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SUPREMACY OF SIGNIFIERS IN DEVELOPING UNCONSCIOUS IN 'HAPPY ENDINGS' BY MARGARET ATWOOD: A LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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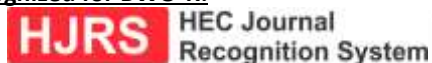
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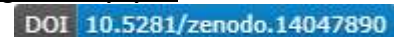
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Abstract

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This research structurally analyses Happy Endings by developing connections within the different sub-plots to show that each plot in isolation is a meaningless entity with no substantial grounds. Through the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, with a particular focus on the symbolic order, it proves that meaning is decentred, and delocalized, and it lies outside the signifiers in the space that is often taken as empty and vacant; by linking one plot to another the research extracts meanings that are imperceptible to common sight. This research studies each subplot as a signifier and demonstrates that the Lacanian Unconscious is a web of understanding that is derived from language, where language itself is an inadequate medium that can be either restricted or expanded as per the number of signifiers. This analysis brings a new perspective to the study of signifiers as a scope of an individual's understanding. Through a close reading of the text, it shows that language is the "big Other" that entraps an individual and turns him/her into a subject. The findings of this study contribute to the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism by stressing the relevance of Lacanian theory in interpreting literary texts that could enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics of lingual control and desire in these texts.

Keywords: Signifiers, Unconscious, Language, Formation, Decentralization.

Introduction

Atwood's short stories, particularly those which are divided into distinct sections, are quite perplexing and disorganized. Many scholars interpret them as rants with no logical head or tail. One such short story is *Happy Endings*, which is about six parallel storylines and about the shades that a conjugal relationship can take in different social, political, and economic contexts. *The short story* was published in Atwood's collection *Murder in the Dark* in 1983. It is a genre-bending fiction that is hard to categorize. The author herself writes about it: "I did not know what sort of creature it was. It was not a poem, a short story, or a prose poem. It was not quite a condensation, a commentary, a questionnaire, and it missed being a parable, a proverb, a paradox. It was a mutation. Writing it gave me a sense of furtive glee, like scribbling anonymously on a wall with no one looking...It was a little disappointing to learn that other people had a name for such aberrations [meta-fiction] and had already made up the rules" (Atwood, 1). The researcher, in this report, brings an unusual perspective to extract meaning out of this entangled web of confusion and contends that this puzzle of a story repetitively uses language to develop subtle links between the sub-plots and derives themes of lingual subjugation, suppression, and control over its users that might be ambiguous and indistinct to common sight. The story starts with two characters: namely John and Mary, and there is no character development. They meet, as is usual for any relationship to take place, and then the author provides different scenarios which the relationship might take; and ultimately ends each scenario with a nihilistic death. There are a total of five characters in the story, which are: John, Mary, Madge, James, and Fred; and they all deal with one another in a way that the end of one sub-plot seems like the start or middle of another. This paper explores the role of language by analyzing the unique structure of

Happy Endings through Lacan's concept of the big Other and Unconscious. The application of the Lacanian symbolic order to this short story represents the underlying lingual dictator that governs the choices, desires, cognitive capacities, and social conduct of a subject. While previous studies have explored the short story through different postmodernist, feminist, and structuralist perspectives; there has been no exploration of how Lacanian theory can be used to deconstruct it and to show the relativity of meaning within it. This research aims to address this gap by studying Language as the big Other that molds the Unconsciousness of an individual by showing the inadequacy of language as a medium to define reality. It finally argues that humans are born within a lingual system and understand the world through the process of signification by deconstructing the short story as such, and it is quite impossible to transcend the boundaries set by language.

Research Questions

1. How are the different sub-stories decentralized and delocalized and what elements help in understanding Lacan's concept of 'unconscious' within the short story *Happy Endings*?
2. How is the arbitrariness of language shown through the plots of the different sub-stories within *Happy Endings* and where can meaning be located?
3. How can the limitations of signifiers lead to dogmatism and vice versa?

Research Objectives

1. To deconstruct the short story *Happy Endings* to prove the decentralization of meaning and to understand the law of the big Other and its internalization in an individual, which is structured like a language and turns an individual into a subject.
2. To show how signifiers construct reality for an 'I'; and how, at the same time, it is an inadequate and unreliable medium that can never grasp the totality of existence.

3.To show how dogmatism limits signifiers to subject the 'self'.

Problem Statement

The central problem this study addresses is the lack of literary investigation into language and its function as the 'big Other' to develop or rather constrict an individual's understanding of *Happy Endings*_ a crucial perspective to understand morality, societies, and regulated conduct of a being.

Significance of the Research

This research is crucial because it provides new insights into the lingual interpretation of *Happy Endings* and shows how language is used to evade yet powerful authority. It offers a unique perspective on psychoanalytic theories that enriches existing literary criticisms and broadens the application of Lacanian theory to early modern texts.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to the short story *Happy Endings*, with a primary focus on textual analysis and deconstruction. The analysis is based on a close reading of the text, particularly on each sub-story within *Happy Endings*. The text is first studied, as per its divisions into sub-stories, in isolation, and then parallels are drawn among them all to develop a proper argument to highlight "language" as the big Other_ the symbolic authority that controls an individual's thought processes, desires, and identities. This approach examines symbolic elements within each sub-story that are repeated subtly throughout the short story and links them with one another to develop their collective significance. This approach relies on textual evidence and relevant scholarly literature to show the lingual power dynamics that shape the desires of an individual.

Literature Review

The short story *Happy Endings* has not been much investigated in isolation, but many scholars have examined it as a collective whole in Atwood's short story collections, namely *Murder in the Dark*, and *Good Bones* and

Simple Murders. However, there are a few scholars who have brought their insight to deconstruct it individually through multiple literary lenses. Both the individualistic and collective approaches to the story are of great significance. [Johnnie Yu \(2019\)](#) in his article 'A Critical Analysis of Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings"', has contrasted the romance in *Happy Endings* against the traditional understanding of it. The clichés of a romance story are deliberately used in a way that makes the story unique with a detached and emotionless narrative. He has also focused on the different styles of narrative techniques adopted by Atwood to satirically analyze it. Yu contends that a third-person narration creates a sense of alienation and detachment from the characters and leaves one in a world devoid of emotions and feelings. It diverts the attention to the plot structure rather than the story itself. [Monfared \(2023\)](#) in his article 'Ergodic Literature and Postmodernist Revisionism in Margaret Atwood's Metafictional Short Story *Happy Endings*' analyzes the hypertextual facets of the story and emphasizes the active role of the reader in determining the outcome of the story. Monfared contends that the second-person narration highlights the active function of the readers as the co-author of the story. It deconstructs the story to show the discursive elements and Atwood's deterministic approach to writing fiction. He further argues that at the core of the short story is the postmodernist revisionist technique, that subverts the conventional approach towards the fairy tale genre and emphasizes the deterministic end of all characters in morbid death. Rebeca Herz's paper analyses the story through a realistic lens by contrasting it with idealistic fantasies. The disconnect between the two is ironically highlighted by the author herself. The lack of imagery and the repetitive diction of this story create a set of empty characters with a "happy" yet mundane and boring life. She criticizes the monotony of life as she says, 'Atwood's short story is an essay on how to not tell a story. She

creates different stories as archetypes of how not to write that type of story' (Herz, 2004). Wilson & Sharon Rose (2005) in their article 'Fiction Flashes: Genre and Intertexts' in Good Bones' deal with Atwood's short story collection Good Bones and Simple Murders (1994) to compensate for the scholarly neglect of her short stories in contrast to her novels. Happy Endings is also a part of this collection. Their research briefly draws parallels between Happy Endings and Murder in the Dark to contend that both have some ideological groundings with all characters ultimately dying at the end. However, their major focus is on those stories that deal with feminist narratives like Gertrude Talks Back. Reingard M. Nischik (2005) in their another article, "Murder in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Inverse Poetics of Intertextual Minuteness" investigates the use of the small-large dichotomy and poetics of inversion in her works, focusing on her comics, literary texts, and prose poems, particularly in the collections "Murder in the Dark" and "Good Bones." The discussion includes Atwood's inversion techniques, intertextuality, and her critique of traditional gender roles; However, Happy Endings is not addressed in this context. Emilie Peneau (2022) in her article 'Don't Ever Ask for the True Story: Versions of Reality and Life Stories in Atwood's Short Fiction' gives a general view of how Atwood's stories challenge ideological discourses and examine the representation of gender, Canadian identity and global issues. She then focuses on the politics of storytelling in Atwood's short stories by analyzing *Giving Birth* and *Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother*; to show that any story, even a "true" story, is always a construction or re-construction. Previous studies have explored different dimensions of Happy Endings, but they have not investigated the short story about its language usage. This research looks deeply into the lingual construction of the story through the application of Lacan's concept of the big Other, Unconsciousness, and the process of

signification to show how an individual becomes subject to language. This approach brings a new way of structurally deconstructing texts and demonstrates the relevance of Lacanian theory in analyzing early modern texts.

Theoretical Framework: Lacan's Symbolic Order and the Process of Signification

This report uses the second register of psyche in Lacan's psychoanalysis which is symbolic Order. The focus is on the concepts of signifier and signified, the process of signification, unconscious, the big other; and how all of these create this intricate web of meaning outside the text. The arrival of the symbolic father breaks the union of the infant-mother relationship, leaving a lack of phallus in the infant. It marks the start of symbolic order and the chain of signification. The displaced desire of the child will now divert itself from the desired parent with whom the sexual relationship is considered a social taboo and will find another socially acceptable substitute for it. Hence the desire or *Object petit* will slide in between different signified. For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language. The way a person uses a euphemism for negative terms or uses metaphor and metonymy, Lacan uses unconscious. It is an internalized system governing and replacing socially unacceptable things with acceptable things. The fear of the symbolic father or the big Other commences the process of signification as the major thesis of Lacan states: "Unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (Homer, 2005, 56). The big Other is the language in which an individual is born. The internalization of the law, authority, or the big other starts as soon as a person is born, and gradually it turns the individual into a subject as "Unconscious is a process of signification that is beyond our control; it is the language that speaks through us rather than the language we speak" (Homer, 2005, 56).

Discussion

The short story itself consists of six plots about different sorts of relationships. These plots or

sub-stories are alphabetically arranged from A-F, whereas none of them end happily. The six sub-stories within *Happy Endings* are divided into concrete sections with alphabetical titles. However, they are all intricately connected and provide back-and-forth information to each story. The satirical title of the short story *Happing Endings* proves to be a paradox throughout the different sub-stories within the short story. The title itself is an oxymoron with both words negating one another. The story starts with a short three-line introduction where the reader is made to feel autonomous in carving out the characters' destinies rather than giving him/her readymade stories. The reader is baffled and confused and is made to feel like a co-author, a god, and a map maker, simultaneously. The introductory lines are as follows.

"John and Mary meet.

What happens next?

If you want a happy ending, try A."(Atwood, 1983, 29).

The first sub-story titled A propagates the story started in the introduction and serves as a prototype for the rest of the sub-stories. It tells the mundane and trivial love story of John and Mary meeting, marrying, procreating, and dying. It is a linear road from point *a* to point *b* that starts with the surety of a job, followed by sex, and then by hobbies. The author uses the words "*Stimulating and challenging*" (Atwood, 1983, 29) three times in this one-paragraph story concerning jobs, sex, and hobbies. Also, a house, real estate, a job, and children are mentioned in connection with marriage. The story ends with both dying. Throughout this story, there is not even a glimpse of happiness or love; and the author's reference in the introduction to this story suggests that happiness lies not in life but in death. The second sub-story titled *B* starts with a feministic touch "*Mary falls in love with John*" (Atwood, 1983, 29), as a woman's name precedes a man. Story A mentions marriage without love, whereas Story B mentions one-

sided love without marriage. John does not love Mary and rather uses her only for sexual gratification; whereas Mary to make him marry her treats him like his son. The characters' names are the same as in sub-story A but here the initials M and J subtly allude to the biblical figures of the virgin 'Mary' and her son 'Jesus'. The way she does the dishes, and the cleaning, tidies herself up, wears makeup, and initiates sexual contact shows desperate unrequited love. Cooking seems to be her weapon or the bait for John. Like a mother, she wants to make John dependent upon her for everything, particularly for food and sex. He visits her twice a week and Mary thinks that "*Inside John is another John, who is much nicer*"(29). At the end of this sub-story, John takes another woman named Madge to a restaurant, marries her and everything continues as in story A; meanwhile, Mary kills herself. Madge's initial letter, i.e. 'M' is again the same as Mary, Mother, Merry, and Marriage. John as the son (of Mary) Jesus is looking for an acceptable version or substitute for his mother Mary to re-enact the Lacanian imaginary dyadic union or imaginary marriage with his mother. The third story titled C is about the story of two couples: John and Madge, Mary and James. John is middle-aged, married, settled, and has a job, two children, and a house: exactly like plot A. Again, the words "*Stimulating and challenging*" (Atwood, 1983, 30) are repeated for the hobbies of the married couple. John has an affair with a twenty-two-year-old Mary, who is in love with James. Mary's sexual relationship with John, who is double her age, shows the Electra complex. Also, Mary's desire for John is again a search to find a socially accepted substitute for her sexual desires toward her father. The initials of John and James are like that of Jesus, who is commonly known as the Father. At the end of the story, John walks in on Mary and James having sex; kills them both, and commits suicide. This story is in complete contrast with the previous one; as it shows the drastic differences between a boy having an

affair with two girls, as in Story B, with the cheated upon girl committing suicide in hopes of being saved, whereas in Story C, a girl having affair with two men ending up being murdered. Madge is left alone and after some time she marries Fred whose initials are again the same as that of Father, and everything happens as in story A. The fourth story titled D is about a married couple, Madge and Fred, with a charming house and real estate. The fifth story titled E is about how Fred "dies of a bad heart" (Atwood, 1983, 31), and Madge opens a charity or develops cancer or is left with the watching birds. The reader is at liberty to choose whichever end he/she likes. The sixth and last story titled F is about John as a revolutionary and Mary as a spy agent. Here, the author is overwhelmed by nihilism and existentialism as she says; "The only authentic ending is the one provided here: John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die." (Atwood, 1983, 32). In all these stories no character is satisfied and content with anything and everything, particularly with their partners. It shows the perpetual quest for the lost phallus and the *Objet Petit* that was never there in the first place.

Structuralism in *Happy Endings*

It is impossible to read each plot in isolation as the repetition of the characters' names, words, relations, and other things such as children and houses interlinks them all. Applying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to *Happy Endings*, we take each sub-story as a different signifier in the chain of signification. Each story such as A, B, C, D, E, and F, are different versions of the same thing which is marriage, relationships, and other social concepts. They are all signifiers with their signified (plots). For instance, A is a signifier that signifies the plot explained in that section, and the same goes for B, C, D, E, and F. However, according to Lacan, the signifier is preferred over the signified; and what a signifier refers to is not a signified but to another signifier, which leads to another signifier, and the chain goes on. The subject is

caught in a continual process of understanding the world through different signifiers. None of the plots in this chain, within the short story, consist of meaning but each rather insists on a meaning as it presses forward to the next signifier while building on the previous one. Meaning is de-centered and not fixed; "there is a continuous sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Homer 56). Similarly, no sub-story can be understood in isolation; they are all intricately linked with one another and the overall story is only understood in the links between these stories. The meaning is not fixed within the concrete sections designated as A, B, C, D, E, and F; rather it lies in the chain that connects one story with the other through the repetitive style of writing. Meaning is relational and differential rather than absolute. At the end of *Happy Endings*, the author, while talking about endings and beginnings, writes; "*So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between*" (Atwood 32). It is the stretch in between where meaning lies rather than the beginning or the ending. She ends her story with the following lines: "*That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.... Now try How and Why*"(32). Reading each story in isolation is rather boring because they are more of a plot than a story and hence meaningless. It is like a signifier referring to an arbitrary signified in a place of isolation or absolutism. For instance, each sub-story is a plot that needs a lot of details to become sensible, develop interest, and become meaningful to stand in isolation; without the details, each story is a dependent and incomplete entity. It highlights the arbitrariness of language itself where 'A what' will only lead to an object with which it has no real and logical connection but is just a product of convention. It is the 'How and why' that fills in the details and creates meaning. It links the stories with one another and makes each small

concept or idea understandable. For example, 'a what' takes us to a word like a table, which is a sign that refers to an object in the physical world. The word table has no connection with the object it signifies; the connection is just a conventional construct. However, when its use and construction are studied and understood against other pieces of furniture; only then can the word table be conceptualized. It is the 'why' and 'how' that simultaneously relates it to the group of furniture and differentiates it from other members of the same group.

Unconscious is Structured Like a Language

Building on Lacanian analysis, an infant born into a language ultimately becomes its subject. Now let's understand his main thesis that 'Unconscious is structured like a language' (Homer, 2005, 56) through *Happy Endings*. Suppose an infant is born where all these plots, mentioned in *Happy Endings*, are happening simultaneously. The infant is exposed to them but from a third-person point of view. This infant grows up seeing the sub-stories develop chronologically as told in the plots. He watches them all, studies them, and internalizes everything unconsciously; but all this happens at a distance. The infant is an unseen spectator and all he can only do is to observe. The infant, to understand the world that it is born into, will utilize the same strategy adopted by adults to understand a word. For instance, the word chair is understood against a chain of signifiers, which are: sofa, bench, couch, seat, etc. The chain of synonyms and antonyms helps the subject conceptualize the chair. Likewise, an infant would relate all these plots and develop an understanding of the world as unconsciousness is structured like a language and it is his/her entrance point into the discourse of the Other. For instance, through the relational analysis of these six plots, the infant would come to understand marriage as a thing that happens between a man and a woman. He can never think of a relationship that might exist between the same gender because homosexuality will be an alien concept

to him. He would come to realize that there are some mandatory requisites for a marriage to take place, which are a job, a relation between a man and a woman, and a house, as per plots A, C, and D. An infant would understand that loyalty and love are the idealized forms of relationships, which are elusive dreams in the physical world. On the contrary, for two people to live with one another till the very end, is as boring as it sounds in plots A, D, and E. The infant would conclude that loyalty and love are perhaps ephemeral and hence are not worth pursuing. He would understand love and marriage as distinct things and that to have an extramarital affair one must be as discreet as John in plot C. He will also learn how a woman having affairs with two men ends up and how a man having an affair with two women ends up as in plots B and C. An infant would understand that the world is not equal, and man has the upper hand. He would also understand the act of suicide as a cry for help as in plot B, and would understand the act of murdering as a form of insecurity on the part of John in plot C. He would understand the role of pity and materialism in attaining physical validation and financial security in a relationship; as in plot C, where Mary does not love John, however, the relation sustains on Mary pitying John and John being a settled man for Mary to ultimately rely on if the libertine James refuses to marry her. He would understand Nihilism by watching each couple going through the same cycle and all couples dying unhappily at the end of each plot. Hence, meaning will be created in the space between these different signifiers and will be accepted as the absolute reality. All these little details will be absorbed in the psyche of the infant, which Lacan termed as unconscious, without him even knowing it, and thinking beyond these available scenarios will be completely impossible. These available sets of plots will ultimately form the models of living, the accepted social behavior, the social law or norm. These plots will eventually become the choices among which the infant

must choose one or a combination of them all but going beyond it will always be a prohibition, a sin, a deviancy, or a tabooed act.

Signifier Over Signified

The Lacanian unconscious is the discourse of the Other_ the law of the Other that arrests an infant, molds him according to the norm of society, and ultimately turns him into a subject. Through introjection of the available signifiers, an infant would only become a copy of what he sees or observes. After years of exposure to these six plots, the infant would stop questioning the other forms of plots that might exist and accept the limited version as the ultimate reality. Without the details, i.e. the 'how' and 'why', an infant can only develop a two-dimensional understanding that can only render him a judgemental intolerant freak who thinks in binary rather than being open to embracing the spectrum of possibilities. An infant, in the end, has no option but to become a puppet whose thinking and moralistic capacities are only dictated by the unconscious or the internalized law of the Other. These Lacanian signifiers of meaning can be extended to any field of cognition. For instance, if a group of people is only taught one sort of national history as issued by the government of that country, then they would have no option but to accept it as the absolute signifier of history and be subjected to it. However, if they happen upon other versions of national history as recorded by non-governmental entities, by outsiders, by rebels, or by the group considered antagonist by the government; only then through cross-sectional examination of all these different signifiers can they be reached at the impartial and unbiased narrative of history. The number of signifiers a subject is exposed to is proportional to his critical abilities. Hence, the limited the chain of signifiers the more conservative, ill-informed, easily subjected, biased, and extremist the society will be the more diverse the chain of signifiers the more tolerant, open-minded, and well-informed the people will be. Diversity is the only way to

transcend the Lacanian unconscious or to expand it at least; otherwise, if all a subject has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Hence, signifiers are always preferred over signified as life lies in the grey and not in black and white.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the research question: How are the different sub-stories decentralized and delocalized and what elements help in understanding Lacan's concept of 'unconscious' within the short story *Happy Endings?* *The findings of this research show the centrality of the story through Lacan's psychoanalytic approach to language and by studying each subplot as a signifier.* It proves that the Lacanian unconscious is structured like a language by establishing a chain of signification within the different plots such as A, B, C, D, E, and F, in the short story. The meaningful link of connectivity between the plots shows that meaning lies outside the text. The repetitive phrases like 'Fall in love', 'Stimulating and challenging', and names like 'John' and 'Mary' were the elements that interconnected the otherwise indistinct plots and helped in understanding language as the big Other and the Lacanian Unconscious. The second question that it addresses is: How is the arbitrariness of language shown through the plots of the different sub-stories within *Happy Endings* and where can meaning be located?'. The findings show that meaning is relational and differential rather than centered. It is impossible to understand a word in isolation; similarly, it is impossible to understand each plot in isolation. The arbitrariness of language is shown through a separate analysis of each plot in isolation where the analysis fails to extract meaning. It is only by relating one plot with another that meaning is located within the chain of lingual relativity. The third question that it addresses is: How can the limitations of signifiers lead to dogmatism and vice versa? The findings show that language is an inadequate medium that does not define

reality and so is the Lacanian unconscious because an 'I' can never come across all the signifiers that the world has to offer let alone think about the infinite signifiers that are yet to be discovered and those which are beyond symbolism. Reality is an abstract phenomenon that can never be pinned down in absolute terms according to a certain discourse; and if it is done then an 'I', a society, a nation, a country will only become dogmatic, extremist, violent, and intolerant. Reality and truth can only be understood in relative terms rather than in absolute forms. Consequently, the more the signifiers a subject is exposed to the more easily he can transcend the boundaries of the limited unconscious and the discourse of the Other.

Recommendations

The concept of the "big Other" through lingual analysis of texts is an area that needs deep investigation to reveal the role of symbolic authority over an individual's freedom. Future researchers could further explore how the Lacanian Unconscious can be studied like a web through texts that are directly or indirectly divided into different sections by the author, for instance in some short stories by Margaret Atwood like *Rap Fantasies*, *Bread*, *The Page*, and *My Life as a Bat*. A comparative analysis of such texts would broaden the scope of literary criticism. Additionally, scholars might examine how other theoretical frameworks related to power and authority like Althusser's concept of interpellation can interact with Lacan's concept to develop a comprehensive understanding.

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