

**In what ways and to what ends do *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi and *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* by James Tiptree manipulate narrative perspective?**

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*'How useless it had been to try and become a singular entity' (Emezi 219)*

*Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi and *The Girl Who Was Plugged In (TGWWPI)* by James Tiptree Jr manipulate and subvert conventions of narrative perspective in literature. Tiptree focalises the story through an omniscient, albeit opinionated future narrator, in part to establish the science fiction genre, and Emezi likewise contributes to the fast-developing genre of post-colonial contemporary fiction through their perspectival destabilisation of the patriarchal and colonial objective first-person narrator. Both authors employ layered narrative voices, albeit to differing ends. The narrative of *Freshwater* is comprised of subjective and overlapping narrators, conveying the multiplicity and unreliability of the protagonist, Ada, alongside more broadly questioning Western conceptions of health or sanity. By contrast, Tiptree uses layered narrative techniques and a 'world-within-a-world' not to bring the reader into the psyche of the story's characters, but rather to distance them from it. As such, a distance from fictional, dystopian world of the story is established, and a critique of its similarities to Tiptree's contemporary society is facilitated through this abstraction. Both authors explore themes of individuality, oppression, and divergent identities within society. Tiptree further uses narrative as a base from which to explore societal progression and consumerism, while Emezi does the same in their exploration of Igbo cosmology and multiplicity.

Both *TGWWPI* and *Freshwater* employ genre specific techniques of narrative focalisation that ultimately distance the reader from any sense of an objective representation of society, thus critiquing society by mirroring its own contradictions. The science-fiction novella *TGWWPI* is framed by a narrator from a dystopian future communicating directly to the reader and attempting to advertise their dystopian reality to them. In *TGWWPI*, the narrator establishes both technological and temporal distance between the reader and fictional world, although at times he connects locations in the book to those of the present day: 'the

whole shebang is five hundred feet underground near what used to be Carbondale, Pa' (Tiptree 48). The geographical coherence connects the world to our own, yet the futuristic and far-fetched technologies of 'holovision' or the 'worldwide carrier field' establish a distance great enough that Tiptree can scrutinise contemporary society without the distorting lens of living within it (44). The narrative focalisation of the novella further contributes to this. A third-person narrator tells P. Burke's story to an imagined receiver from the present day, who is consistently disparaged by the narrator from the future as a 'zombie', 'doubleknit dummy', but also 'dad' (43-4). The latter characterisation speaks to the political bent of the novella, whereby the patriarchal, technoreligious, and consumerist landscape of P. Burke's society is heir to our own. Tiptree characterises the society of *TGWWPI* as one which deifies technology, using it without restraint, and losing sight of humanity in the process. By connecting it to her contemporary society through a narrative intercessor, Tiptree thus confronts her own culture's attitudes toward technology, warning of the potential outcome of glorifying technological progress without clearly defined ends.

*Freshwater* likewise suggests a layered, subjective, and mutually distorting interplay between individual and society, presented through the overtly subjective lens of the ogbanje spirits within Ada. This is linked to its post-colonial contemporary novel genre in its facilitation of a deconstruction of colonial and Western-centric aspects of the novel (particularly those which go unnoticed, such as narration and objectivity). The narrative perspective reflects the exhausting and overwhelming effect of constantly overlapping voices within the self and deconstructs the colonial and patriarchal objective first-person narrator traditional to the genre novel. Emezi thus manipulates narrative perspective so as to engage with the emergent West African contemporary novel tradition. They further contribute to their social critique by deconstructing Western notions of wholeness as contained within a

singularity, instead privileging Igbo concepts of ‘paradoxical identity manifestations’ as layers within the divine and multiple self, rather than fragmentations as Western medicine and culture would perceive it (Ossana 85). Both authors therefore stand in opposition to the perceived injustices of colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist society.

Tiptree demonstrates the hypothetical dystopian progression of contemporary ideological injustices and capitalist societal structures in a fictional near future. In particular, she satirises the impact of commercial broadcasting from the 1930s onwards, which made advertising into a form of entertainment (Donawerth 157). The overwhelmingly fast pace of the narrator’s prose, filled with asides and sudden plot shifts - as though vying to maintain the reader’s attention - serves to disorient both the reader and the fictional recipient of the story. This provides a brief insight into a world and psyche so saturated by advertising that it had to be banned, the narrator perhaps catering towards a severely diminished attention span. He also communicates in advertorial catchphrases that rhetorically promote the unbridled capitalistic growth apparently possible in this future: ‘believe it, zombie. When I say growth, I mean *growth*’ (Tiptree 78). These two aspects of narrative tone strongly resemble the rhetoric of predatory advertising strategies through their intentionally obfuscatory and blindsiding approach to selling a product, whereby the narrator promotes the consumerism of his society to the audience as though it were utopic. Thus, perspectival arrangement facilitates the aspects of genre that prioritise societal critique. Furthermore, the interplay of the individual and the collective is framed in both texts as a dichotomy between authentic human expression and the distorted vision of an oppressive society refracted through the lens of the subjective narrator.

Narrative focalisation can also be explored through the different approaches towards the posthuman by internalised and externalised narrators: Emezi uses multiplicity in narrative

to explore and celebrate notions of the individual ogbanje as connected to complex webs of ‘brothersister’ spirits, while Tiptree condemns through a feminist lens the posthuman ideal as unattainable under Capitalism. *TGWWPI* implicitly distinguishes the ideas of transhumanism from Foucaultian posthumanism and biopower. The former synthesises humanity with technology to individually and socially beneficial ends, whereas the latter involves a renunciation of the human form in lieu of a fully digitised existence, such that capital production is, theoretically, maximised at the expense of subjective human experience: ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production’ (Foucault 141). In the novella, humanity is not synthesised with technology to better life quality, but rather to maximise corporate profit by minimising the contingency that human subjectivity poses to marketing. The most potent example of this is the celebrity model of *TGWWPI*, whereby celebrities are literally brainless, beautiful bodies, whose marketing power is maximised by their biological reduction to vessels for advertising, and who cannot compromise this through controversy because they are literal mouthpieces for the corporations they represent.

Furthermore, the filtering of narrative through a biased proponent of biopower sees P. Burke’s tragic story recounted as a humorous blip in a societal progression towards streamlined ‘capital appreciation’ (Tiptree, 78). The reader inevitably feels a strong empathy for P. Burke, a tragic figure whose fate is near predetermined by her involuntary non-conformity to a shallow society as a result of her deformity. Strongly contrasting this, the narrator reduces her experience to a casually presented anecdote meant only to advertise technological products. This invited the reader to criticise the narrator, facilitating critical engagement with the subtly dystopian future landscape Tiptree creates. Thereby a dialectic tension is created between humanity and hyper-consumerism, where individuals are defined by capital productivity, thus raising questions about the fairness of narrative control in the

hands of those economically benefiting from a system, as opposed to those it excludes. This also encompasses society's annihilation of the individual; Tiptree's perspectival arrangement centres the hyper-individualistic narrator and the zombie reader, both of whom pointedly lack solid characterisation.

Similarly, *Freshwater*'s subjective and sometimes contradictory narrative perspectives, which are ultimately the key to understanding Ada's hybrid identity, have twofold significance. Primarily, they are in service of the novel's trauma narrative; the ramifications of Ada's childhood trauma are expressed as non-linear, shaping the narrative, despite being unseen until the end of the novel. Secondly, they reject Western and Enlightenment ideals of individualism and rationalism. Although Ada could be diagnosed and understood through a Western lens, to do so would continue the cycle of erasing meaningful spiritual traditions in favour of those represented by the impotent figure of Yshwa. Yshwa is a representation of Western Humanist Christianity, who ignores Ada with 'no intention of manifesting' (Emezi 37). This reflects the confused collision in Western society portrayed in the novel: Ada's suffering is ascribed by Westernised figures both to medical issues, and a failure to have faith. Yshwa's nebulous promises of safety, combined with his failure to deliver on these promises, distill Emezi's criticism of Western society into a single figure.

Following on from this, the novel's ending sees Ada accept and celebrate that 'ogbanje are as liminal as possible', and that their identity contains and is contained within 'translucent thousands' (Emezi 225-6). Self-actualisation at the end of the novel does not overcome but rather embraces multiplicity: 'how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity' (Emezi 219). Thus, narrative perspective is filtered through a series of overlapping voices in order to legitimise Ada's experience through the fabric of the book itself, and by extension, radically confront the Eurocentricity of conceptualisations of the

novel as a form, and the human psyche as having to be based in singularity. Rather, Emezi writes to suit the Igbo worldview, reflecting through their use of narration the world as an ‘arena for the interplay of forces’ (Cole and Aniakor 63). This presentation of self actualisation as an acceptance of multiplicity is thus represented in the novel’s own structure, where converging narratives are never unified into a singular voice, such that the reader has to accept conceptual multiplicity themselves.

Both texts engage with concepts of gender performances through varying narrative lenses: *Freshwater* in the context of Ada’s non-human existence, and *TGWWPI* in the context of womanhood as a political category under capitalism. The only spirit in *Freshwater* which never narrates is Saint Vincent, a construction of Ada’s who represents their gender dysphoria rather than being external ‘godspawn’ like the other spirits (123). His emergence is sudden and, though he is of ‘no threat to Asughara’, he becomes ‘a secret buried in the marble’ representing Ada’s mind until they embrace gender nonconformity later in the novel (Emezi 122). Emezi presents Ada’s gender-neutral presentation not as part of a Western queer experience defined by its own cultural narratives, but rather as an outward expression of their inner liminality and divinity. Whilst Ada’s friends question their excitement to wear dresses after breast reduction surgery, saying ‘most people get it done to be more masculine’, the ogbanje spirits maintain that male and female are ‘inaccurate’ descriptors of their liminality, and Ada’s self-fashioning only makes ‘the vessel look a little more like us’ (Emezi, 192-3).

In *TGWWPI*, P. Burke’s lack of input in her own story fittingly represents the commodification of her mind at the expense of her body, this being justified repeatedly by the narrator through language denoting her uselessness to society in her ugliness: she is ‘rotten’, and only has worth once her mind is separated from her ‘big rancid girl body’ and applied to

the avatar Delphi (Tiptree 43, 47). Once connected to Delphi, P. Burke is no longer described in terms of womanhood, but is rather object - 'something called P. Burke', a 'grim carcass' (Tiptree, 54, 55). Her womanhood is thus merely incidental before she works as Delphi, and entirely performative as Delphi, who fully embodies the concept of brainless beauty as the result of an embryo modified to lack a brain, and thus is not a full person. The descriptions of P. Burke mirror the narrator's calling the reader a 'zombie', implying that just as contemporary society is obsolete in the technocratic future, so too is P. Burke's body once connected to Delphi's (Tiptree 43). That valuations of womanhood based on appearance - P. Burke's uselessness due to her deformities, and Delphi's cult following as a celebrity - result in both their deaths, evidences the pervasive and destructive forces of consumerism in the novella's world. In Tiptree's view, posthumanism fails because humans cannot transcend their bodies and exist merely as minds in avatars if the only function of this is to create capital; humans cannot exist as efficient and productive machines. Indeed, P. Burke falling in love with Paul and beginning to engage in non-productive activities sets off the chain reaction leading to her death. The commodification of the female body under capitalism is heavily criticised by Tiptree and satirised most potently in P. Burke and Delphi's job as a celebrity whose fifteen-year-old body convinces consumers to buy any product she is seen using, thus bypassing anti-advertising laws. The impact of this anti-consumerist and anti-patriarchal argument is exacerbated by the misogynist narrator, who refers to Delphi as 'a neat job' and to P. Burke as 'about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*' (Tiptree, 49, 55). Neither is fully a woman - the narrator implies that combined, they form a whole, yet the ending refutes this, with Delphi returning to empty vessel and P. Burke dying. That Delphi is then piloted by an unnamed replacement for P. Burke emphasises that womanhood exists in the novella only as an economic category, whereas for Ada it is possible to reclaim a degree of femininity on

their own terms. Tiptree's own identity as a woman and a lesbian writing under a male pseudonym adds a meaningful layer to this interpretation, where her own success as a science-fiction author was partly predicated on the erasure of her individual identity.

Overall, both Tiptree and Emezi employ a plethora of narrative devices in service of their communication of respective ideas about society, the individual, and gender. Both authors utilise narrative subjectivity to different ends, whereby multiplicity is celebrated in *Freshwater*, and advertorial bias is condemned in *TGWWPI*. Both authors thus incorporate their explorations of complex and clashing notions of subjective experience and objective truth within the structure of the narrative itself. This in turn effectively demonstrates the veracity of their own arguments, as the reader experiences first-hand that which the text explores. Emezi manipulates narrative perspective to convincingly portray Ada's - and, in turn, their own - experiences of multiplicity, whilst also legitimising Igbo ways of seeing. Tiptree, by contrast, employs a single narrator biased towards the dystopian society, so as to convey the pernicious advance of consumerism more effectively and viscerally in her own contemporary society. It is to these radically political - and at times emotionally impactful - ends that narrative perspective is manipulated by both Tiptree and Emezi.

### Works Cited

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