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Brittany R. Raymond
University of New Mexico, brintraymond@unm.edu

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The Marriage of Mimesis and Diegesis in *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith’s literary masterpiece, *White Teeth*, employs a yin-yang relationship between Mimesis and Diegesis, shifting the style of narration as Smith skillfully maneuvers between the past and present. As the novel is unfolding, two distinctive writing styles complement each other; we are given both brief summaries and long play-by-play descriptions of the plot, depending on the scene. Especially as the story reaches its climax with Irie, Magid and Millat, Smith begins to interchange the styles more frequently, weaving them together in the same scenes. These two literary styles are grounded in Structuralist theory, which focuses on the function of the language itself. Structuralists suggest that form and content are endlessly connected, and that there is fluidity in writing. Smith demonstrates these functions of structuralism throughout *White Teeth*, embracing the fluidity of speech, and weaving seamlessly between Mimesis and Diegesis. Through the lens of Structuralism, Smith’s novel is focused and intentionally written; her style can be clearly perceived to serve her purpose.

Authors implement two styles in narrating a story, which serve dramatically different functions. The identification of these styles dates to the early 400s BCE, in ancient Greece, the work of Plato’s research (Berger 168). Mimesis, the term used to define writing to “show” the story, has been elevated as the preferred style of storytelling, as it allows room for reader interpretation (Barry 14). However, the less-common style, Diegesis, the act of “telling” the story (Barry 14), serves a powerful function, as well. Diegesis limits the reader’s interpretation,
providing very specific, limiting detail through the assertion of the story’s content (Barry 15). Not surprisingly, there are few resources surrounding the use of Diegesis available, partially due to the lack of a coherent, universally agreed upon definition of the term (Bunia 679). Smith is unique in the marriage of the styles, creating an unpredictable pattern of detailed scenes and broad, overarching scenes. Inarguably, the combination serves a broad function in *White Teeth*, giving the reader a false sense of power over the story, then promptly yanking the power back from the reader.

Structuralism delves into an examination of the elements of language, focusing on the specific words selected (Klages 31). In *White Teeth*, each word exists for a reason and occurs in a specific place to serve a specific purpose. Smith carefully weaves her tale, reintroducing common threads frequently, and making minor alterations to her wording choice. Structuralist Theory limits the analysis process, forcing readers to confine their interpretations to what the author provides, which serves as a defense of the implementation of Diegesis. Outside interpretations and information are not welcomed in Structuralist Theory (Klages 47-48), nor in the interpretation of Diegesis. Through Structuralism, we are given a confined set of information, and set aside our biases. In *White Teeth*, we are asked to understand exactly what Smith gives us; we must set aside our own ideas of why Irie, Millat and Magid behave as they do. Their actions and interactions are not subject to debate; we must only consider why Smith elects to tell us these details and scenarios. In reading *White Teeth*, we consider word choice, narrative style, and the story, as we understand it; however, we refrain from speculating on events the narrator does not explicitly detail.

Key to the Structuralist Theory is the idea that language speaks us, rather than humans wielding language (Klages 49; Deumert 12). Language is something that already exists, we
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simply manipulate it to tell a story. Zadie Smith cleverly uses language to tell a complex story, in a style most authors could never master, nor manipulate as complexly. However, it is important to note that the constraints of the English language limit Smith. While she inarguably demonstrates her writing genius, she is not redefining the language—she is merely implementing the words to tell her story. Structuralist Theory proposes the idea that the languages we use become a channel for our purposes.

Finally, Structuralist Theory suggests that there is “no such thing as objectivity” (Klages 51). In the analysis of literature, we often embrace the faulty idea that we can be completely objective. However, our perceptions and beliefs dwell deep within our souls: they influence every idea we form. Structuralist Theory reminds the reader that there will always be a bias in our interpretation, which seems to work against the whole idea of Structuralism. However, this concession is necessary: it draws attention to the human error. Indeed, we must also concede that there is bias included in the way Smith narrates: she could be leaving out information or be intentionally misleading her readers. This anecdote in Structuralist Theory seems to be problematic; however, it grounds the analysis of literature. We must be aware of our biases in interpretation and realize that there is bias in the writing process, as well.

Examining a written work through a specific literary theory can be challenging, as it limits the realm we experience the text through. However, literary theories are also necessary for delving into the intricacies of the message. Zadie Smith’s novel, White Teeth, is rich in stylistic choices, which seem quirky and superfluous. However, in examining the novel through a lens of Structuralism, it becomes obvious that there are no coincidences in the story. Smith’s creative genius cannot be comprehended as an abstract idea; we must limit ourselves to the observation of
the words she sets on the page and weigh the choices she makes in presenting information to her readers.

Mimesis takes a strong role in most literature, carefully detailing the full scene, as though the reader is within the story, able to completely understand the events. Mimesis has given way to film adaptations, which seek to show the story, implementing dramatic and elaborate sets (Berger 131-5). Ana Deumert’s research about Mimesis is extensive and exhaustive. She argues that Mimesis reinforces the creativity of the author or speaker, as they seek to “paint” the world for their audience. Through elaborate description, we make use of allusion through subconscious references to cultural, historical, and traditional icons, and mimic the unfolding of the events (11). Mimesis seeks to put the audience back in the exact moment and offers an immersive experience. If Mimesis is to reach its goal, the reader will infer the intended emotions into a written work, without being expressly told what to feel. In this way, Mimesis presents a sizeable challenge to the artistic style of an author; strong, rich words must be chosen in the telling, but direct commands must be eliminated.

However, Deumert concedes that we all control language in different ways; two witnesses of a crime may tell the story in very different ways (9). Every individual implements the tools of languages differently, reflecting personality and portraying the events through the speaker’s perception. Deumert points out that to a critical ear, even musicians bend the music to fit their own style, without compromising the integrity of the written notes (9). According to Deumert, this is the limitation of Mimesis, as it incorrectly assumes that we all bear the same mental representations for the language we speak. Language is fluid and evolving, according to Deumert (9). A singular word may be completely valid in one circumstance; inappropriate or offensive in another. For example, when discussing animal husbandry, very blunt terms can be
used; if this conversation were migrated to a black-tie event, it would be completely inappropriate; if the word were directed at a person, they become derogatory insults. Deumert also explains that the word “adorable” can be taken as an insult or a compliment, depending on the circumstances, and even the intonation of the speaker (9). Mimesis assumes that the emotional charges of words are universally experienced, despite the reality of human individuality. Further, Mimesis offers challenges in writing; it is difficult to show a tone of voice (11). For this reason, Deumert explains that some authors manipulate the words on the page, implementing varying type fonts, spelling, length, and printing styles, influencing the reader’s reaction through what they see (13-4). Zadie Smith carefully weaves this technique into *White Teeth*, as she manipulates the spelling of “Pande” and “Pandy” throughout the narrative—indirectly likening a war hero to a coward; offsetting and bold facing key thoughts. Through *White Teeth*, Smith inserts emotion through the monosyllabic responses of Millat, as he becomes increasingly extremist in his behaviors.

Mimesis presents the information to the reader as objectively as possible, although attempting to present an overwhelming amount of detail. Responsibility for portraying the truth rests solely on the author (Deumert 16). However, the reader maintains complete authority over the work, according to Deumert, as he or she chooses whether the author is telling the full story and infers his or her own interpretation into the scenario (9; 15-6). Although Mimesis is limited in style, it has the capability to submerge the reader into a new world; giving the reader power to manipulate the story to his or her own purposes (Deumert 9; 16).

Diegesis was elevated as the primary style by Aristotle, who argued that the presentation of truth is not subject to debate (De La Fuente 454). However, Diegesis frequently takes a back seat in the writing of literature, as contemporary authors and literary theorists argue that it is
devoid of artistic style; used primarily in writing of research and for academic purposes (Berger 168-70). Despite the odds stacked against Diegesis, De La Fuente argues that it possesses a powerful position in modern literature and can be implemented stylistically for intentional purposes (453). Diegesis offers a specific representation, removing room for errors in interpretation, as the reader is told exactly how to react to the information (De La Fuente 454).

De La Fuente’s research explores the way Mimesis and Diegesis function in tandem, serving varying purposes. He proposes that Diegesis can reach corners of the narrative, as there are events that can only be described in blunt terms, leaving no room for a reader to form his own opinions (453). De La Fuente also asserts that Diegesis levels the field between author and reader, building an equilibrium in literature. The reader must trust that the author is presenting reality and using accurate words to describe the scenario; however, the reader cannot choose to infuse his own interpretation into the text. De La Fuente explains that Diegesis eliminates emotionally charged speech, replacing it with more concrete terms (454). However, De La Fuente makes an important concession about the dangers of Diegesis, pointing out that advertisers capitalize on the inability of consumers to argue with what they are told to believe (454-5).

Regemius Bunia has also conducted extensive research on Diegesis, and explores the stigma surrounding the style. According to Bunia, Diegesis is largely frowned upon because of its vague nature (679). Bunia argues that authors implement both styles in tandem more than they would like to admit, or even are aware of (680-1). Bunia also challenges the way Diegesis is considered a clean-and-cut topic, saying that there is a great deal of style and technique involved in Diegesis, just as Mimesis (690). Authors using Diegesis are challenged to present reality in blunt terms without making their readers feel “preached” at or told what to think. This challenge
of Diegesis is controversial, as the entire style seeks to tell the readers what is happening; Bunia argues that there are functional styles of Diegesis, which require practice, to avoid distancing the reader by forcing him to accept information he does not appreciate (Bunia). Bunia expresses the challenges surrounding merely “explicitly” telling a story, and why this tends to alienate readers. With this anecdote, Bunia launches into an argument of why it is necessary to merge Mimesis and Diegesis to fully tell a story, without betraying the trust of the readers.

As in most things, there must be balance, as Zadie Smith cleverly illustrates. If White Teeth were narrated solely through Mimesis, the story would feel too abstract, and readers would be challenged to understand the intricacies of the plot. As we embark on the rising action, subsequent climax and sudden falling action and denouement, the story would fall to pieces at our feet; unable to tie up the loose ends. Conversely, if the story were narrated entirely through Diegesis, readers would have very little vested interest in the fates of Irie, Millat and Magid. Diegesis would simply dictate their interactions, leaving the issues shallow and the characters flat. However, Smith implements both styles: she gives her characters depth, and causes readers to connect with them; however, she does not become so entangled in the emotions that she loses touch with the larger narrative and complex plot.

As tensions between twin brothers, Millat and Magid, come to a head, Irie inserts herself into their conflict. While Millat is alone in his room, Irie enters, intending to relay a simple message and make her departure. However, animalistic erotic behaviors occur instead, leaving Millat rueful and Irie ashamed of her body (Smith, 381). This scene is a perfect example of how Smith flips between Mimesis and Diegesis, effectively telling the scene, while leaving her reader with the appropriate inferred emotion. As Millat surveys himself in the mirror, Smith narrates the story through Mimesis, including a description of the mounting tension in his mind. A moment
later, Irie enters, bringing Diegesis with her. “It was natural that [she] should mistake it for … smoldering passion … the result was inevitable” (Smith 380). Smith clearly narrates the unfolding events, keeping the readers’ own interpretations at bay. As readers, we are forbidden from reading the scene as an event premeditated, or for reading that Millat possessed true feelings towards Irie, or that the scene could end in any other way. As Smith concludes the brief scene, she shifts back to Mimesis, detailing Millat’s repentance very carefully. However, she refrains from telling us expressly of the guilt in his mind for his actions; instead, she simply tells us that he feels he is being watched, leaving her readers to infer their own interpretations of why he reacts as he does (Smith 381).

Immediately upon leaving Millat, Irie determines to make Magid second to his brother (Smith 382). This scene reads almost directly opposite to the scene with Millat; Smith dictates exactly why Irie executes her actions. The scene is heavy with Diegesis, and the readers are told what Irie thinks and feels, “in defense of Millat … she wanted to find whoever had damaged him … she wanted to find whoever had made him unable to love her” (Smith 381). Further, Smith dictates, “maliciously determined… [she] made love to him angrily and furiously…” (382). As readers, we are presented with difficult information; it feels as though Smith is stuffing unpleasant realities down our throats. Fortunately, Smith softens the blow of this unpleasant serving of Diegesis, leaving us with a conclusion of the scene narrated through Mimesis: “for a long time they lay in silence together, naked, the autumn light disappearing from the room with every minute that passed,” (Smith 382). As readers, we are given an opportunity to infer our interpretation into this unexpected conclusion to the scene. Although Irie’s previous interaction with Millat was born of sudden passion, it terminates suddenly and regrettably; with Magid, however, the scene initiates out of anger, but concludes on a peaceful note. The final sentence of
the scene leaves the readers with a clever marriage of Mimesis and Diegesis: “Then he gave her a kiss on the forehead that felt like a baptism and she wept like a baby,” (Smith 382). In this one sentence, Smith demonstrates her literary prowess—she dictates the events, choosing not to employ more flowery, descriptive language; yet, she also leaves the reader with an opportunity to make their own meaning of why Irie is so affected by Magid’s kiss. Smith gives indisputable information, but she never leaves her readers feeling as though they have lost control over or touch with the story and characters.

Despite the extensive difference between Mimesis and Diegesis, the two are both necessary in the use of literature. In effective literature, the two styles must be merged into one style. The structure of literature is dependent on the constraints of language; we cannot fully wield language when ignoring one of the primary styles of narration. Zadie Smith illustrates this repeatedly throughout *White Teeth*, giving her readers an overwhelming text that employs Mimesis and Diegesis in tandem. The styles work in tandem; the give-and-take relationship between the styles works together to produce a literary masterpiece. Although there will always be critics of both Mimesis and Diegesis, Smith proves that there is value in implementing both, and that there are ways to bounce between the two artistically and effectively.
Works Cited


