

Emplotment, Ideology, And the Transatlantic Metaphor in Colum McCann's Transatlantic

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Abstract: This article examines Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* through the theoretical frameworks of Fredric Jameson and Hayden White, focusing on how historical narrative is constructed, ideologically coded, and symbolically charged within a postmodern literary context. By applying Jameson's model of the three interpretive horizons, historical, social, and political, the study explores the novel's fragmentary structure, the role of ideological subtexts, and the symbolic function of narrative form. The analysis demonstrates how McCann's depiction of real and fictional figures across different time periods generates a transhistorical dialogue, in which the metaphor of the "transatlantic" serves as a narrative and conceptual connector. White's theories of emplotment and tropology further reveal how historical events are aestheticized and reframed within fictional discourse. Ultimately, the article argues that *TransAtlantic* enacts a complex negotiation between history and fiction, offering a multilayered reflection on memory, identity, and the representational challenges of narrating the past.

Keywords: Historical narrative, emplotment, postmodern historiography, ideology, symbolic act, transatlantic metaphor, memory and fiction.

Introduction: This article examines *TransAtlantic* through the theoretical frameworks of Fredric Jameson and Hayden White, focusing on the novel's narrative construction, ideological subtext, and symbolic dimensions. By applying Jameson's model of the three interpretive horizons: historical, social, and political, we seek to reveal how McCann structures historical meaning and engages in what Jameson terms a "symbolic act." White's typology of emplotments and tropes further assists in analyzing how historical events are narrativized and aesthetically reframed within the novel. Central to our analysis is the metaphor of the "transatlantic" itself, not only as a geographical connector but as a narrative and conceptual device that underpins the novel's logic of continuity and rupture. Through this theoretical lens, the article demonstrates how *TransAtlantic* functions as a multilayered narrative in which history is not merely depicted but mediated, reconstructed, and symbolically recharged. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the novel's engagement with memory, identity, and historical consciousness, while also situating it within

broader debates about the role of fiction in representing the past.

METHOD

The novel *TransAtlantic* by American writer Colum McCann, published in 2013, received wide acclaim from literary critics and readers alike, thanks to its complexity, deep symbolic meaning, and the intertwining of historical context with personal experiences. Fragmentary in its narrative structure, the novel is composed of three parts and spans the period from 1845 to 2012. It presents, in a non-linear and fragmented fashion, historical events such as the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Great Famine in Ireland (1845–1852), the transatlantic flight of Alcock and Brown (1919), Frederick Douglass's journey to Ireland (1845–1846), the Northern Ireland conflict, and the Belfast Agreement (1998). Alongside these, McCann creates fictional characters such as Lily Duggan, her daughter Emily, granddaughter Lottie, and great-granddaughter Hannah, who loosely connect these events into a broad transatlantic mosaic. The novel's extensive thematic range invites multiple

interpretations, yet it is our view that its historical and cultural subtext forms the key to decoding the work.

The use of Jameson's and White's theories for interpreting TransAtlantic.

Analyzing the novel through the lens of Fredric Jameson's and Hayden White's theories requires a detailed interpretation of many aspects of the text, including the type of emplotment, the tropes used, and their reading across Jameson's three interpretive horizons. First, it is worth noting that the novel presents several narrative lines, particularly three involving historical figures, which are not provided in chronological order and appear disconnected, along with the narratives of three fictional women who indirectly weave the novel into a unified transatlantic tapestry. In our view, this form of narration, when examined through Jameson's historical horizon, focused on genre, style, and structure, reflects the novel's broad thematic scope. In *TransAtlantic*, the reader encounters various issues through specific characters: for example, the problem of migration and overcoming hardship is explored through the stories of Lily and her children, as well as George Mitchell; the theme of freedom and hope for a new life is represented in the figure of Frederick Douglass; life transitions and their impact on the individual are depicted through Alcock and Brown.

However, it is the concept of the "transatlantic" itself, we argue, that serves both as a metaphor unifying the various narrative lines and as a driver of change within the novel. The schematic timeline of the novel reveals that at its center stands the idea of the transatlantic, emphasized by the statement that "the distance was finally torn" [McCann 2013:25]. While interpretation through the historical horizon reveals the structure of the narrative and its influence on the understanding of the novel's themes and ideas, analysis through the social horizon allows us to see how broad issues are conveyed through specific ideologemes, made visible through particular tropes and episodes in the characters' lives. Finally, when viewed through the political horizon, we examine how the archetypal plot, or emplotment, reveals the text of the novel as a symbolic act.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *TransAtlantic* by Colum McCann exemplifies a narrative strategy that resists linear historiography and instead offers a fragmentary, layered representation of the past, where personal and collective histories intersect across temporal and geographic boundaries. Interpreting the novel through Fredric Jameson's three interpretive horizons allows for a deeper understanding of its structural complexity,

ideological resonances, and symbolic function. The historical horizon highlights the formal organization of the narrative and its genre hybridity; the social horizon uncovers the ideologemes embedded in individual stories; and the political horizon situates the novel as a symbolic act that reflects and reconfigures historical consciousness. Hayden White's theory of emplotment and tropes further illuminates how McCann transforms historical facts into narrative forms that carry interpretive and affective weight. The recurring motif of the transatlantic, both as metaphor and narrative axis, serves to bind disparate episodes and figures, while also marking moments of rupture, displacement, and transformation. McCann's fictional women, particularly Lily Duggan and her descendants, operate as connective tissue within the novel's transgenerational structure, embodying both continuity and change. Ultimately, *TransAtlantic* functions not as a chronicle of events but as a meditation on how histories are remembered, transmitted, and reimagined. Its narrative form enacts a critical engagement with memory and historiography, foregrounding the role of literature in shaping the afterlives of historical experience.

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