINTER NIGHT A TRAVELER

The second literary text that occupies a significant place in this study is Italo Calvino’s metafictive novel, If on a winter’s night a traveler, published in Italian in 1979 and translated into English in 1981. Constance Markey, in Italo Calvino, describes the novel as “both one of the most successful and the most demanding” (115) of Calvino’s work. And Salman Rushdie, of course a prominent postmodern metafictive novelist and critic in his own right, refers to If on a winter’s night a traveler as “quite possibly the most complicated book you ... will ever read” (qtd. in Markey 16-17). This complexity arises since If on a winter’s night a traveler addresses literary and theoretical issues of the 1970s and 80s, especially debates on the process of reading and the role of the author and the reader in the literary analysis. As a metacritic, Calvino wrestles with the “death of the author” and reader response theory, issues that were in hot dispute between literary critics and creative writers.

In his metafictive examination of the writing and reading processes, Calvino directly portrays disputes over interpretive authority in literary texts. Casting the writer and the reader as actual characters in If on a winter’s night a traveler, he dramatizes the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader and makes manifest his theoretical understanding of their relationship. Unlike theories that overvalue the role of text or reader in interpretation, Calvino’s theory about the writing/reading process posits a third term: text, reader, and writer. In addition to Wolfgang Iser’s two poles of
interpretation of literary works in *The Act of Reading* “the artistic pole is the author’s
text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader”(21), Calvino
proposes a homogeneous text where the author is a constant and inevitable presence. By
homogeneous, I do not mean that Calvino maintains a consistency in presenting his ten
unrelated narratives in the novel (in fact his novel is heterogeneous in its style and many
fragments), but homogeneous in the sense that he constructs a relationship between the
text, author, and reader. In *If on a winter’s night a traveler* Calvino shows a literary text is
a continuous mixture of the writer’s emotions, experiences, and expectations along with
the reader’s emotions, experiences, and expectations. During reading, it is impossible to
separate either the author or the reader from the interpretive process and still ascertain
meaning.

In fact, Calvino’s novel is, to use Mikail Bakhtin’s term in *The Dialogic
Imagination*, a “dialogic” text in which the writer (or speaker) and the reader (or listener)
form a relationship within that text. In discussing the novel genre (or defending it),
Bakhtin says:

the “serio-comical” is characterized by a deliberate and explicit autobiographical
and memoirist approach. The shift of the temporal center of artistic orientation,
which placed on the same temporally valorized plane the author and his readers
(on the one hand) and the world and heroes described by him (on the other),
making them contemporaries, possible acquaintances, friends, familiarizing their
relations (we again recall the novelistic opining of *Onegin*), permits the author, in
his various masks and faces, to move freely onto the field of his represented world
(27).
The first critical issue that Calvino engages with in his novel is reader-oriented criticism. Reader-oriented criticism, reader response and receptionist theories which rose to prominence in the early 1970s asserted the reader as an active factor, rather than a passive recipient in the meaning-making process. Charles E. Bressler writes in Literary Criticism that reader-oriented critics believe that the reader and the text interact with each other, sharing a transactional experience in which “the text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts, and ideas of the reader, those found in both real life and in past reading experiences. Simultaneously, the text shapes the reader’s experiences, selecting, limiting, and ordering the ideas that best conform to the text” (358).

In The Act of Reading, Iser argues that interpretation derives from the combination and interaction of the text and the reader rather than from one or the other. Iser emphasizes that interpretation is neither objective nor subjective, but a result of the dynamic interaction of the text and reader. “Reading,” according to Iser, “is an activity that is guided by the text; this must be processed by the reader, who is then, in turn, affected by what he has processed” (163). The structure of the text guides the reader, continually modifies and changes views in the reader, and creates gaps that the reader can fill. “The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it.... There is no such frame of reference governing the text-reader relationship; on the contrary, the codes which might regulate this interaction are fragmented in the text and must first be reassembled or, in most cases, restructured before any frame of reference can be established” (166).

Although reader-oriented criticism became prominent in the early seventies, the role of the reader was strongly present in literature throughout history. In fact there are
many traces of the involvement of the reader in literary texts long before the term “reader response” and receptionist theories became widely used. For instance, there is evidence that “even the classical writers Plato and Aristotle were aware of and concerned about the readers’ (or viewers’) reactions. Plato, for example, asserts that watching a play could so inflame the passions of the audience that the viewers would forget that they were rational beings and allow passion, not reason, to rule their actions” (Bressler 76). Greek and Roman literary techniques included a role for the chorus in engaging the audience in the play. The chorus would either ask the spectators to be patient, or forgiving if the language or the subject matter of the play were offensive.

In juxtaposition, the Christian tradition of the interpretation of sacred texts that emerged after the classical period during the medieval period has lasting significance in modern literary criticism. This religious approach posits the text as bearing a divine or inspired truth and the reader not as a collaborator in shaping meaning, but as a supplicant, who must seek knowledge already formed and complete. And hermeneutics, which originally served to establish principles for interpreting religious writing (specifically the Bible) was developed by Gadamer in the 1960s to serve reader response theorists. Gadamer “believed that readers can interact with the text, produced as it is by another person operating and communicating from the common baseline of language and temporality” (Murfin and Ray 198).

Even in the first half of the twentieth century when critics and literary theorists seemed to show strong opposition to any involvement of the reader and his or her personal experience in the interpretive process, there were attempts to investigate the role of the reader as a figure in determining the meaning of literary texts.
One of the New Criticism's most prominent scholars, I. A. Richards, showed interest in the relationship between a reader's personal feelings and a text's interpretation. In writing his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards applied an approach to textual analysis that demonstrated that a variety of interpretations were possible, a significant precursive step to more full-blown theories of reader response. When Richards was at Cambridge University, he "distributed to his classes ...copies of short poems of widely diverse aesthetic and literary value, without citing their authors and titles and with various editorial changes that updated spelling and pronunciation. He then asked his students to record their free responses to and evaluations of each of these short texts" (Bressler 77). To his surprise, Richards noticed a wide variety of seemingly incompatible and contradictory responses. One of Richards' findings is that "science, not poetry or any other literary genre, leads to truth-- that is, science's view of the world is the correct one. Poems, on the other hand, can produce only 'pseudo-statements' about the nature of reality" (Bressler 77). This experiment does not surprise readers, especially modern readers, since is it common knowledge that no scientific truth can be derived from literature. However, Richards' approach to literary criticism reveals one of the most prominent figures of New Criticism (who are known for rejecting any relationship between the reader's personal feelings and the text) recognition of the reader's role in the interpretive process.

Even the proponents of structuralism, who built their ideas on Saussure's writing on modern linguistics and approached textual analysis as if it were a science, did not exclude the role of the reader and his or her subjectivity in determining meaning in literary analysis, though their emphasis was on cultural systems rather than individual
disposition or prior knowledge. "According to structuralist critics, a reader brings to the
text a predetermined system for ascertaining meaning... and applies this sign system
directly to the text. The text becomes important because it contains signs or signals to the
reader that have preestablished and acceptable interpretations" (Bressler 82).

Narratology, a specific kind of structuralism developed by Gerald Prince and
Tzvetan Todorov and drawing on Russian Formalism, is a process of analyzing a story by
applying all the structural elements involved in its telling such as genre, point of view,
style, setting, and audience. According to Prince in A Dictionary of Narratology,
"narratology studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative (regardless of medium
of representation) and tries to characterize narrative competence" (66). Without doubt the
reader, in his or her many forms (the real reader, the virtual reader, the ideal reader, and
the implied reader), has an inevitable role in the study of narrative theory. This interest in
different types of readers emphasizes the complex role that the reader plays in the
interpretive process. Although the real reader is the only one who actually reads and
interprets fiction, the discussion of other forms of readers is significant to the interpretive
activity. The virtual reader (the reader to whom the author believes he or she is writing),
ideal reader (the one who explicitly and implicitly understands all the nuances, ideology,
and structure of the text), and the implied reader (the reader implied by the text, one who
is predisposed to appreciate the overall effects of the text) all add meaning to the text
(Bressler 83, 85).

Reader response theory appeared as a revolutionary reaction to the objective
certainties of the nineteenth-century science. Reader Response theorists rejected T. S.
Eliot's emphasis on 'science,' 'objectivity,' impersonality, and the 'medium' as the
objects of analysis. In fact, reader response critics believe that literature is a performative art and each reading is a performance, analogous to playing or singing a musical work or enacting a drama. In this perspective, literature exists only when it is read; meaning is an event, and the literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value, no one "correct" meaning. Instead, literary meaning and value are "transactional," "dialogic," created by an interaction of the reader and the text. Since the meaning of the text is never self-formulated, it is the reader’s role to act upon the textual material to produce meaning (Bressler 47).

Another critical view Calvino addresses in *If on a winter’s night a traveler* is the role of the author in the writing and reading processes. Even before the terms ‘reader response theory’ or ‘reception theory’ came into use, literary critics and creative writers had begun to minimize or even eliminate the role of the writer in the interpretation of literary texts. New Criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism have rejected the idea of considering the author as a part of interpretation and ascertaining meaning. In fact Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, two critics among the first to directly discuss “the death of the author” suggested different factors that led to the idea of the disappearance of the author from the text. Before Barthes and Foucault, there was argument about the identity of “the speaker” in literature and whether the ‘I’ in the text referred to the author as a person responsible for creating the text or to a completely separate fictive identity without authority in the meaning-making process. According to Foucault, the “I” in a narrative has no connection with the actual author. In fact, it refers to a completely separate identity created within the text itself. Foucault in “What is an Author” says:
It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its sign of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a "second self" whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission— in the division and distance of the two (1631).

Barthes and Foucault believe that any text is necessarily intertextual; it does not have boundaries but, instead, has filiations and connections. An 'author' exists as a cultural process, what Barthes calls a 'scriptor,' Foucault an 'author-function.' Foucault believes that a literary text indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse and "that the task of criticism is not to reestablish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author’s thought and experience through his works and, further, that criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships" (Foucault 1624).

Barthes, in “The Death of the Author,” believes that the author limits the text and eventually closes the writing itself. Instead, “[once] the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (1469). The author, according to Barthes, “when believed in, is always conceived as the past of his own book…[he] is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete
contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (1468).

The examination by literary critics of the balance of interpretive authority between the author, or the creator of the text, and the involvement of the emotions and experiences of the reader created an inviting intellectual environment for many metafictive writers and creative metacritics. Clearly, creative writers have an interest in these debates over their life or supposed “death.” In the activity of writing they keep the projective reader likely present in their mind. Moreover, living creative writers consider themselves reliable judges of their relationship to texts, regardless of their scholarly “death.” Perhaps the most important and interesting metafictive, experimental novel addressing the triangle relation between the author, text, and reader is Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.

Calvino is a writer-philosopher who explores questions about both reading and writing by literally characterizing The Reader and The Author as figures in his text. According to Beno Weiss in *Understanding Italo Calvino*, “Calvino plays with the process of writing and reading” (170). “In fact,” Weiss contends, “the entire book is devoted to questions pertaining to the creation of a story, its writing, narrating, reading, as well as the fundamental reality of a text” (179). While describing various ways of reading, Calvino experiments with different possibilities and techniques of writing and narrating and also comments on the process of writing through the fictitious personage of the author in the novel.

Calvino self-consciously narrates the tension between literary critics and between creative writers. In the novel he divides his characters into two camps, authors and
readers. The authors’ camp consists of the implied author, the author-character and the narrator while the readers’ camp includes The Reader (or the narratee), the political reader, the academic reader, the pragmatic reader and the ideal reader. By so doing, Calvino experiments with the possibility of whether the reader alone is, productively and effectively, capable of ascertaining meaning without the presence of the author in his text. He also examines whether or not the writer will be successful in writing his novel without the presence of the reader in his mind during the process of writing. It appears that Calvino sets off to explore reader-oriented theories by dealing with three major ideas considered crucial in reader response and related theory, the disappearance of the author from the text, the involvement of the reader’s emotions and experiences in that text, and the competence of the reader as interpreter of meaning.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the major characters’ quest to find the missing parts of If on a winter’s night a traveler. The narrator begins with a preface on the art and nature of reading. The ensuing twenty-two passages that comprise the novel are divided into two sections. The first section, the odd-numbered passages and the final passage, is narrated in the second person and involves the Reader. That is, these passages concern events supposedly happening to the novel's reader, although some critics, such as Andre Brink, believe that they involve the actual reader. Brink in The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino believes that “[apart] from the ‘novel to be read’ another ‘possible novel to be lived’ is taking shape under the Reader’s eyes -- with the obvious implication that we, the ‘real’ readers of both those stories, may in a comparable manner be caught in (or drawn into) our own gradually evolving stories” (312). However, these chapters concern the Reader's adventures in reading Italo Calvino's novel, If on a
winter's night a traveler. Eventually the Reader meets a woman, Ludmilla, who is also addressed in her own chapter, separately, and also addressed in the second person. She is also a reader of many of the same texts, and an object of romantic attraction for the Reader. The other section of the novel includes the even-numbered passages, each of which is a first chapter in ten ostensibly different novels, of greatly varying subject matter, genre, and style. These passages are divided for different reasons explained in the interspersed passages.

After reading Chapter One, actually the second passage of the novel, the Reader finds out that the book he is reading is misprinted and contains more copies of that same chapter. When he goes back to the bookseller to return the book, he is given a replacement book which also turns out to be another novel. Just as he becomes engrossed in the replacement book, the Reader discovers that it, too, is broken off and there are pages that are completely blank. This cycle is repeated every time the Reader tries to read the replacement book, where the reader reads the first chapter of a book, cannot find the other chapters in his copy of the book, so he returns to the book seller to find another copy. But to the Reader's surprise, the new copy he gets turns out to be another book altogether. The second-person narrative passages deal with the novel's two protagonists who find themselves in the middle of an international book-fraud conspiracy.

The penultimate paragraph reveals an intriguing treatment of the whole novel in which one of the ten readers combines the actual first-chapter titles which are the titles of the books that the Reader is trying to read to make up a single coherent sentence. Interestingly, this combination of the first-chapter titles forms a good start for a new book that reads as follow: "If on a winter's night, a traveler, outside the town of Malbork,
leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlace, in a network of lines that intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around the empty grave-- What story down there awaits its end?—he asks, anxious to hear the story” (258).

The first critical view that Calvino questions in his novel is the disappearance of the author from the literary text as a part of the interpretive process as described by Barthes and Foucault. As it appears in his novel, Calvino does not agree with Barthes’ idea of a total replacement of the author by the reader, nor does he agree with Iser’s exclusion of the writer as a partner in the reading activity. Although he acknowledges the significant role the reader plays in the text, Calvino gives a similar importance to the author in his text.

Aptly, Calvino invents a situation that plays on Barthes’ idea of the disappearance of the author from his novel. Calvino gives the reader the impression that neither the name of the actual author nor his nationality is significant to the reader since the various stories that construct the novel turn out to be written under the names of different writers. For example, some authors’ names were put on other novels due to a publisher’s mistake, including the portion of the text overtly named If on a winter’s night a traveler, while other partial novels in the text bear a pseudonym for an author’s name because the real author supposedly wants to protect his identity from being revealed for fear of prosecution by a dictatorial government.

Intriguingly, Calvino establishes his novel on the assumption that there is a clear distinction between the writer as a real person and the author who writes the novel. He manages to do that by creating a writer-character called Italo Calvino who wrote If on a
winter’s night a traveler the first unfinished novel, as the narrator, from the very beginning, announces that The Reader is “about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*” (3). By dramatizing a separate image of Italo Calvino the character in the novel, Calvino creates an author-character named for himself who is a literary embellishment, in this sense serving a role as merely “nourishing the book” as Roland Barthes puts it in “The Death of the Author.” By inserting himself, or a figure representing himself, into the text Calvino both demonstrates and satirizes Barthes’ notion that the Author is responsible for creating the text but his role ends there. Calvino’s apparent separation between the author and his novel is a dramatization of Barthes’ idea of the discontinuous role that the writer plays in his texts. Only later does Calvino refute this idea by presenting the different readers’ relation to the authors in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.

Apparently, Calvino believes that the moment the author decides to sell his book to the reader is the moment that he or she gives away the ownership of the book, yet this metafictive novel enacts a process of engagement between reader and writer, performing the writing process as one a collaboration between narrator and narratee. The narrator addresses the reader by saying:

you have turned toward a stack of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* ... you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established (6).

The reader, or the new owner of the book, becomes involved in the text the moment he or she starts reading the novel. That’s why the narrator warns the reader: “watch out: it’s surely a method of involving you gradually” (11). At this point the reader starts changing
the text by adding his own perception of the events and characters and becomes involved in the interpretive process. But the reader’s perception of the novel is not independent of the author’s since, in Calvino’s vision, they both share in the process of weaving the events of the novel. This is apparent by the narrator’s description of Madame Marne.

Your attention, as reader, is now completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her, I have— no, the author has— been circling around the feminine presence, for several pages you have been expecting this female shadow to take shape the way female shadows take shape on the written page, and it is your expectation, reader, that drives the author toward her (20).

Both the author and the reader share the same perceptions and expectations of the female character. The author knows what the reader expects from the woman, so he draws an image of her that conforms to the reader’s expectation. Also the reader expects that the author will draw a feminist image of Madame Marne because of the narrator’s prior description of her as a divorced independent lady who does not care about what society might think of or say about her.

Calvino, the writer and metacritic, attacks Barthes’ idea of the ‘death of the author’ and his replacement by the reader in literary texts by arguing for two important techniques that writers use in their fiction; the use of the pronoun “I” and free indirect discourse. It seems that Calvino, although agreeing with Barthes’ idea of the role of the author as a scriptor, disagrees with the last statement of Barthes’ article “The Death of the Author” that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (1470), by which Barthes means that the reader takes the role of the author in ascertaining
meaning by filling the gaps that are created in the text. Calvino warns us, both actual and implied readers, against completely identifying with the characters. The narrator in the novel says:

But a situation that takes place at the opening of a novel always refers you to something else that has happened or is about to happen, and it is this something else that makes it risky to identify with me, risky for you the reader and for him the author (15).

Here, Calvino addresses a major issue related to the death, or the disappearance, of the author and to reader response theory. Critics, who believe in the replacement of the author by the reader, must deny the author any relation to the pronoun “I” in a first person narrative considering that “I” to be merely another character.

Calvino, on the other hand, gives a part of that “I” to the author who shares it with the reader. The “I” in the novel is neither the author nor the reader, but a shared entity that combines three selves: the author, the narrator (whether first person or third person) and the reader altogether in one text. The narrator in the first novel in If on a winter’s night a traveler addresses the reader by saying:

If you, reader, couldn’t help picking me out... this is simply because I am called “I”....but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger “I.” Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character “I” as if to conceal him... still, by the very fact of writing “I” the author feels driven to put into this “I” a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels ....(14-15)
According to the narrator, even if the author desires to conceal himself, he will still reveal "a bit" as his presence is still recognized through the characters and the narrator. As Wayne Booth asserts in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), "the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. Whether its particular forms are harmful or serviceable is always a complex question, a question that cannot be settled by any easy reference to abstract rules. As we begin now to deal with this question, we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20).

Although the identity of the writer is shared with other identities in Calvino's novel, his presence is strongly asserted as an active factor in the reading process. It appears that Calvino asserts his identity and influence as an author present in his text through different forms: the implied author, the author-character, and the narrator. Calvino's representation of the author in the text agrees with Booth's development of the idea of the implied author in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth believes that "[the] implied author (the author's "second self") is "an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails" (151) and "imposing [a] fictional world upon the reader" (xiii). The writer, according to Booth, "[as] he writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote" (70-71). However, Booth contends that "[this] implied author is always distinct from the "real man"--whatever we
may take him to be-- who creates a superior version of himself, a “second self,” as he creates his work” (151).

Drawing on Booth’s idea that the writer creates an image or “version” of himself as he writes, one can assume that the implied author is a construction of the real author. The reader’s construction of the implied author depends on what the author wishes to reveal about himself in his narrative. Therefore, if the author’s construction of his image meets the reader’s construction of the implied author, then there is a successful relationship built on mutual understanding between the author and the reader.

In Calvino’s novel, the narrator contends that his identity can be tracked and identified throughout his narrative by paying attention to the language and characters in that text. The implied author’s and the narrator’s voices, which are constructed by the actual author in If on a winter’s night a traveler, might become one entity whose dialogues interrelate and represent the same narrative viewpoint. In describing his narrative, the narrator says:

I leave traces if I don’t speak.... I leave traces if I speak with someone because every word spoken is a word that remains and can crop up again later, with quotation marks or without. Perhaps this is why the author piles supposition upon supposition in long paragraphs without dialogue, a thick opaque layer of lead where I may pass unnoticed, disappear (14).

Here, the narrator alludes to an effective narrative technique known as free indirect style (or discourse), that writers use when they want to insert their voice in the text. “Free indirect style is a narrative representation of a character’s thoughts and expressions without quotation marks or the usual addition of phrases like “he thought” or
“she said” and without the grammatical markers” (Abbot 190). According to narratologists, this narrative technique allows the voice of the narrator to blend with the voice of a character to convey a certain thought. Calvino makes use of this narrative technique to emphasize the presence of the voice of the author that appears in different forms in literary texts. One of the forms that Calvino uses to present himself in the novel is by taking over the narrator’s voice to convey his critical view about this narrative technique. Perhaps that is why the narrator says in If on a winter’s night a traveler “I have—no, the author has, been circling around the feminine presence” (20). Here the narrator relates this activity of “circling around the feminine presence” to the author of the book. According to Brink in The Novel, “[this] foregrounds both the differences and similarities between so-called ‘fictitious’ and ‘real’ worlds. Similarly, both the narrator and the author are involved in the process; when the ‘character’ of the doctor’s wife begins to emerge from a cluster of words, a signified from an accretion of signifiers, the narrator warns quite explicitly: ‘and it is your expectation, reader, that drives the author towards her’” (312). Calvino’s reference to ‘free indirect speech’ is an indication of the writer’s desire, or deliberate attempt, to be recognized as an active participant in the novel. The author’s desire to be present in the novel is confronted by the reader’s attempt to take over the interpretive activity.

The second idea that Calvino, the metacritic, seems to critique is the reader’s attempt to force certain interpretations on the text. As a metacritic and a creative writer, Calvino understands the reader response argument that readers involve their personal emotions and experiences in their interpretation, but he plays with this idea, demonstrating that doing so can distort the text, violating meaning that resides in it, and
thus undermine the basic beliefs of reader response criticism. As it appears in his novel, Calvino does not seem pleased with the way that some readers would minimize the role of the author for the sake of the reader. According to Weiss in *Understanding Italo Calvino*, “in this highly self-reflexive novel-- or better, a novel about novels-- Calvino questions once again, but with a keen sense of humor, his own narrative voice by satirizing modern fiction, particularly the poststructuralist discourse concerning the supremacy of reading over writing” (167).

Calvino depicts the contamination of the intention of the original text by readers’ feelings, experiences, and ideologies as a distortion of that text’s reality. He conveys his ideas about readers’ interpretations through presenting different types of readers who belong to different genders, ages, educational, and political backgrounds and the way each of them approaches the ten unfinished novels differently. The problem with this type of reading is that it overtakes the authorial intention and marginalizes, if not eliminates, the role of the author altogether in the text.

At one point in the novel Calvino describes a woman sitting in a bar and shows how characters’ perception of what they see distorts the reality of that situation. In describing that woman, the narrator, who is a stranger to the town, explains how his perception of this woman differs from those who know her. And he also comments on how his memories and past experiences affect his perception of her and prevent him from seeing her as the person who she actually is. Similarly, Calvino’s characters cannot continue reading the ten novels without forming their own impressions about the texts, impressions involving their personal experience and emotions that distort the text’s meaning.
An example of Calvino’s readers who force their ideologies and experiences on the text is what he refers to as the political type. This type of reader is a professional and experienced one who reads with scrutiny and talent. The political reader (according to Calvino) approaches the text with a preexistent message and agenda without concern for any value of truth as he or she intends to categorize the author and gears the interpretation of the text to serve his or her own intentions. This type of reader is represented by Ludmilla’s sister, Lotaria. She is an active feminist who is not content with the literal meaning of the text, but searches for political messages that exist beyond the surface. In Chapter Eight, titled “From the diaries of Silas Flannery,” Lotaria opposes the desire of Silas Flannery regarding how he wants his novel to be read. Lotaria explains to Silas Flannery by saying “what you want would be a passive way of reading, escapist and regressive” (185). In fact, Lotaria’s reading is imaginative and creative. From only reading some pages from a novel, she is capable of deriving several themes and raising multiple topics for discussion. For instance in Chapter Five, after she reads some pages from *Without fear of wind or vertigo* she and her colleagues

throw open the discussion. Events, characters, setting, impressions are thrust aside, to make room for the general concepts.

“The polymorphic-perverse sexuality...”

“The laws of market economy...”

“The homologies of the signifying structures...”

“Deviation and institutions...”

“Castration... “ (91)
When Lotaria is asked by the Reader about the rest of the novel, she cynically replies by saying: "The rest? ... Oh, there’s enough material here to discuss for a month. Aren’t you satisfied?" (91)

In Calvino’s view this kind of reader is a dangerous reader because she deconstructs the original text and presents it in a way that has no relation to the author’s intention. Calvino depicts this conflict of interpretation through the dramatization of Silas Flannery, the author-character, who is experiencing a writer’s block and cannot finish the numerous books he has started. Silas Flannery can be seen as a creative metacritic in a fictional work who might represent the voice of the author in the text by raising important issues about the process of writing and how writers perceive their work after being interpreted and analyzed by others. One of Silas Flannery’s crucial arguments is the relation between the intention of the author and the reader’s interpretation of literary texts. According to the author-character in If on a winter’s night a traveler, no matter how competent the reader might be, there is a contest for interpretive authority and a gap between the intentional meaning and the reader’s interpretation. As depicted in the novel, Silas Flannery denies any connection between his novels and the way some readers interpret these texts. Complaining about how Lotaria, the political reader, interprets his books, Silas Flannery says to Ludmilla:

I see that my work serves her perfectly to demonstrate her theories... for the novels or for the theories... From her detailed talk, I got the idea of a piece of work being seriously pursued, but my books seen through her eyes prove unrecognizable to me. I am sure that Lotaria... has read them conscientiously, but
I believe she has read them only to find in them what she was already convinced of before reading them (185).

In this way Silas Flannery, Calvino’s alter ego, addresses and rejects extreme reader-oriented theorists’ belief of the unrestricted involvement of readers’ emotions, experiences, and ideas in interpreting literary texts and ascertaining meaning. The readers’ unrestricted involvement of their experiences in the novel contaminates the author’s intention, an expression of own emotions, experiences, and ideas. In the novel, Silas Flannery refuses help from Ermes Marana the translator, a member of OEPHLW of New York (Organization for the Electronic Production of Homogenized Literary Works) an organization which offers technical assistance to writers incapable of finishing their novels, because he is frustrated by the way his novels are read and interpreted. According to Weiss in Understanding Italo Calvino, Silas Flannery then turns “to writing a diary, a record of reflections, in which nothing really happens. This diary – the only true book he can write -- is revealing because it allows us to penetrate Calvino’s most intimate ideas pertaining to the relationship between writer, reader, and text. In these self-conscious reflections on the telling and reading of stories, Calvino lays bare his artistic spirit, his satisfactions and frustrations” (176-7). According to Silas Flannery, the author character, his diary is the only book that prevents his emotions and personal experiences from being contaminated by readers’ personal emotions and experiences.

The reference to Ermes Marana, the translator who is involved in an international conspiracy to falsify novels, is significant to understanding the problematic of interpretation. As depicted in If on a winter’s night a traveler, Ermes Marana is the most detested character because he fakes the books he translates and “whatever he touches, if
isn’t false already, becomes false” (152). To Calvino, he is a representative of all translators who, no matter how good they are, remain unfaithful to the original text. There is a gap between the intention of the translator and the intention of the author that the translator fails to represent simply because a translator is a reader of the original novel, therefore the translated text is susceptible to his personal understanding and interpretation (or misunderstanding and misinterpretation). Translators act as interpreters of literary texts who involve their emotions and personal experiences in these texts. That is why the Reader in the novel concludes that “there’s only one person who can tell us the truth: the author” (160).

Unlike Lotaria the political reader, Ludmilla, her sister, “loves reading for reading’s sake” (240) and does not seek to interpret the text she reads. She believes that “the function of books is immediate reading, not for study” (141). This kind of reader seems to win the admiration of every character in the novel, starting with the narrator and ending with Silas Flannery. It seems that Calvino is saying that this is the ideal role for the reader, to read for the pleasure of reading. But according to the Reader, this kind of reading is farfetched, only a dream. In If on a winter’s night a traveler, the Reader finds himself involved, even embroiled, in the interpretive process. Although the Reader is deeply convinced that it is not possible for him to read a novel without being involved in it, the Reader tries to find the perfect text that does not allow readers and critics to define it and put it in a certain category. He tries to prove that such a text exists in order to please Ludmilla, the girl to whom he is attracted and wants to win her admiration. As the Reader reads What story down there awaits its end, the last novel in Calvino’s text, he finds that the narrator attempts to avoid categorization by erasing everything around him,
including people, buildings, “the university with the entire faculty, the academy of sciences, letters, and arts, the museum, the library, monuments and curators, theaters, movies, television, newspapers” (247). The narrator believes that “their existence is damaging or superfluous to the harmony of the whole” (246). But unfortunately, he is faced with a serious problem, which is the impossibility of erasing what others before him tried to erase and add to “the world” which “is reduced to a sheet of paper” (251). These others, who are referred to as “section D.” (it is not explained in the text what “section D.” refers to) confront the narrator with the harsh reality that he is unable to erase what they added, and furthermore, others will come and try to add to what already exists. Symbolically speaking, Calvino alludes to the idea that it is quite impossible to read a text without being influenced by others’ interpretations and contributions to the meanings that exist in it, including the author’s categorization. The Reader and the actual reader reach the realization that everything has to be defined and categorized.

Apparently, from Calvino’s point of view, the reader who forces his or her personal feelings, experiences, and ideologies on a text epitomizes Barthes’ understanding of the proper role of readers. In describing the conversation between “you” and another reader, Markey says in *Italo Calvino*:

In this scene, “you,” in one last mighty effort to locate the Calvino book, goes to the library. There he becomes involved in an unconventional conversation with other readers about the art and the meaning of reading. Before long it is clear to the reader outside the novel that the ensuing dialogue is a pretext for the writer to elaborate openly his personal thoughts on literature and its significance for living. In the subsequent discussion, the author stresses once more the reader’s role in
making meaning, explaining in terms that would assuredly successfully satisfy not only Barthes, but Propp and Saussure as well.

For example, according to a second reader with whom “you” converses, it is the reader himself who, in the Barthean sense, actually generates the fiction, simply by rereading, grasping a thought and then forming his own impressions (118-9).

Yet, I believe that in Markey’s desire to show Calvino as a Postmodernist, she underestimates the conservatism of Calvino’s treatment of the author-reader relation. Drawing on Markey’s idea in the above quotation, one can understand that the writer’s elaboration on “his personal thoughts on literature and its significance for living” is an indication of the author’s involvement in the novel. In fact, this involvement generates a relationship between the writer and the text which will eventually invite the reader to be a part of this relationship. Unlike Barthes, Foucault, and Iser, Calvino would appear to maintain that there is a literary interaction between the writer and the reader, rather than only between the text and the reader. In the novel this interaction is depicted as an emotional or even a physical relationship between the writer and the reader in which the writer who is a male in Calvino’s novel, Silas Flannery, tries to please his reader, the naked lady who is reading his novel in the sun. Describing his writing process to Ludmilla, Silas Flannery says: “I read in her face what she desires to read, and I write it faithfully’ (127). Silas Flannery, who acts as a metacritic in the novel, imagines himself writing the book the girl is reading at the very moment she reads it, in a motion which could unite the two activities. This example is significant because the naked girl who is an actual reader in the narrative’s reality is also the implied reader whom the author is addressing in his fiction.
When Iser talks about interaction in *The Act of Reading*, he refers to a relationship between two participant partners who “both know each other’s ‘behavioral plan’ so well that the replies and their consequences can be accurately predicted” (163). But a written text is an object that cannot predict nor reply to the reader’s behavioral plan. Calvino’s novel, on the other hand, suggests a more active and responsive partner than a written object, and that partner is the author who in a way, anticipates what his audience wants to read and intellectually participates with his readers, as when Silas Flannery writes his novel in response to his female reader’s desire.

Calvino explores the gendering of the author-reader relationship. In the novel the intellectual interaction between the author (male) and his reader (female), has sexual overtones. Describing Francine du Plessix Gray’s interview with Calvino upon the publication of his novel in English in 1981, Weiss says in *Understanding Italo Calvino*:

Indeed, Calvino stated quite categorically that literature is for him the “only aphrodisiac” and that “reading is a possession, a march toward a possession. It has many degrees of eroticism. It can be a caress or a complete intercourse (173).

But, in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the readers are always interrupted in each of the ten unfinished novels. Whenever the readers come close to reaching the climax, they find out that the novel they are reading is missing the rest of it, for one reason or another. Therefore, in an attempt to satisfy their desire and complete the act of reading the novel, the readers, desperately, try to search for the author but all their attempts are in vain. Here Calvino appears to argue that the reader needs the author, as much as the author needs the reader, to achieve the full satisfaction of the sexualized reading act. The reader is in the
mind of the author when he or she writes as well as the author is in the mind of the reader when he or she reads.

Calvino’s engagement with the two critical views discussed earlier, the death of the author and reader response theory, leads to a third argument raised in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. An important point Calvino raises in this novel is the competency and the validity of the reader as a sole authority in interpreting texts. Calvino dramatizes this idea by discussing the role of academic readers in the process of interpretation.

Among the readers is the academic critic who is the most serious, professional, and aggressive type of reader, directly tackled by Calvino in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. As presented by the narrator, this academic reader does not read for pleasure, as Ludmilla who reads for the sake of reading and is neither interested in interpreting literary texts nor seeking truth in what she reads. Also this academic reader is not forced to read as are many students and book reviewers, such as the pale, creepy, and weary looking character Irnero who takes reading as a task and whose only interest in the reading process is governed by how much he can materialistically benefit.

Actually the academic reader is a competent reader who continuously seeks truth about the text and the author. Ascertaining meaning is a major goal for these readers who approach literary texts in a professional manner and try to categorize texts by labeling and analyzing them in light of specific critical theories. Also, the academic reader is keen on pointing out literary styles and giving names to literary techniques applied by the author. As Lodge puts it in “Crosscurrents in Modern English Criticism,” the academic critic is a critic “who is attached to a university or similar institution, who writes usually for an implied audience of fellow-academics and/or students, and for whom literature is
in some sense a ‘subject’, a body of knowledge, and the study of it is a ‘discipline’” (247).

In the novel, Professor Uzzi-Tuzzii and Professor Galligani dispute the meaning and originality of *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo* and go through a series of accusations and insults against each other causing themselves public embarrassment in front of their students. While discussing the originality of the novel, their voices grow louder as Professor Uzzi-Tuzzii criticizes Professor Galligani’s naïveté for falling to a vulgar fraud, and the latter criticizes the former’s ignorance, gathering around them students and others interested in the novel. The severe dispute between Professor Uzzi-Tuzzii and Professor Galligani over their convictions and understanding of *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo* can be read as Calvino’s depiction of the intellectual tension and disputes of twentieth-century critics who vociferously defend their theories and the critical schools they represent. Although Professors Uzzi-Tuzzi and Galligani are not reader response-theorists *per se*, their dispute over the meaning and originality of the text simulates the different interpretations that readers present when they read. They, too, although they are more experienced and systematic in their reading than the ordinary reader, tend to force their personal understanding of what they read regardless of what evidence other academic readers might provide.

Apparently, Calvino develops his novel on the assumption that there are no definite meanings or satisfying conclusions in criticizing literature, The narrator of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* says:
to read properly you must take in both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which you (and I, too) are as yet not in a position to perceive (18).

This position implies that many readings are both possible and valid or invalid at the same time, because there is no certain factor that controls either the way writers write or readers read. Therefore, as mentioned above in Iser's *The Act of Reading*, “the reader... can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it” (166) simply because the truth does not reside in the text but in the author, as the Reader concludes in *If on a winter's night a traveler* (160). Calvino asserts the impossibility of separating the reader or the writer from the writing/reading process. A literary text only exists when it is written by an author and read by readers. Both writer and reader are responsible for ascertaining meaning. By so doing, Calvino, the writer and the metacritic, critiques and criticizes two major theoretical views concerning the death of the author and reader-oriented theories. Reading involves all three elements, the author, the text, and the reader.
One intriguing fiction writer who excels in his treatment of the experimental novel is the contemporary American author, Tim O’Brien. O’Brien has been celebrated by readers and critics as one of the finest American writers. Steven Kaplan in Understanding Tim O’Brien, compares O’Brien to Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Joseph Conrad for “his tendency to make broad leaps between areas of internal perception and external reality: between the mind and the material world” (13). O’Brien’s centrality as a metafictive writer is evident in his novel In the Lake of the Woods (1994), chosen by the New York Times as one of the best books of the year.

In the Lake of the Woods demonstrates Tim O’Brien’s interest in narratology and the concept of truth in storytelling as the novel raises important issues in narrative theory and its role in explaining and demystifying the ambiguity of fictional texts. In the Lake of the Woods establishes O’Brien as a creative metacritic who examines and engages with major theories in narratology as an attempt to show that, although these scholarly approaches play a pivotal role in offering readers ways to understand how narrative works, they do not help readers ascertain meaning or obtain truth. Some of the narratological narrative techniques O’Brien draws on to complicate readers’ ability to reach certainty in fiction include the three ways of interpretation that H. Porter Abbot offers in The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative: adaptive reading, intentional reading, and symptomatic reading. This novel also addresses other narrative techniques that narratologists believe explain fiction, such as paratexts, prolepsis, and analepsis.
By examining O’Brien’s experimental novel, the reader realizes the difficulty, and perhaps the impossibility, of definitively capturing and fixing narrative truths in fiction. In fact, it could be argued that Tim O’Brien takes a nihilistic approach in this novel as he challenges the concept of truth itself and presents the notion that there are no reliable rules or norms that govern interpretation. In “An interview with Tim O’Brien” he emphasizes that “this book is about uncertainty,” and that it “adheres to the principle that much of what is important in the world can never be known. That’s what disturbs people. In the Lake of the Woods suggests that the ‘truth’ of our lives is always fragile, always elusive, always beyond the absolute” (Kaplan 108).

Steven Kaplan says O’Brien “equates fiction and storytelling with exploration and discovery” (9); in In the Lake of the Woods O’Brien’s exploration is in the field of narratology, the theory that studies and explains storytelling, and his discovery is that this field is a proper and rich source for the author to create a philosophical text that confronts us with our inability to capture truth. O’Brien’s novel can be seen as a metacritical text not in the sense that it overtly discusses important points in narrative theory, but that O’Brien’s treatment of narrative techniques, techniques that narratologists have argued help readers in reading and understanding fiction, put the idea of ascertaining truth into question. Indeed, O’Brien utilizes and manipulates specific narrative techniques in his novel in order to question and challenge the idea that these techniques can provide meaning. In so doing he emerges as a creative metacritic who critiques, challenges, and engages with philosophy and literary scholarship. O’Brien, as a metacritic, is addressing other literary theories, especially structuralism, that depend on language and narrative techniques to ascertain meaning and locate truth in fictional texts. Although O’Brien
appears to utilize the core philosophy of deconstructionists which is, according to Charles H. Bressler in *Literary Criticism*, “denying any centre of truth” and maintaining “that we can never be certain about our values, beliefs, and assumptions” (337), it would be inaccurate to state that he fully aligns himself with deconstruction. In some ways, O’Brien’s approach in *In the Lake of the Woods* is deconstructive as he denies any center of truth in the different and contradictory narratives that the text provides about Kathy’s and John Wade’s disappearance. However, this treatment of the novel leads the reader to infer only one meaning (or theme) from the text which is the difficulty, or impossibility, to ascertain truth in narratives. In other words, the reader can interpret the text and find meaning, an idea that contradicts the deconstructionists’ assumption that “a text has many meanings and, therefore, no definitive interpretation. (Bressler 116-7).

Narratology, the study of narrative, offers tools to help readers approach fiction and understand literary meaning by studying “grammatical elements such as verb tenses and the relationships and configurations of figures of speech within the story” (Bressler 351). In her “Introduction” to *Narratology*, Mieke Bal defines narratology as “a theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’ Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives”(3). In her “Preface to the Second edition,” she tries “to emphasize more the role of narratology as a heuristic tool, not an objective grid providing certainty” (xiii). According to narratologists, understanding strategies of reading and the theories of narrative can help the reader understand literary texts as a first step to ascertain meaning from those texts. Bressler in *Literary Criticism* says “although these narratologists provide us with various approaches
to texts, all furnish us with metalanguage—words used to describe language—so that we can understand *how* a text means, not *what* it means” (114).

Narratology recognizes that literary narratives may obscure or complicate interpretation. Stories do not tell about themselves; sometimes they delude and mislead readers. According Abbot in *Narrative*,

[narrative] can be, and often is, an instrument that provokes active thinking and helps us work through problems, even as we tell about them or hear them being told. But, finally, it is also important to note that narrative can be used to deliver false information; it can be used to keep us in darkness and even encourage us to do things we should not do (11).

Because of the difficulty of explaining fiction, narratologists emphasize the necessity of understanding the different elements of fiction: narrative point of view, setting, characterization, plot, style, and theme in order to find an approach to demystify meaning in narrative.

Before discussing O’Brien’s treatment of narratology in *In the Lake of the Woods*, a summary of the novel will prepare the major argument of this chapter. *In the Lake of the Woods* tells the story of the disintegrating marriage of John and Kathy Wade and follows the struggle of John in a recently failed campaign for the United States Senate. In an attempt to escape the pressure and humiliation of the defeat, the couple moves to the isolated town of Lake of the Woods, Minnesota. One day John wakes up and discovers his wife Kathy missing. After a day of walking around the area and discovering the absence of their boat, John talks to his closest neighbors, the Rasmussens. After some time they call the sheriff and organize a search party. The authorities are
suspicious of John's calm demeanor and noninvolvement in the search. Kathy's sister joins the effort, and John begins to search for Kathy as well. After eighteen days the search party is called off and an investigation into John heats up. In spite of the lack of evidence, John becomes the prime suspect in his wife’s disappearance. With a boat from Claude Rasmussen and supplies from the Mini-Mart, John heads north on the lake to escape from his problems. Over the boat's radio, Claude is the last person to talk to the disoriented John.

Much of the novel has to do with John Wade’s childhood years and a relationship to his father that was responsible for forming his repressive personality. Although many have described Paul Wade, John's father, as alcoholic and often abusive, he was idolized by John, and consequentially his suicide devastated him. John always struggled with the notion that Paul did not offer him affection, and this affected him throughout his life. Because of John’s obsession with magic, he was given the name of “sorcerer.” As a child, John often visited Karra’s Studio of Magic, but the only item he bought was the Guillotine of Death, purchased by his father. John and Kathy met in college and became intimate, despite many secrets harbored between them. John spied on Kathy, which she was aware of, just as he was aware of her affair with the dentist. When John was deployed to Vietnam, he and Kathy conversed through letters, some of which frightened Kathy. In Vietnam, John became deeply absorbed in his identity as sorcerer. John was a member of Charlie Company, the military unit involved in the real-life My Lai massacre. Later, while working a desk job in records, John erased his involvement with the company. Afterwards, John became lieutenant governor of Minnesota and later runs for the US Senate, his campaign managed by the business-oriented Tony Carbo.
In *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien introduces a number of theories about the disappearance of Kathy Wade over the course of the story. Through the narrator's use of flashbacks of John's childhood, college years, and war experience in Vietnam, as well as evidence and testimony from related characters, the novel offers several hypotheses, but no resolution. Perhaps Kathy had sped over the lake too quickly, hit a rough patch of water, and had been violently tossed into the lake, where she drowned. Maybe, after sailing for a while, she mis-navigated the boat and became hopelessly lost in the wilderness, and then ran out of supplies. Or possibly John, in his rage, returned to the bedroom with the boiling water and poured it over her face, scalding her. Afterwards he would have sunk the boat and body in the lake, weighed down by a number of rocks. Or the event might have been John's last great magic trick, a disappearing act. John and Kathy could have planned her disappearance, including having John join her later on, after the search efforts had been called off, leaving them to a new start at life. O'Brien introduces different pieces of evidence to support these theories, and, apparently, leaves the decision up to the reader.

The sophistication of O'Brien's novel emerges from the narrator's combination of fiction and non-fiction narrative in one text. Intriguingly, what O'Brien does with *In the Lake of the Woods* simulates the narratologists' approach in interpreting fiction. He gives attention to narrative and the concept of truth by creating intricate plots that allow the author to have a voice in the novel in order to interfere in the text and express his ideas about narratology. O'Brien's skill in the novel appears when he creates an author/narrator writing a report about the disappearance of the two major characters, Kathy and John Wade. At the same time, this anonymous narrator is a reader (or listener) to John Wade's
and other characters’ narratives. In reading these intricate narratives, the narrator character in the novel applies similar methods to those used by narratologist critics in order to interpret the narrative he or she hears.

According to Abbot in *Narrative*, narratologists provide three different ways to interpret novels; the adaptive reading, the intentional reading and the symptomatic reading. *In the Lake of the Woods* would appear to specifically invite each of these approaches.

The first method of interpretation that O’Brien seems to examine in *In the Lake of the Woods* is the adaptive reading. According to Abbot, adaptive reading is a way of interpreting a text by comparing it to another text. Narratologists believe that we can find meaning by comparing the literary text under examination to other texts, whether fiction or non-fiction. For example, many literary critics and readers attempt to interpret Shakespeare’s history plays by comparing them to the historical facts, events and characters, the playwright dramatized.

Similarly, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, O’Brien seems to adapt the style of other genres, mainly detective novels and historical documents. For example the “Hypothesis” and “Evidence” chapters can be seen as an explicit intertextual imitation of police investigation files while the chapters that include footnotes simulate historical documents. By including these chapters in his novel, O’Brien mimics non-fictional texts which, in effect, amplifies the reader’s perplexity in determining what is true and what is fiction. Further, O’Brien also draws on detective novel genre methods in writing *In the Lake of the Woods*, inviting the reader to attempt to “solve the crime” and obtain truth whether in the massacre trials or the search for Kathy. The “Evidence” chapters are
divided into two parts: one dedicated to describing the interrogations of the soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre and the other part focusing on questioning John Wade and others to find out what happened to Kathy. The approach that John Wade followed in spying on Kathy recalls detectives' methods of observing suspects in trying to solve crimes. Unlike most detective stories, O'Brien's novel does not reveal any truth nor does it provide the kind of satisfying justice that can result from a successful police investigation or the popular detective novel. For example, although all the members of Charlie Company were responsible for the My Lai massacre and took part in the killing of innocent villagers, only Lieutenant William Calley was convicted and punished in the trial. Even John Wade was not punished though he deliberately killed Weatherby (the American soldier who shot two little girls in the face and was killing Vietnamese and whatever he could).

Above all, the detectives' investigation methods that O'Brien employs in his novel do not help unravel the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. On the contrary, the reader is left with many questions and in a state of deep perplexity. As depicted in the novel, there is no physical evidence to explain Kathy's disappearance. There are no witnesses, no body, no blood and, at the end, not even a trace of John Wade. And finally, even John's spying methods helped neither him nor the reader to discover Kathy's whereabouts and even whether she cheated on him during their college years. The narrator who appears in footnote number 21 in one of the Evidence chapters comments on the invalidity of the evidence in achieving satisfactory answers about Kathy's disappearance. Commenting on Sheriff Arthurs J. Lux's statement that he is a man who deals with facts (unlike Vinny who is a "theory man") the narrator says:
Yes, and I'm a theory man too, Biographer, medium -- call me what you want -- but even after four years of hard labor I'm left with little more than supposition and possibility. John Wade was a magician; he did not give away many tricks. Moreover, there are certain mysteries that weave through life itself, human motive and human desire. Even much of what might appear to be fact in this narrative--action, word, thought -- must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events. I have tried, of course, to be faithful to the evidence. Yet evidence is not truth. It is only evident. In any case, Kathy Wade is forever missing, and if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book (30).

This passage encapsulates O'Brien's theoretical intention in this novel. The constructed narrator, writing a report about the story of Kathy's, then John's, disappearance, admits that he is a man who deals with theory -- exactly as literary theorists do. In spite of hard and diligent work, this theorist writer-narrator realizes that it is impossible to unravel what John Wade, the magician, intended to conceal. Similarly, the reader might be tempted to compare O'Brien, the creator of the novel, to John Wade, the creator of the narrative about his wife's disappearance. Both John Wade and Tim O'Brien are then magicians who do not give away their tricks; their purpose is to deliberately conceal truth from their audience. Therefore, the narrator suggests, if the reader needs to read a less sophisticated narrative that reveals itself, he or she ought to read another book. O'Brien demonstrates that even when adapting a detective narrative style in reading In the Lake of the Woods truth remains unattainable and the mystery of
Kathy’s disappearance unrevealed. O’Brien adapts a recognizable narrative mode (detective fiction plotting), only to deconstruct it as a reliable guide to interpretation.

O’Brien’s conscious treatment of his narrative proves the difficulty of relying on the narratologist’s adaptive method of interpretation simply because historical facts, the original documents that fiction is compared to, are distorted and misrepresented. Another example of the adaptive reading that O’Brien employs in his novel is modeling his text on historical documents by using footnotes and including chapters that dramatize the military trials of the Charlie Company’s involvement in killing innocent people, raping women, and using children as shooting targets during the Vietnam War. Again, O’Brien dramatizes one of the narratologists’ theories about the effectiveness of relying on historical documents in interpreting literature, only to critique this same belief and show its futility in providing meaning. It could be argued that O’Brien is addressing New Historicism, a literary theory that often depends on reading together historical and literary documents to ascertain meaning. Bressler writes in *Literary Criticism* “[since] any historical situation is an intricate web of often competing discourses, Cultural Poetics scholars center history, declaring that any interpretation of a text would be incomplete if we do not consider the text’s relationship to the discourses that helped fashion it and to which the text is a response” (222). By relying on the views of narratologists, who like cultural critics or New Historicists believe that comparing literary texts to historical documents can help readers interpret these texts, the readers of *In the Lake of the Woods* discover that they will not gain from applying this “adaptive” technique.

Normally, when a reader encounters documents with footnotes, he or she presumes the actuality and reliability of information. But once the reader checks out O’Brien’s
footnotes, he or she will discover that not all footnotes are true, such as those that belong to the characters of the novel and Richardson’s testimony of the My Lai massacre ("An Interview with Davis Edelman"). The perplexity does not reside in our attempt, as readers, to determine whether In the Lake of the Woods is fiction or nonfiction since this is something already predetermined by the author when he notes that: “Although this book contains material from the world in which we live, including references to actual places, people, and events, it must be read as a work of fiction.” There is some historical referent for these false footnotes and confusion over truth. O’Brien may be criticizing the validity and the reliability of the historical facts -- a confusion that was also crucial to the involvement of the American government in Vietnam War in the 1960s. In some sense O’Brien is portraying the denial of facts in the same way the American government dealt with the horrific stories and reports about the war crimes American soldiers committed in Vietnamese towns and villages, such as the massacres in My Lai and Thuan Yen. According to H. Bruce Franklin in “Kicking the Denial Syndrome: Tim O’Brien’s In the Lake of the Woods,”

The actual history of U.S. warfare in Vietnam was buried under layer after layer of falsification, fabrication, illusion, and myth. A growing part of the vision was an artfully retouched image of the war that simply erases the Vietnamese from the picture altogether (335).

As Franklin contends, the American army and government tended to erase the horrific image of the soldiers’ brutality towards Vietnamese civilians during the war from the memories of the Americans by a total denial of these stories. And the denial came in two forms, first by denying that these crimes ever took place and later by trying to forget
about the crimes and pretend that they never existed, as did George Bush in 1989: “[A] newly elected president used the taboo word [Vietnam] to tell the nation what to do about the Vietnam War: forget it” (Franklin 334).

The way the American government and people dealt with these historical events can be connected with O’Brien’s criticism of the narratologist’s method of comparing novels to history in order to ascertain truth. The reader of O’Brien’s novel might get the impression that no truth can be obtained by comparing In the Lake of the Woods to historical documents simply because the historical record itself is distorted and misrepresented. A historical text then is like a fictional text that can be misread, misinterpreted, and doubted. Ironically, O’Brien’s fiction seems truer and more reliable as a source of information about the Vietnam War than historical facts presented by American politicians. William Rourke contends in “Into Troubled Waters,” that “O’Brien, it appears, wants to place his fact-based fiction in the service of history (rather than the more usual history in the service of fiction), and he is for the most part successful” (1). The narrator of O’Brien’s novel not only manages to portray the brutality of the soldiers in My Lai, but also demonstrates insight into their psychology during and after the war. In the Lake of the Woods confronts Americans with the horrific effects of a meaningless and ruthless war that transformed many young men and “kids” from American villages, towns, and cities into criminals who committed massacres and became capable of committing murders back home-- as may have happened to John Wade. In his fiction, O’Brien manages to portray a more realistic picture of the soldiers’ situation and psychology than some historians do in their nonfiction account of the Vietnam War.
Another way of interpreting fiction that O’Brien questions in this novel is intentional reading. According to Porter H. Abbot in Introduction to Narrative, intentional reading is an “interpretation that seeks to understand a text in terms of the intended meanings of the implied author” (192). These critics strongly believe that the reader seeks meaning as if there were a mind behind the words on the page. O’Brien’s metacritical text challenges narratologists’ ideas about understanding fiction by assuming the intention of their author. Apparently, because readers know that O’Brien is a war veteran, they likely understand In the Lake of the Woods as a war novel about the psychological burden that war places on soldiers. Verlyn Klinkenborg, in “A Self-Made Man,” describes it as “a novel about the moral effects of suppressing a true war story, of not even trying to make things present, a novel about the unforgivable uses of history, about what happens when you try to pretend that history no longer exists” (2). This approach to the work as a “war novel” accentuates the interpretation that, because John Wade took part in the My Lai massacre, he can easily commit murder, making him a number one suspect in the disappearance, or murder of his wife. The narrator shows this through Viny’s (the officer who was questioning John Wade) insinuation throughout the investigation. One of the hypotheses put forward in the novel is that on the night of Kathy’s disappearance, John Wade got out of bed in rage, shouting “Kill Jesus” after thinking of everything that happened to him during the campaign, remembering the trial, remembering My Lai and Thuan Yen. Perhaps after he poured a kettle of boiling water on each houseplant in the cabin, he poured another kettle of boiling water on Kathy’s face (272-3). He next concealed the murder by carefully weighing both her body and the boat and then burying them at the bottom of the lake. In the same interview mentioned above
O’Brien rejects this assumption by saying this novel is about love, not about war. By so doing, O’Brien in effect complicates the possibility of understanding In the Lake of the Woods in terms of the presupposed theory of the author’s intentionality.

The third mode of interpretation O’Brien dramatizes is the symptomatic reading. According to narratologists, symptomatic reading is a way of interpreting fiction by understanding the social, psychological and economic circumstances of the author. Abbot, in Narrative, explains that “symptomatic approaches are oriented toward a meaning that is presumed to lie behind the narrative. It lies either in the implied author or in the real author (or, channeled through the real author, in the culture of which she or he came). ... symptomatic readings tends to place a greater weight on paratextual material for the reason that they are bypassing the internal organization principle of the implied author” (99).

In fact, the whole structure of In the Lake of the Woods depends on different circumstances and pieces of information provided by the narrator that work together in order to enable the reader to have a certain understanding of the text. These clues range from the main narrative to the different paratexts that constitute the whole text. Apparently, O’Brien acts as a metacritic when he dramatizes this method as he allows the characters to discuss John Wade’s personal life as a child and as an adult in order to demystify his role in the disappearance of Kathy. By so doing, O’Brien critiques psychoanalytical approaches that attempt to ascertain truth by analyzing the characters’ personalities. Although studying the social, psychological, and political background of John Wade is supposed to help the narrator, the investigators, and the readers in unraveling the mystery of In the Lake of the Woods, Kathy Wade’s and John Wade’s
disappearance remains unsolved because O’Brien offers intricate contradictory information about his characters. Reading about John Wade’s background, the readers come to believe that he has something to do with his wife’s disappearance, but reading about Kathy’s background the reader realizes that her life is as complicated and her character as complex as her husband’s.

For example in the section “The Nature of Loss” the narrator talks about John Wade’s reaction to his father’s death: all “he felt for many nights afterward, was the desire to kill” (14). Apparently, Wade felt betrayed by his father who deserted him by committing suicide, so he was enraged and felt the need to kill someone or something because he could not accept the fact that the person he loved most had left him. A look at this piece of information can lead the reader to believe that John Wade perhaps knew that his wife was planning to leave him for someone else, so he killed her in order to prevent her from doing so.

In the “Evidence” chapters, the characters, including John Wade’s mother, comment on his interest in magic and how skillful he is in making things disappear. John Wade is the master of disappearance. In the war in Vietnam, he managed to have access to his file and make it disappear from the Army records to erase his involvement in Charlie Company. Depending on these pieces of information, the reader might form the impression that John Wade killed his wife or, at least, is involved in her disappearance. Yet, O’Brien also alludes to the inaccuracy of this approach of interpretation when he presents a commentary on Kathy’s background. Several times the narrator mentions Kathy’s desire and skill to make herself disappear. For example when they were at a movie together, or at a party, she would simply vanish, “[without] reason, usually without
warning, she’d wander away while they were browsing in a shop or a bookstore, and then
a moment later, when he glanced up, she’d be clearly and purely gone, as if plucked off
the planet. …He understood her need to be alone, to reserve time for herself, but too
often she carried things to an extreme that made him wonder” (33-4). Even when John
Wade was spying on her and making a deliberate effort to keep her in view, he was
unable to prevent her from disappearing. O’Brien’s narrator presents these incidents to
suggest that all interpretations are possible, and, further, that even a careful consideration
of the psychological and social background of the characters will not lead the reader to
access truth.

Another narrative technique O’Brien dramatizes in his metacritical novel is the
study of paratexts. O’Brien engages with narratology as he addresses the effectiveness of
paratexts as a way to understand narratives and obtain meaning. Narratologists define
paratext as “material outside the narrative that is in some way connected to it. Paratexts
can be physically attached to the narrative vehicle (book, magazine): prefaces, tables of
contents, title pages, blurbs on the jacket, illustrations. They can be also separated from
the vehicle but nonetheless connected by association: comments by the author, reviews,
other works by the same author. Paratexts have the capacity to inflect the way we read
and interpret a narrative” (Abbott 194).

The difficulty of ascertaining meaning in O’Brien’s novel forces the reader to
attempt to rely on paratexts in order to interpret the work. But even by reading what the
author has to say about his own novel does not necessarily help the reader better
understand In the Lake of the Woods because O’Brien refuses to demystify his fiction,
thus underscoring its uncertainty. As mentioned above in Kaplan’s interview, O’Brien
contends that "this book is about uncertainty. This book adheres to the principle that much of what is important in the world can never be known" (108). On a visit to Western Michigan University in Spring 2006, O’Brien started addressing his audience by telling a story of a horrific incident that happened to him and some other American soldiers in Vietnam. After few minutes of describing the group’s struggle to survive a fatal attack, he confessed to the eager audience that his story was mere fiction. Then he proceeded to comment on the difference between truth and fiction in telling a story, and concluded that truth can never be asserted in a story. Once again, O’Brien throws doubt on paratexts in helping the reader to access truth in storytelling.

Reading a text like In the Lake of the Woods with its secretive nature and its multiple perspective narrative points of view, one feels a need to go beyond the pages of the novel and seek meaning through the author’s biography, publishers’ comments, the cover page, the author’s introduction, and other paratexts. As a reader, the first paratexts one would likely examine are those that exist within the front and back covers of the book; the chapter titles, footnotes, and author’s notes, known as peritexts. Unfortunately, these paratexts do not help the reader in unraveling the text, simply because they present contradictory pieces of information. The author’s note states that the text is fiction while the footnotes are factual, yet as discussed earlier, the footnotes vary between actual documents and names of people, places, and events simply created by the narrator. The same applies to the “Evidence” chapters. Therefore, the reader might logically consider additional paratexts beyond the novel itself to reach more satisfactory answers. One type of paratext that narratologists suggest as a way to help the reader understand the text is called epitexts, which are, as Suzanne Keen in Narrative Form explains, documents
created by the author or publisher about the text for public consumption such as catalogue copy, publicity materials for reviewers, work diaries and interviews (130). Many narratologists emphasize that the writer is in fact a reader of his or her own experience or the experience of the characters he or she describes. Even the writer's biography is a paratext that ought not to be excluded from the primary literary text.

Another technique that O'Brien addresses in his novel is analepsis, also known as flashback, and prolepsis, or flash forward. According to narratologists, analepses and prolepses, help the reader interpret fiction. Analepsis is the introduction into the narrative of material that happened earlier in the story. Suzanne Keen in Narrative Form states that “analepses can have a lot to do with the story at hand (providing background on a character, for instance)” (102). “A flashback or an analepsis can narrate past events about something or someone already brought up in the story (the backstory), or it can introduce something or someone not already mentioned in the story.... The function of analepsis varies dramatically form instance to instance. An analepsis can return to a previously omitted event to fill in what happened earlier (Genette calls this a ‘completing’ analepsis), or it can recall an event already narrated at least once (Genette calls this kind of internal analepsis ‘repeating’ analepsis). The content of analepsis can also contribute to their evaluation; for they can appear factual and objective, or subjective (as in memories and dreams)” (103). Prolepsis, on the other hand, “is an introduction into the narrative of material that comes later in the story” (Abbott 195). In many cases, prolepsis which reaches into the future of the main event, or main plot, functions as a prophecy or an anticipation of an event.
O'Brien's extensive use of analepsis and prolepsis encourages the reader to consider these narrative techniques in order to interpret his novel. Yet, these two narrative techniques in O'Brian's *In the Lake of the Woods* do not help unravel the mystery of the novel. Identifying and understanding prolepsis and analepsis in a narrative should lead a reader to a more confident interpretation of what the narrative means, but this is not the case in O'Brien's novel because the author intentionally creates contradictory situations that complicate, or even confuse, our understanding. In this case readers have to rely on their own intuition because, as Kaplan puts in *Understanding Tim O’Brien* “O’Brien subtly influences his reader to choose conjecture over fact and to prefer the possibilities of stories over supposedly “factual” data” (203).

In *In the Lake of the Woods*, there are many references and expressions that one can consider as analepsis and prolepsis which the reader might believe could help demystify the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. There are two main events in the story, Kathy's disappearance which is presented at the beginning of the novel, and John Wade's disappearance which takes place at the end of the novel. The distinction between prolepsis and analepsis depends on the order in which the events and pieces of information are introduced to the reader in regard to the main events. For example, if a piece of information that anticipates the disappearance of Kathy is narrated before her disappearance, that information should be considered as prolepsis. But if a past event is introduced to the reader after Kathy's disappearance, it is seen as an analepsis.

From the very beginning, the narrator of O'Brien's novel depicts the setting of the Lake of the Woods as a mysterious and a secretive place that connotes the general atmosphere of the narrative, the disappearance of the couple.
There were no roads at all. There were no towns and no people. Beyond the dock
the big lake opened northward into Canada, where the water was everything, vast
and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and
tangled forests and islands without names. Everywhere, for many thousand square
miles, the wilderness was all one thing, like a great curving mirror, infinitely blue
and beautiful, always the same. Which was what they had come for. They needed
the solitude. They needed the repetition, the dense hypnotic drone of woods and
water, but above all they needed to be together (1).

In the same chapter, only two days before Kathy’s disappearance, the couple talks about
their future plans and their trip to Verona and Florence and their will to adapt to the
changes. The narrator mentions more than once that she will be gone in the following
days and describes what John Wade would remember afterwards.

The description of the setting and the couple’s planning for the future and how
they will get over their problems indicate that their disappearance is premeditated and
well-calculated. Drawing on narratologists’ belief that prolepses would help in
anticipating the main event and throwing light on the meaning of the text, O’Brien’s
readers would probably believe that John Wade did not murder his wife and then escape
at the end the novel. It might be also understood that she left, and eighteen days later he
went after her to meet her somewhere they had both agreed on. Perhaps they plotted all
this as an attempt to escape their debts and their sense of humiliation after his defeat in
the Senate elections and the scandal of the My Lai massacre leaking to the newspapers.

A careful look at another prolepsis in the novel contradicts this conclusion,
however. In the first chapter and two days before Kathy Wade’s disappearance, the
narrator refers to a horrific image of John Wade's screaming “kill Jesus,” and his desire to kill. “He felt crazy sometimes. Real depravity. Late at night an electric sizzle came into his blood a tight pumped-up killing rage, and he couldn’t keep it in and he couldn’t let it out. He wanted to hurt things. Grab a knife and start cutting and slashing and never stop” (5). This reference anticipates the upcoming disappearance of his wife, the only person whom he was with when he had this outrageous temper. The narrator’s depiction of John’s destructive state of mind sets the narrative in a death-like atmosphere and prepares the reader to deal with a brutal crime at some future point in the novel. This description of John Wade’s inability to control his “pumped-up killing rage” at the beginning of the novel also gives the impression that he is certainly capable of committing a crime. Once again, by considering these two examples as prolepses anticipating the main events, the reader is only further perplexed.

O’Brien’s narrator brings up many past events that highlight the disappearance of Kathy and which are supposed to explain what happened to her. But the contradictory nature of these narratives also complicates our understanding of the usually explanatory purpose of analepsis. Among the many examples of analepsis in the novel there are two intriguing references that add still more mystery to the disappearance of Kathy. First, the reference to Kathy’s desire and skill to make herself disappear may imply what will happen to her later in the story: she might just get up and leave without giving a reason or leaving any trace. Kathy’s desire and skill to disappear might give the reader the impression that John Wade has nothing to do with her disappearance and has no clue where she is, as when back in college he was never able to keep track of her when they were at a movie or a party. Another example of an analepsis in the novel, however,
contradicts this theory of Kathy’s disappearance. In “The Nature of Love,” the narrator describes John Wade’s state of mind after waking up from a dream about the war in Vietnam. In this description, the narrator mentions two people who are already dead and one who later disappears in mysterious circumstances. The first one is Weatherby, whom John killed in Vietnam; the second is his father who committed suicide; and the third is his wife. He sees himself pressing the palm of his hand above her lips trying to control her breath.

Sometimes he’d say things.

“Kath,” he’d say peering down at her, “Kath, my Kath,” the palm of his hand poised above her lips as if to control the miracle of her breathing. In the dark, sometimes, he would see a vanishing village. He would see PFC Weatherby, and his father’s white casket, and a little boy trying to manipulate the world. Other times he would see himself performing the ultimate vanishing act. A grand finale, a curtain closer. He did not know the technique yet, or the hidden mechanism, but in his mind’s eye he could see a man and a woman swallowing each other up like that pair of snakes along the trail near Pinkville, first the tails, then the heads, both of them finally disappearing forever inside each other. Not a footprint, not a single clue. Purely gone— the trick of his life. The burdens of secrecy would be lifted. Memory would be null. They would live in perfect knowledge, all things visible, all things invisible, no wires or strings, just that large dark world where one plus one will always come to zero (76).

This quotation leads the reader to deduce that John killed his wife and concealed the crime by carefully weighing both her body and the boat and then burying them at the
bottom of the lake. He would have done this because he loves her and feared that she might leave him, and then committed suicide by drowning himself. Killing his wife and then committing suicide would also explain why John disappears at the end of the novel. This idea is supported by the recurrent subtle comparisons between Weatherby and Kathy. The narrator more than once refers to John remembering Whetherby smiling to him before he shot him and also remembers Kathy smiling to him the night before she disappeared.

The other example of analepsis that stands out in the novel as a source of perplexity is the image of the mirror. The mirror is of significance in In the Lake of the Woods since it represents the reality that John wade was trying hard to deny and escape. One of the magic tricks Wade mastered since he was young was how to hide behind the mirror whenever he felt bad, teased, or betrayed. Intriguingly, another image of the mirror the narrator employs in the novel is when the surface of the lake is compared to the mirror that reflects the sky and the trees on the lake’s shore. In order to escape their problems, perhaps John Wade and Kathy slipped behind the mirror, the surface of water, and disappeared by using the very trick that he used to use whenever he felt bad. Maybe he killed his wife and drowned her, and then committed suicide by also drowning himself in the lake. Or maybe they both planned to escape and meet somewhere in Canada but both drowned under the surface of the Lake of the Woods that reflects the sky and the trees like a mirror. The problem is that no one knows, because the image of the mirror is referred to in the novel as a mechanism for making people and things disappear. The past references to Wade’s magical trick are made in different contexts sometimes to himself.
or sometimes to Kathy who once expressed her fear to her husband by saying: “Be careful with these tricks. One of these days you’ll make me disappear” (38).

O’Brien presents two sets of contradictory foreshadowing. In so doing, he illustrates that prolepsis and analepsis do not necessarily help the reader unravel the text and access truth. On the contrary, searching for analepses and prolepses in some narratives, such as in *In the Lake of the Woods*, only intensifies the reader’s sense of confusion. Apparently, O’Brien is more interested in storytelling than in reaching truth simply because truth is inaccessible. Although the inconclusive ending might irritate the reader, O’Brien in effect argues that this is the truest way to tell a story. Perhaps that is why Kaplan in *Understanding Tim O’Brien*, says that “O’Brien believes that storytelling truth is often truer than the ‘truth’” (10).

O’Brien, the metacritic, appears to take over the narrator’s voice and appears in footnote number 177, interfering in the text and informing his readers about the nature of narrative and the value of truth in storytelling. Referring to Eleanor K. Wade’s interrogation about her son’s involvement in Kathy’s disappearance, this narrator says:

Because all of that cannot be known. And what if we did know? ...Hence, eternal doubt, which both frustrates and fascinates. It’s a standoff. The human desire for certainty collides with our love of enigma. And so I lose sleep over mute facts and frayed ends and missing witnesses. God knows I tried. Reams of data, miles of magnetic tape, but none of it satisfies even my own primitive appetite for answers. So I toss and turn ... Would it help to announce the problem early on? To plead for understanding? To argue that solutions only demean the grandeur of human ignorance? To point out that absolute knowledge is absolute closure? To
issue a reminder that death itself dissolves into uncertainty, and that out of such uncertainty arise great temples and tales of salvation? ... The truth is at once simple and baffling: John Wade was a pro. He did his magic, then walked away. Everything else is conjecture. No answers, yet mystery itself carries me on (266).

It is obvious that “truth” is not accessible in In the Lake of the Woods. Even by applying the different methods that narratologists provide to enable us to read and understand literature, the truth remains unattainable. All these methods, adaptive reading, intentional reading, symptomatic reading, paratexts, prolepsis and analepsis, can help the reader in reading fiction but O’Brien teaches us that they do not necessarily provide meaning or ascertain truth.

As metacritic O’Brien argues that in spite of the effectiveness and centrality of narratology as a theory of storytelling, it only serves as a first step to interpretation but can not guarantee readers discover textual meaning. The reading techniques that narratologists offer can make storytelling and reading narratives more interesting and reading more professional, but these techniques do not necessarily demystify the intention of the author. These narrative techniques enable the writer to, directly or indirectly, convey his thoughts, frustrate the reader’s expectations, more than help the reader to ascertain truth in a text like In the Lake of the Woods, where the novelist’s purpose appears to demonstrate human’s limitations to access truth. Rather than assent to Abbott’s claims in Narrative that narratology offers ways to obtain meaning, it seems that O’Brien agrees with Peter Barry’s explanation of narratology in Beginning Theory: that narrative theory provides ways to read fiction, but not how to interpret it.
Unlike the three creative metacritics discussed in the previous chapters (Robbe-Grillet, Calvino, and O’Brien) who dealt with other theorists’ critical views in their fiction, John Barth’s metacritical treatment of his metafictive novel, *Chimera* (1972), takes a different approach. Instead of dealing with other theorists’ views, Barth dramatizes and embodies his own critical views about the novel and postmodernism. Barth’s metacriticism is self-referential as he self-critiques and reevaluates his personal understanding of the novel as a genre, a subject he also discusses in his famous essay “The Exhaustion of the Novel.”

Self-referential criticism occurs when creative writers present and critique their own theories on literature and literary criticism in their fiction. These creative writers function as metacritics supporting and criticizing their own theories and critical views of narrative theory and literary criticism that they have also discussed in their critical writings by dramatizing, explaining, and evaluating their personal understanding of these theories in their creative works. Self-referential criticism can also include creative writers anticipating and examining theories about their own writing also explained and commented on in subsequent journals, articles, or books. Self-referential criticism allows creative metacritics to explore and experiment with their own theoretical ideas, to put them into practice, so to speak, and to “prove” to themselves and to others the validity or failure of their theories.
John Barth, the American literary critic and novelist, is an interesting case in point. Barth has published many essays commenting on, explaining, defending, and even correcting some of his ideas about narrative appearing in his earlier critical writings. As Barth explains in his introduction to “The Literature of Replenishment,” unlike many writers, he “is afflicted with the itch to understand and explain, to himself and others, why he tells the stories he tells the way he tells them, rather than some other sort of stories some other way” (193). Self-referentiality in Barth’s case is a reciprocal connection between his fiction and his essays. As a theorist who understands narrative literary theory and criticism at a sophisticated level, Barth was able to enrich the study of the novel genre through metafictive experimentation in his novels. Indeed, he managed to dramatize and embody many of his and other theorists’ critical views in his creative writing and examine the validity of these theories in fiction writing. Moreover, the practical employment of his ideas and narrative strategies in his fiction also resulted in changes in his theoretical views.

A significant example of Barth’s use of self-referential criticism is Chimera, a deliberate dramatization of his ideas on the exhausted possibilities of literature and critical views of postmodernism. In this self-referential, postmodern novel Barth explicitly and straightforwardly interrupts his narrative to comment on and explain various critical theories, and attitudes towards his own theories, as well as respond to other critics’ and creative writers’ critical views of the current status of the novel. The three novellas, “Dunyazadiad,” “Perseid,” and “Bellerophoniad” that constitute Chimera are about storytelling, and the author frequently comments on his own narrative style and themes in the novel. Barth uses his creative writing to illustrate his understanding of the
different problems in writing fiction as his novel deals with various narrative issues such as writer’s block, point of view, truth, theme, and unity. In “The Novel Looks at Itself—Again,” Jerry H. Bryant refers to Barth’s Chimera as “a lecture on the nature of fiction, disguised as a kind of retelling of some very old stories.” According to Bryant, Chimera “is supposed to be … an exploration into the possibilities of a new kind of fiction” (213). Apparently, this exploration into the nature of fiction resonates with readers interested in the position and fate of the novel genre. Because many readers and critics were provoked by Barth’s ominous discussion of the death of the novel, they paid more attention to his narrative techniques and overlooked the thematic implications of Chimera. According to Jerry Powell in “John Barth’s Chimera: a Creative Response to the Literature of Exhaustion,” “Chimera, unfortunately, has received very little critical attention, mostly focused on Barth’s form and technique, as though Barth had discarded ‘content’ in favor of technique” (229). A careful study of Barth’s Chimera demonstrates that content is no less important than style and techniques in his novel.

Chimera consists of three parts retelling three ancient myths; the stories of Scheherazade of The One Thousand and One Nights; Perseus, the slayer of Medusa; and Bellerophon, who tamed the winged horse Pegasus and spent his life seeking immortality. In “Dunyazadiad” the Genie—who might be considered to represent Barth himself since they both are forty, wear glasses and are from America—appears to Scheherazade and her little sister Dunyazade. Scheherazade, armed with stories she read in her library, offers to marry Shahryar in order to save the women of her city from his vengeful decision to slay a virgin every night as a punishment for his wife’s deception. Barth adds the story of Shah Zaman, who also, like his brother, was betrayed by his wife, vowing to marry a
virgin every night and execute her the next morning. But unlike his brother who executes his brides, Shah Zaman sends them away to a secluded island. In “Perseid,” Perseus, the Greek mythic hero, narrates his own story from Heaven where he is among other mythic figures such as Medusa and Calyxa. Similarly, Barth adds a twist in Perseus’ myth. In *Chimera* Athene revives Medusa, but in Barth’s reconfiguration whoever looks into Medusa’s eyes is rejuvenated, and she will die unless the one who looks at her falls in love with her. In “Bellerophoniad” Barth allows Bellerophon, the Greek mythic hero, to tell the tale of his heroic deeds, including the killing of the Chimera, in his quest for immortality. At the end of the story, Bellerophon finds out that his own story is being told by another character, Polyeidus the Seer, and that Bellerophon himself is not Bellerophon but his ostensibly dead brother Deliades. He retells these tales from different perspectives, examining the myths’ relationship to reality and their resonance with the contemporary world. Through these characters manipulations and narrative approaches, Barth raises many issues and arguments about narrative.

*Chimera* marks a critical point in Barth’s writing career. He wrote the novel in 1972, five years after his famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and seven years before what Barth calls its “companion and corrective” essay, “The Literature of Replenishment” (written in 1979 and published in 1980). *Chimera* reflects Barth’s theoretical transformation, a transformation he experienced during the writing process as he experimented with his beliefs and ideas concerning the exhaustion of the novel. Apparently Barth set out to write *Chimera* as an illustration of the exhausted possibilities of the novel, but, while writing it, became inspired by what he discovered in the text and
eventually finds what he considers a solution to the problem of the contemporary novel. He explicitly puts this solution forward in “The Literature of Replenishment.”

In “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth introduces the notion that all stories have already been told. He argues that the conventional modes of literary representation have been “used up,” their possibilities consumed through repetition. By exhaustion, Barth does not “mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (64). “The Literature of Exhaustion” is principally concerned with the ways art has been kept alive in the age of “final solutions” and “felt ultimacies” (67). Barth believes that art and its forms and techniques must live in history and change according to time and circumstances. Artistic conventions, forms, and techniques are “liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work,” as Barth explains in “The Literature of Replenishment” (205). This need for constant regeneration means it is necessary for the writer to be technically up-to-date and to engage with changes in society, politics, and technology.

In “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth expresses deep admiration for Jorge Luis Borges as Barth considers him an outstanding artist who rejuvenates literature and “doesn’t merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it” (68). According to Barth, Borges can employ an ultimacy by “doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do” exactly “like a novel with scenes that will pop up, like the old children’s books” (66). Barth is fascinated by Borges’ story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” in which “the hero, an utterly sophisticated turn-of-the-century French Symbolist, by an astounding effort of imagination, produces – not copies or imitates, but
composes -- several chapters of Cervantes's novel" (68). As Barth explains in his essay, Borges borrows Cervantes' novel as an attempt to produce a "remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps theunnecessity, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (69-70). Barth uses Borges' metafictive style to illustrate ideas in "The Literature of Exhaustion." In fact, Barth considers Borges an artist who "paradoxically turn[s] the ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work -- paradoxically, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world" (71).

"The Literature of Exhaustion" was a call for a new era in literature to supersede modernism, believed exhausted by many critics including Barth. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth's main "purpose was to define to [his] satisfaction the term postmodernism" (193). Unlike many postmodern writers he mentions in his article, including Robert Alter, Gerald Graff, and Ihab Hassan, who believe that "postmodernist fiction merely emphasizes the "performing" self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy" (200), Barth contends that there is a more comprehensive meaning to postmodernism than simply experimenting with new techniques in writing fiction. Barth's understanding of postmodernism reflects what Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez have employed in their novels; a combination of artistic juxtapositions including the traditional past and the liberal present, fantasy and magic realism, myth and objective reality, political passion and nonpolitical
artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror all in one literary body. According to Barth, “the ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and ‘contentism,’ pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (203). At the end of his essay he concludes “that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted -- its “meaning” residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language” (205).

There are two major issues that Barth raises in his aforementioned essays which are dramatized in Chimera: the survival of the novel and writers’ block. First, he manifests the techniques that many postmodern writers applied as an attempt to revive the novel to stand against critics’ and readers’ accusations of its death. Second, Barth uses his fiction as a vehicle to express his personal opinion and understanding of writer’s block, a problem that can devastate a creative writer’s career, and he offers several ways to surmount this crisis. Barth’s self-criticism allows him to discuss, employ, and work out the major difficulties that he encountered in his writings.

Like many modern and postmodern writers, Barth was burdened with the haunting idea of the death of the novel and the incapability of writers to keep pace with social and technological change. The rapid and various changes the world had experienced in the last century-and-a-half, such as the industrial revolution, the end of slavery, World War I and World War II, the independence of many colonized countries, numerous scientific and technological discoveries and inventions, emancipation, and feminist movements -- called on writers to seek different forms of writing in order to please readers’ tastes and satisfy their need for a meaningful way to represent their
feelings and daily problems. The emergence of the “modern novel” seems to be essential since it is, according to Jesse Matz in *The Modern Novel*, a “fiction that tries for something new, in the face of modernity, to reflect, to fathom, or even to redeem modern life” (7).

Both modern and postmodern literatures explore fragmentariness in narrative -- and character -- construction. Modernist literature sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as existential crises, problems that must be solved, and the artist is often expected to be the one to solve these problems. Postmodernists, however, often demonstrate that contemporary chaos is insurmountable; the artist is impotent, and the only recourse against ruin is to play within the chaos. Playfulness is present in many modernist and postmodernist works as they treat serious subjects in both an experimental and humorous ways. Obviously, Barth utilizes this same belief in *Chimera*, as he dramatizes interpretations of modernism and postmodernism while embodying many features of the so called “exhausted” literature. Barth, in fact demonstrates a playful treatment of serious problems in the novel in an attempt to find solutions to these problems.

Self-criticism might be Barth’s main point, but he also explores other critics’ ideas about the current status of the novel. At first glance, it might seem that Barth was really out of new ideas when he attempted to retell the stories of three well known characters known for thousands of years in different cultures and languages. However, Barth’s choice of famous ancient stories and Greek myths is intriguing because he is able to bring new perspectives to literary works told and retold numerous times. In so doing, Barth does not only narrate these stories in a new form, but also comments on them,
interpreting themes and literary techniques, a strategy that positions him as a metacritic and commentator on literature. For example, in the text associated with Polyeidus the Seer, one of Barth’s characters in “Bellerophoniad,” confesses that his narrative of the mythic hero is a form of self-criticism that experiments with the hero’s supposed heroism and quest for immortality.

What Barth does in “Dunyazadiad” of The One Thousand and One Nights is in keeping with a tradition of adding to the original story of Scheherazade and Shahryar, something that people have been doing for centuries. The stories of The One Thousand and One Nights that we have today do not share common origins nor are they all told by the same narrator. These tales were translated from Indian into Persian then into Arabic during the Abbasid era in the ninth century and subjected to changes and retellings over time, each new version injecting its own social traditions, religious beliefs, and political influences. Some nations added to these stories from their folk tradition. Even in Europe when The Arabian Nights was translated into French then into English in the eighteenth century, some of the tales best-known today, including “Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp,” “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” and “The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor,” while likely in their origin genuine Arabic folk stories, were added to the collection by European translators. Similarly, Barth adds to these ancient oriental tales and imposes a western perspective, calling for women’s rights and the classical image of a western savior whose mission is to liberate the East from fanatical dictators.

“Perseid” tells the story of Perseus, an authentic historical figure to the Greeks and the first mythic hero of Greek mythology. The Greek writers who transcribed the mythic oral story of Perseus drew on super-human elements in their tales the same way
Barth, and other writers, would come to add new perspectives. Barth’s employment of this historical figure as a focus for his postmodern novel illustrates his critical interpretation of the role of repeated treatment of historical figures in literature as a method to combat literature’s supposed “exhaustion.”

Finally, the Bellerophon’s story in “Bellerophoniad” embodies Barth’s belief that the advantage that classical authors, Greek and Roman, had over modern writers is that the former had all the raw materials they needed to create stories and invent themes. In “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth thus argues that modern novelists, unlike classical writers, are more likely to be imitators and renovators, rather than creators and innovators. In fact Barth does not conceal his jealousy of these “authentic stories” depicting that jealousy in Bellerophon’s resentment of later writers distorting his myth. As the narrator in “Bellerophoniad” says, “Bellerophon senses, not for the first time, that this picture of his late lamented, distorted for accuracy like a caricature, is being drawn with jealous pen, and wonders by whom... someone imitating that author -- anyone, in short, who has ever written or will write about the myth of Bellerophon and Chimera” (236-7).

In Chimera, Barth deals with these three ancient stories, supposedly exhausted and out-of-date, to embody his theoretical views concerning the reinvigorating possibilities of literature versus the proposed “death” of the novel. Barth attempts to retell these stories in order to experiment himself with the very narrative techniques that modern and postmodern critics and writers had suggested might revive the novel and secure its survival and relevance in the face of modernity.
In dealing with the three novellas that comprise *Chimera*, Barth imitates the role of the Genie in “Dunyazadiad” who travels from the present to the past (Scheherazade’s present time) to narrate the stories she is supposed to narrate to her husband, Shahryar. The Genie and Scheherazade are similar in the sense that they both have learned the history of mankind and studied ancient stories and myths that they intend to use to narrate their own stories. Scheherazade, attempting to entertain the king and stall his decision to execute her, explores her library and studies the histories of other nations and earlier stories. The Genie, who has been facing a writer’s block, studies the tales of *The One Thousand and One Nights* in order to write his novel. Addressing Scheherazade, the Genie says: “In all the years I’ve been writing stories, your book has never been off my worktable. I’ve made use of it a thousand times, if only by just seeing it there” (13).

As depicted in “Dunyazadiad” Barth believes that the traditional stories that represent people’s lived experiences in prior epochs are able to serve as an inspiration for modern authors in writing fiction. Modern writers use older materials and add to them in order to present a different perspective, one that can capture contemporary issues, an idea that he emphasizes in his essays. In “The Literature of Exhaustion,” and “The Literature of Replenishment,” Barth acknowledges the significance of earlier stories in enriching the postmodernist’s experience in writing fiction. In *Chimera*, Barth uses the metaphor of the snail to convey this concept. The Genie reveals to Scheherazade his narrative technique saying:

My project... is to learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I’ve been -- where we’ve all been. There’s a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes -- perhaps I invented him -- that makes his shell as he goes along out of
whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail’s pace has become my pace -- but I’m going in circles, following my own trail! I’ve quit reading and writing; I’ve lost track of who I am; my name’s just a jumble of letters, so’s the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I’ve lost the key to (10-11).

Presenting old stories in a modern perspective and using others’ experiences, according to Barth, are not imitation; rather, they are a source of inspiration and education that add more knowledge and experience to modern individuals. According to Powell in “John Barth’s Chimera,” the Genie “learned from Dunyazade, a new perspective is all that is needed to create “new” stories out of old ones” (230).

Furthermore, making use of old stories and themes need not necessarily be considered an indication of the exhaustion of the modern and postmodern novel, nor an anticipation of the death of the novel. In fact many contemporary writers in their treatment of traditional stories simulate the way ancient storytellers themselves treat previous stories and myths. Barth depicts this “borrowing” of older themes and techniques by the Genie’s revelation of Scheherazade’s skill in storytelling when he tells her that she “didn’t invent them either;” they are stories told by other people before her. “The only tales left in the treasury of the sort King Shahryar was likely to be entertained by were the hundred mimicries and retellings of Sherry’s own” (29).

The other novellas in Barth’s Chimera utilize an approach similar to what Barth tried to convey in “Dunyazadiad.” Similarly, the myth of Perseus serves as an
inspirational factor for creating the later myth of Bellerophon. Bellerophon in “Bellerophoniad” constantly compares his story to the myth of Perseus as he desperately spends his life seeking immortality. The narrator of Bellerophon’s myth, who attempts to recycle the myth of Perseus, compares his narrative to “the rich prose of the Perseid” (140). This imitation of earlier stories does not end by Bellerophon trying to follow Perseus’ steps or Polyeidus attempting to recycle “Perseid.” These Greek myths continue to inspire creative writing serving as rich material for Roman, Renaissance, as well as modern and postmodern writers including Barth in Chimera. Bellerophon describes this phenomenon:

It has been remarked that this state of spiritual affairs -- the general malaise ... I wonder how many voices are telling my tale. It seems to me that upon my first being transformed into the story of my life, at best a sorely qualified immortality, the narrative voice was clear and objective: in simple, disciplined prose it recounted my middle-aged distress, figured conveniently by Pegasus’s inability to fly, voila” (141-2).

Barth strongly believes that narrative fiction entails the dependence of later writers on earlier ones. Writers of all eras use older motifs and archetypes as models for their own works and add to them their own perceptions, experiences, and beliefs to represent the realities of the age they live in.

It also appears that Barth does not believe that modern and postmodern writers have come up with authentically new narrative techniques. The new techniques they purport to be revolutionary in the novel genre are, in his view, not new at all. These techniques have been used by writers and storytellers in the past. In fact, there are two
major turning points in the development of the novel in the modern age which Barth
discusses and dramatizes in Chimera. The first was at the turn of the twentieth century
when the term “modernity” became an important characteristic of people’s lives. Modern
writers attempted to break free from the nineteenth-century bourgeois social order, world
view, and conventions of realism. According to Matz,

[putting] reality in question and falling into fragments; “automatic” sentences and
“subjective” voices: these were a few of the things that made the novel modern.
First of all, that modern novelists start with the belief that modernization has
changed the very nature of reality, and that fiction also has to change its very
nature in order to survive. They tell us that the modern novel therefore does things
differently -- that it sets itself against literary norms and conventions. Experiment,
innovation, and improvisation are its hallmarks. New styles and structures are the
result, and these are often shocking, surprising, and difficult. But the difficulty has
its reasons: often, it makes fiction more like life, or makes the modern reality
more subject to awareness, scrutiny and understanding (6).

The second turning point in the development of the novel of which Barth appears
to minimize in Chimera is postmodernism. Although postmodernism gained popularity
in the late 1960’s and 1970s, Bressler in Literary Criticism says that “there is general
agreement that the word first appeared in the 1930s. Its seeds, however, had already
germinated far earlier in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)” (99). Critics
believe that the massive destructive effects that the Second World War had on humanity
led people to doubt the concept of truth or to lose hope in human nature. The horrific war
fostered a pessimistic and cynical perspective on life and reality. Therefore, postmodern

107
writers, like their modernist predecessors, felt an urgent need to try new techniques to represent the human experience. As Matz puts it,

“truth too, seemed exhausted. The modern writers had wanted always to question it -- to see things from different perspectives, to doubt the conventional wisdom, and even to suggest that truth lay beyond our powers of perception and knowledge. ... But now modern skepticism got pushed further -- further enough to undermine totally the possibility of “representation.” The modernists had wanted immediacy; postmodernism seemed to prove that we could only get “mediation,” since there was no reality beyond the reach of thought and language. ...[all] it could do was “dramatize the theme of the world’s noninterpretability” (129).

Although modernism and postmodernism relate to two different eras, many critics believe that the latter is a continuation of the former and the prefix “post” better refers to an “extension” rather than to “succession.” Modernism and postmodernism share important characteristics that writers tended to apply in their fiction as a rejection of traditional narrative techniques. Both modern and postmodern literature embody a break from nineteenth century realism, in which a story was often told from an objective or omniscient point of view. In character development, both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to inner states of consciousness.

Unlike some critics and postmodern writers, Barth disagrees with the idea that postmodernism is a mere extension of modernism. In “The Literature of Replenishment,” he contends that
the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program as described above [referring to Alter’s, Graff’s, and Hassan’s point of view concerning the relationship between modernism and postmodernism,] nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what [he is] calling postmodernism: “traditional” bourgeois realism (201).

Barth also disagrees with the idea that the characteristics of the novel provided by modern and postmodern novelists are new to the novel. As he contends in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” there are novels and narratives in history, such as The One Thousand and One Nights, Cervantes’ metafictive novel, Don Quixote, and Fielding’s Parodies of Richardson, that employ so called modern and postmodern narrative techniques. Barth dramatizes this idea in Chimera when Bellerophon addresses Polyiedus, the writer of his story:

The tradition of the double in literature. The tradition of the story within the story, the tradition of the mad editor of the text, the tradition of the unreliable narrator… Polyeidus, old Charlatan, this is your best? No answer (150).

As this passage suggests, Barth is not impressed by the changes modernist and postmodernist novelists claim to have made in fiction. In fact, he mocks their so called “Revolutions in the Novel Genre” describing them as “digression after digression.” Barth conveys this deterioration of the novel by allusion to Napoleon’s attempt to revolt against the French system. Napoleon tried to further the French Revolution, yet, in the end, reinforced the same decadence that existed before the revolution as he undertook his colonial ambitions. Ironically, the French Revolution that was meant to demolish the
decadent and corrupt system that existed during the monarchy only proved another form of corruption in which France, led by Napoleon, sought in effect to deprive other nations of their freedom and dignity.

In "Bellerophoniad," Barth uses the metaphor of the French Revolution to dramatize the two major phases that mark the transformation of the novel since the Victorian novel. The "First Revolution" marks writers' attempts to change the traditional form of the novel which existed before the Victorian era into other fictional and nonfictional forms. This phase appears in the emergence of

[a] novel in the form of artificial fragments. A novel in diary form, in epistolary form, in notebook form, in the form of notes; a novel in the form of annotated text; a novel in the form of miscellaneous documents, a novel in the form of the novel. The tradition that no one who believes himself to be losing his mind is losing his mind. The tradition that people who speak much of committing suicide are talking themselves out of committing suicide, or is it into committing suicide (154).

And these new forms, referred to as digressions, "will not lead to the main stream" (157) because, Barth maintains, writers are taking the wrong way.

Another significant aspect of the modern novel that Barth dramatizes is the revolt against the traditional linear plot, as found in nineteenth century fiction where novelists conventionally followed a chronological order in narrating the events of the story. Modernists' and postmodernists' objection to this linearity in narrative is that even if events happen in linear time, humans do not psychologically experience them in that manner. Characters often recount their stories through past memories, present realization
of their actions, and future expectations of their hopes and dreams. According to Barth, this technique is neither a modern nor postmodern invention since it has been used in narratives for many centuries, such as in the stories of *The One Thousand and One Nights* and the *Odyssey*. Barth’s own text incorporates this technique as he plays with the plot of the three novellas in *Chimera*. For example, in “Perseid,” Perseus starts narrating his story after his death. In “Bellerophoniad,” the narration starts from the middle of the story then the narrator shifts the narrative to the beginning of Bellerophon’s myth and finally moves to the end of the story.

Because Barth is not convinced that modern and postmodern novelists really made a revolutionary change in the novel genre, he places hope in *The Second Revolution*, which he refers to as the “science fiction” revolution. Barth believes that the genre of science fiction will actually create a change in the novel genre, a change which he anticipates before the “bicentennial of the first,” which happened in the Victorian age. Intriguingly, Barth denies himself, and I suppose many postmodern writers, credit for making a drastic change in the novel since, according to what he believes, modern and postmodern writers mainly recycled older narrative techniques and motifs. He introduces this notion by excluding Jerome B. Bray, the purported author of John Barth’s works, from the honor of rejuvenating the novel. The narrator in “Bellerophoniad” says:

> As best as I could make out, the Five-Year Plan for the ambiguous “Second Revolution” was conceived not by Bray directly but by a second ingenious machine, an automatic Polyeidus called Computer which Bray was using in his scholarly endeavors; it suggested to him one day that he might better vindicate himself to the world and attain his rightful place among its immortals by putting
aside the tedious concordance in favor of a Revolutionary Novel -- the "scientific fiction" aforementioned...(249).

Once again Barth dramatizes what he strongly urges writers to do in "The Literature of Exhaustion," that is to be technically up-to-date in writing fiction. This new era, the 'future of fiction,' is supposed to revive the novel and inspire fiction writers to make use of older materials in new perspectives. His reference to 'science fiction' manifests one of the major roles of the novel which is to represent the massive change that technology has caused to modern life. For example, Barth presents an interesting idea concerning the function of fiction to transcend its supposed aesthetic purpose. In "Bellerophoniad," Barth, whose voice interrupts the narrative as it appears in the form of interviews with Bellerophon, claims that fiction is necessary as it serves as "a model of the world" (246). The narrator's belief in the necessity of fiction resonates with Barth's critical view of the practical function of literature he proposes in "The Future of Literature and the Literature of the Future." In his essay Barth says "there is a historical connection between prophecy and poetry. Between prophecy and prose fiction, that connection gets debased (some would say elevated) into 'science fiction': fiction about the future" (162). Barth is saying that fiction represents the reality of our present as it also anticipates our future. We know historically the importance of this function of literature. In the case of science fiction, numerous inventions and events were represented years before they became a reality. For example, Jules Verne wrote novels about traveling around the world and a trip to the moon decades before the invention of aircrafts and spaceships. In this view, literature has a sublime function; it explains the

112
past, represents the present, and anticipates the future. Therefore, it can never be exhausted.

It can be said that Barth’s self-referential criticism and discussion of the relationship between old stories and newer ones and the function of the novel introduce one of the major problems that led to the notion of the death of the novel: writer’s block. Writer’s block, perhaps the most fatal predicament that any fiction writer can face, is a prominent theme in fact related to the question of the possible exhaustion of literature. Writer’s block and the idea of exhausted literature are connected in that many modern and postmodern writers came to a realization that there is nothing left to talk about. According to these writers, all themes and subject matters have been used and ‘exhausted’ before by earlier writers. Barth dramatizes writer’s block as he explores this problem throughout the three novellas that comprise Chimera. Barth deals with this problem from different viewpoints. The first is associating narrativity with survival. In “Dunyazadiad,” Scheherazade’s life and the lives of many virgins depend on storytelling. The writer’s block to Scheherazade means death, and Shahryar is going to continue deflowering and executing a virgin every day. So the only way for Scheherazade to survive is by telling a story every night. She feeds her narrative imagination by reading the history of kings and people in the books she found in her library. In fact, her source of creativity then is older stories and myths, myths which she aptly retells in a contemporary perspective in order to entertain her husband, and to teach him lessons about human nature. In the original tales of The One Thousand and One Nights, Scheherazade did not save her life only by entertaining King Shahryar; she in fact managed to convince him, by the stories she narrated, that goodness exists in humans as evil does. She taught him that
not all people are like his first wife. Also, through the themes she addresses in her stories, Scheherazade reminds him that his duties as a king should come before his personal desire to avenge his pride.

Interestingly, the Genie, who is facing a writer’s block, learns from Scheherazade that “the Key to the Treasure is the Treasure.” The treasure here is storytelling and the key to storytelling is retelling stories. They both conclude that the only way to get over writer’s block and narrate new stories is by retelling older stories from a contemporary perspective. In Scheherazade’s case she managed to save her life by retelling stories invented by others before her. In the Genie’s case he managed to save his writing career by the retelling of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. As John Vickery puts it in “The Functions of Myth in John Barth’s *Chimera*,”

[it] is as if the sinister threat of writer's block can only or best be held at bay by never allowing a/the story to stop, by continuing to spin increasingly intricate permutations and combinations on the original or initial formulation. In a diachronic sense, clearly the later works are, at least potentially, elaborations on the earlier ones (427).

Similarly, Barth, a symbol himself for creative writers and storytellers, depends on old stories and experiences of other people to get over his writer’s block and survive as a story teller.

Writer’s block is also integrated with the literature of exhaustion in *Chimera* through the association of writing with sexual competency. In all three novellas Barth compares writer’s block to sexual impotency as he depicts the process of narration as love making. The relationship between writing and reading, or between telling and
listening, is symbolically presented as a sexual activity in which the writer makes love to the reader and the reader conceives new ideas. In “Dunyazadiad”

[the] Genie declared that in his time and place there were scientists of passions who maintained that language itself, on the one hand, originated in ‘infantile pregenital erotic exuberance, polymorphously perverse,’ and that conscious attention, on the other, was a ‘libidinal hypercathexis’—by which magic phrases they seemed to mean that writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literary ways of making love (24).

This sexual impotency problem is solved when characters become involved in the narrative process, whether telling or listening. Participating in the story and discussing the problem of storytelling simultaneously resolve their ability to tell stories and their sexual impotency. Addressing the problem is the “Key to the Treasure.” If storytelling constitutes as a major problem for the writer, then the best way to get over this crisis is by talking about the problems of writing and narrative. If writers have failed to produce new themes, subjects and techniques, then why not make that very failure the subject of writing?

There are several examples in the text. In “Dunyazadiad” the Genie overcomes his writing block by talking about his failure to write a new novel with Scheherazade and Dunyazade. Shah Zaman, who experienced sexual impotency on his wedding night was able to have sex with his new bride, Dunyazade, when he started to narrate his story to her. Similarly in “Perseid,” Perseus was unable to have sex with Calyxa, the nymph who saved him from death, until he was encouraged to tell her his whole story. Eventually,
Barth insinuates, Perseus becomes a mythic hero and turns into a star among other mythic heroes in the constellation because of his success as a lover/narrator.

According to Barth, the sexual relationship between teller and listener must be consensual and not forced. Bellerophon, desperate to join the pattern of immortal heroes, rapes Melanippe, the Amazon warrior, to prove his competence to himself.

Therefore, unlike Perseus, Bellerophon who spent his life imitating the former failed to become an immortal hero and a star in the constellation because his sexual act was forced rather than a mutual interaction. The relationship patterns of the classic Greek immortal heroes become in Barth’s novel a series of metaphors referring to the mainstream of storytellers. Barth depicts Bellerophon’s forced sex with Melanippe as a fatal flaw that caused his final fall from heaven. As depicted in the novel, at the end of “Bellerophoniad,” Bellerophon faces a ‘writer’s block’ and is unable to finish his narrative. The second Melanippe, his rape victim’s daughter, faces Bellerophon with his disgraceful failure as a storyteller since he was unable to add anything new to his life story. Melanippe addresses Bellerophon:

“...I swear this isn’t immortality: it’s suspended animation. ... I’d sure be pissed off that you never tell what happened to Polyeidus and Philonoe and Anteia and your mother and your kids, especially that ring business when you left home; and you don’t say what the rest of Sibyl’s letter said, or clear up that episode with the Chimera -- whether she was real in the first place and whether she’s back again -- or explain all that fudging thing about your brother’s death, et cetera. You even call it ‘Part One,’ but I don’t see any Part Two. There are nice things in it, sure, a
lot of nice things, once you get past that heavy beginning and move along; but if
your immortality depends on this piece of writing, you're a dead pigeon (294-5).

As depicted in the novel, both love-making and storytelling require good skill,
experience, and mutual consent in order to guarantee their success. It is not enough that
the narrator should be a good storyteller; the listener and reader also ought to have
attentive listening and reading skills to be able to competently interact with the narrator
and conceive new and fruitful ideas. In “Dunyazadiad,” Dunyazade describes
Scheherazade’s and the Genie’s successful interaction in narrative by saying:

Narrative, in short -- and here they were again in full agreement -- was a love
relation, not a rape: its success depended upon the reader’s consent and
cooperation, which she could withhold or any moment withdraw; also upon her
own combination of experience and talent for the enterprise, and the author’s
ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest -- an ability on which his
figurative life hung as surely as Scheherazade’s literal (26).

Indeed, Barth’s self-referentiality is most evident in “Bellerophoniad” as he
interrupts the narrative to explain his decision to write this novella. While writing his
novel Letters, Barth says that he faced a writer’s block which forced him to set that novel
aside. “To the artist himself,” Barth explains, “however minor his talent, imaginative
potency is as crucial to the daily life of his spirit as sexual potency -- to which, in the
male at least, it is an analogue as irresistible as that of Grace, and as dangerous.” Then he
“envisioned a comic novella based on the myth; a companion piece to Perseid” (202).
The comic treatment of Bellerophon enabled Barth to discuss the major difficulties of
narrative and talk about novelists’ failure in storytelling, including his own. He
eventually found that the key to the treasure is the treasure itself. The key to his writer’s block is talking about his imaginative impotency in his fiction. Consequently, Barth found himself “composing as busily as ever” (202-3). In fact, because many modernist and postmodernist novelists, including Barth, felt that to continue to utilize the traditional novel form was a negative even skeptical act; if there was no sure meaning in the world, perhaps it would be appropriate to think of the world as a game. As Matz puts it, “If you could not truly represent anything, why not make that failure your subject? ...And if there were no longer any way to be original, maybe it would be best just to spoof what there already was” (130). This is a vision of modern fiction that Barth, among other postmodern writers, came to realize. “The Literature of Exhaustion” describes ways that postmodern writers can respond to the postmodernist condition, through play, parody, reflexivity and deflation. In this sense postmodern writing would be the fiction that speaks to the failure of modern fiction.

Through writing Barth determines that the solution to this problem is talking or writing about the problem, without worrying about techniques, content, plot, linearity and fragmentation. As he emphasizes in “The Literature of Replenishment,” writers must rise above quarrels between realism and “irrealism,” formalism and “contentism,” pure and committed literature. He believes that fiction existed more than 4500 years ago and it will continue to exist. These ideas and beliefs are dramatized and explored in Chimera, a transformative experiment effective for recovery from writer’s block and inspirational for “The Literature of Replenishment” as an affirmative and corrective essay to its companion “The Literature of Exhaustion.”
Apparently, for an author who is both a literary critic and a novelist, creative metacriticism offers a unique opportunity to work through-- even resolve-- issues of concern. Barth has the ability to step in both fields, exploring and exposing the limitations and potency of each. Indeed, through self-referential criticism Barth was able to prove to himself the inaccuracy and invalidity of some of his critical views. In return, he discovered that fiction cannot survive without theory. As a matter of fact, there is a reciprocal relationship between theory and creative writing. As we have seen in Chimera, it was the discussion of theory that saved the author from his writer’s block. At the same time, it was his involvement in the activity of fiction writing that generated and modified his theoretical views of the novel.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Many creative metacritics have apparently found their fiction a better vehicle to express, examine, and experiment with literary theory than traditional scholarly or theoretical writing, and, in so doing, they have extended the already expansive range of the novel and its capacity for self-referentiality, self-reflection, and engagement in philosophical discussion. This is not to assert, however, that creative metacritics underappreciate the importance and the effectiveness of theoretical non-fictional discourse. Thus many creative metacritics, including writers discussed in this dissertation, make use of scholarly and theoretical discourse to express their ideas and concerns about literature, apparent in the publication of their critical views in essays and books. Academic as well as creative publication in return lends credibility to creative metacritics as they support and, indeed, demonstrate their critical views with the evidence of their own creative writing. In the struggle for interpretive authority, creative metacritics have then a significant advantage over literary critics and literary metacritics as they engage in a practical employment of their critical views. They are in a position to describe literary activities and processes they have experienced first hand instead of theorizing and philosophizing only about other people’s writing experience.

The creative writers discussed in this dissertation have made significant contributions to literary theory, often by raising questions about the validity, applicability, and universality of existing theories. Creative metacritics contribute to the theory of literature in different ways. Some of these writers’ novels inspire literary
theorists to create new theories and refute others. Just as Saussure prefigured and inspired
the pillars of structuralism, Robbe-Grillet’s narrative style in Jealousy prefigured the
major characteristics of post-structuralist thought. To use Currie’s words (while
commenting on Derrida’s description of James Joyce’s Ulysses) in Postmodern Narrative
Theory, Jealousy “is a monument erected to deconstruction before it ever happened” (57).
In working on the main devices of structuralism, such as the objectivity of fiction, the
scientificity of language, and the unified relationship between the sign and the signifier,
Robbe-Grillet insinuated the insufficiency of structuralism in interpreting fiction. Robbe-
Grillet’s narrative treatment of gaps in structuralist thought has led critics, whether
opponents or proponents of structuralism, to consider alternative ways of viewing literary
texts. The limitation of structuralist techniques in demystifying Jealousy fosters a
poststructuralist reading that reveals the uncertainty and unpredictability of language in
literary texts. It can be argued that theory is construed in Jealousy merely through our
reading and understanding of it, and that the novel itself does not address structuralism
per se. However, Robbe-Grillet (who acts as a metacritic by commenting on his novel in
For a New Novel) discusses the major gaps in structuralism. As discussed in the second
chapter of this dissertation, Robbe-Grillet’s views of the relationship between the
signified and the signifier, realism, and the subjectivity of fictional texts predate and
prefigure the basic principles of post-structuralism. Robbe-Grillet (who can be considered
as one of the pioneers in creative metacriticism) covertly employs theory in his novel
encouraging by that other creative metacritics to take a more confrontational stance in
discussing literary and critical theory in their novels such Calvino and Barth.
Another type of creative metacritic intends to work with theorists to examine the possibility of applying their theories about literature in literary texts. In so doing some come to believe that their fiction is richer than theorists’ descriptions. In “Philosophy and Literature,” Italo Calvino introduces the writer-philosopher who believes that literature is self-sufficient and outflanks the academically privileged position of philosophy. Calvino discusses the traditional relationship between the philosopher and the writer and contends that, in effect, the philosopher sets the rules and the creative writer applies rules and ideas in his or her work. Calvino finds that once rules are put into practice, the writer learns that in creative practice philosophical understandings seem different, perhaps richer and more complete, than the philosopher’s prior description. According to Calvino, as the creative writer dramatizes theory, he or she reveals potential limitations and faults in the theory itself (45). We have seen how in If on a winter’s night a traveler, Calvino works with the notion of “the Death of the Author” and elaborates reader-oriented theories to come up with a more complete equation for the source of meaning than the simple replacement of the reader by the author or vice versa.

The third kind is the metacritic who self-consciously addresses existing theory and uses its techniques to support his philosophy concerning providing meaning and ascertaining truth in fiction. For example, Tim O’Brien’s contribution to the field of metacriticism and narrative is that he explores the role that narratology plays to interpret fiction. O’Brien does not critique narrative theory per se, but demonstrates how fiction writers use this theory to manipulate the text in order to obscure the reader’s ability to obtain meaning and find truth. Indeed O’Brien engages with literary theory in In the Lake of the Woods as he emphasizes that although narratology offers ways to understand the
act of interpretation, the theory itself does not offer a satisfactory interpretation of fictional texts. In other words, O’Brien implicitly criticizes other literary theories that apply the techniques provided by narratologists in order to find meaning and truth.

A fourth kind of creative metacritic works with his own critical views and uses his fiction to either prove or refute his theories. John Barth’s self-referentiality in *Chimera* conflates two metacritical activities. After he worked on his critical views concerning narrative techniques and the ability of the novel to survive in a postmodern era as discussed in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” in his creative work Barth manages to illustrate some of his views, though he discovered, at the same time, that other views no longer made sense. Treating these techniques in his metafiction, Barth was inspired to write a corrective essay. In “The Literature of Replenishment,” Barth contends that writers, including himself, in 1966/67

scarcely had the term *postmodernism* in its current literary-critical usage … but a number of [them], in quite different ways and varying combinations of intuitive response and conscious deliberation, were already well into the working out, not of the next-best thing after modernism, but of the best next thing: what is gropingly now called postmodern fiction; what [he hopes] might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment (206).

All four novelists overtly and/or covertly assert the right to participate in the interpretation of their fiction, and in the discourse about how fiction itself should be understood. Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* and Barth’s *Chimera* are explicit examples of the writers experimentation with the role of the author in fiction. Calvino, for example, personifies the image of the author through the character Silas Flannery and
allows him to express his concerns about the writing and reading activities. Barth personifies himself through the character of Bray, who wrote Barth's actual novels, and also through characters who resemble him in age, nationality or physical appearance. As writers and metacritics, all of the authors under examination are aware of the significant role academic critics play in enriching the understanding of literary texts. However, they reject minimizing their role as writers and creators of these texts. As is apparent in the discussion of the novels in this dissertation, creative metacritics comment on their own novels and explain their intention in writing their texts in critical essays and interviews. In *Jealousy*, for example, the narrator's identity is specifically demystified by the author himself. It is only through Robbe-Grillet's own words in his critical book, *For a New Novel*, that the reader can recognize the narrator as the husband. When O'Brien was asked in an interview whether his novel is about war, he claims that contrary to what many believe, *In the Lake of The Woods* is about love. Of course, as readers we are not obliged to take these novelists' claims for granted, but the explanations they offer indicate their insistence in being both literary producers and interpreters.

Without doubt, these creative metacritics' contribution to the novel is not less important than their contribution to literary theory. By dramatizing theory and philosophy in their fiction, they play a significant role in developing and enriching the novel genre. In fact, the metacritical novel benefited from the big progress the metafictive novel made in modern literature since it paved the way for the latter to develop and expand. The metafictive novel, as Currie puts it in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, has contributed "in rejecting conventions of realism, traditional narrative forms, principles of unity and transparent representational language for techniques of alienation, obtrusive intertextual
reference, multiple view points, principles of unity borrowed from myth and music, and a more demanding, opaque, poeticized language" (55). However, the metacritical novel takes a different role than the metafictive novel which its major purpose was to stand against the accusations of the death of the novel genre. The metacritical novel does more than tell a tale, engage the reader in the events of the story, or even explore the relationship between fiction and realism (as in the case with the metafictive novel). As a matter of fact it has become a rich source of theory as it informs readers not only how to read fiction, but also how to understand literary theory. It can be said that creative metacriticism attempts to help readers read and understand fiction by discussing literary theories in these texts and explain how fiction can be read. For example, Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* offers various ways of reading novels as it also attempts to explain important critical views such as the death of the author. And also in *Chimera*, Barth overtly explains his obsession with mythology, discusses the different stages that the novel has gone through, and offers several solutions to overcome the difficulty of writing.

Because creative metacritics are experts in literary theory and in fiction writing, they manage to reveal the importance of the novel by emphasizing and pointing out various narrative techniques. For example, O’Brien’s knowledge of narrative theory and his mastery in embodying this knowledge brought *In the Lake of the Woods* to a highly sophisticated and aesthetic level that gained the admiration of many readers. Indeed, O’Brien’s ability to philosophize about truth and humans’ need for knowledge in a realistic manner gives the novel a profound impact.
Barth’s self-referentiality helped him better understand and explain his own theory about the novel and postmodernism. In his experimental novel, Barth explored fiction and experimented with the various critical views he discussed in his theoretical writings. As a matter of fact Barth’s self-criticism managed to save his literary career as a novelist. As explained in Chapter V, his discussion of the characteristics of the modern novel made him understand the difficulties of narrative and get over his writer’s block.

If, perhaps, their stances against the plurality of theory in dealing with literary texts might be considered “defensive,” the creative metacritics’ desire to assert their interpretive authority in their own fiction is both an intellectual and artistic objective and an expression of their pleasure in writing and interpretation. A reader of If on a winter’s night a traveler, for example can well imagine Calvino’s enjoyment in playing with the reader and the act of reading itself. O’Brien also expresses his joy in writing. In an interview with Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery, he says “I feel liberated by a sense of space when I’m writing” (276). Indeed, Robbe-Grillet, Calvino, O’Brien, and Barth mastered the skill of narration and achieved the best of the two worlds, creativity and criticism.

There are many creative metacritics beyond those analyzed in this dissertation. For instance, two British creative writers who excel in their engagement with literary theory in their novels. David Lodge who, like Barth, experiments with his own critical views in his fiction. Lodge’s Home Truths reflects his ideas about the intention of the author and the impact that literary critics and reviewers have on the creative writer’s career. He explores the growing tension in the relationship between these critics and creative writers that results from the latter’s contempt for and dissatisfaction with the
former’s subjective views and ethics. And in his recent novel, *Thinks...*, Lodge examines critical views on the writer’s consciousness that he discusses in his earlier book *The Consciousness and the Novel*. Jeannette Winterson also imports theory into fiction in interesting ways. In her controversial novel, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, Winterson deconstructs religious texts and opens other possibilities for interpretations to these texts as deconstruction critics deconstruct literary texts.

Within the fields of fiction and criticism creative metacriticism demonstrates new roles that novelists play in fiction writing. The role of fiction writers has changed from imaginatively presenting experience and emotions to responding to, discussing, and developing theory and criticism. Creative writers have become more subjective then ever in the sense that they have become involved in their fiction, revealing their intentions and elaborating on the meaning of their texts. Before the emergence of creative metacriticism, novelists were careful to maintain distance between themselves and the personas that inhabit their fiction. Currently, an increasing number of creative writers have begun to expose their identities, ideologies, and philosophies in their own work. Instead of disguising their identities behind fictional characters, these creative metacritics reveal themselves and demand a place for themselves in the novels they create. Creative metacritics are still reluctant to completely expose their identities in the fiction they create. For instance Barth creates a character in *Chimera* named Bray who writes the same novels that Barth wrote and lives in America. However, this reluctance may not last long. The future of the met critical novel may include creative metacritics who introduce themselves more openly while discussing theory in fiction. In fact, more contemporary creative writers start to demand to be recognized in their fiction. For example, as
discussed in the “Introduction,” David Lodge asserts his presence in the novels he writes. The increasingly overt involvement of the writer in literary texts will lead to a more open engagement with the reader. This articulation of the necessity of both reader and author in the interpretive activity has not been a focus for literary critics, but is a topic I am considering as a future project.

Since the number of fiction readers exceeds the readers of theory, creative metacritical texts may emerge as an important source of literary theory and criticism, and many readers may find fiction a more accessible source for their theoretical education. Perhaps, creative metacriticism represents the new generation of the novel succeeding the metafictive novel and might gain a significant place in literary criticism, as well. This kind of fiction places demands on the reader, and fosters reading of a professional kind. Readers of the metacritical novel will benefit from some knowledge of literary theory and different critical and literary trends in order to better comprehend this type of fiction.


Keller, John and Server, Albert. Translator’s Introduction Don Quixote. By Alonso


