



POSTMODERN HISTORICITY AND CULTURAL THOUGHT PATTERNS IN COLUM MCCANN'S "APEIROGON"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the narrative structure of Colum McCann's Apeirogon (2020) through Fredric Jameson's concept of the historical horizon and Robert B. Kaplan's models of culturally specific rhetorical patterns. The analysis focuses on how parallelism and circularity function both as structural principles and as ethical statements. Ultimately, Apeirogon uses its hybrid, spiral form not only to represent trauma, but also to construct a discursive site where enemies are reimagined as mirrored participants in the same historical and emotional "circle."

Introduction. The novel *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann was published in 2020 and is devoted to the lives of two activists, Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan. In his work, the author, through the images of these characters and their loss, both men lost their daughters as a result of the conflict, reveals the centuries-long confrontation between Palestine and Israel. The style and structure of the novel are highly distinctive.

First, it consists of 1001 chapters, an allusion to the Eastern collection of tales *One Thousand and One Nights*. The length of the chapters varies: some consist of a single word, phrase, sentence, or even a single photograph. Second, the novel lacks traditional plot development. Third, as the author himself notes, the work is a hybrid of fictional narrative, artistic creation, and various documentary elements, such as historical facts, data, and transcripts of the public speeches of Bassam and Rami.

Another unique feature of the novel is the way the narrative is constructed. We see how two plot lines, the line of Bassam and his family, and the line of Rami and his circle, parallel each other to form a spiral whose center is the concept of the "apeirogon," a geometric figure with an infinite number of sides. This image symbolizes the idea that history can be viewed and analyzed from an infinite number of points of view, with each person having their own truth and their own story.

Theoretical framework. We will analyze this narrative form through Fredric Jameson's concept of the historical horizon, which asserts that the structure and style of a work reflect the historical context and the time in which it was created. (Jameson, 63) In this case, we are interested in how the structure of the narration, through such characteristics as fragmentariness, parallelism, and spiral-like form, reflects the postmodern era and the ideological features of the novel.

As we can see, the structure of the novel resembles two spirals that together form a single coherent story. This scheme echoes the cultural model of thinking described by Robert

B. Kaplan in 1966. In his work on teaching English, Kaplan identifies several models of thought depending on the origin and cultural background of foreign-language learners. As a result, based on cultural characteristics, he distinguishes the following models: "English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian." (Kaplan, 15)

Our attention will be focused on analyzing the Semitic and Oriental models of thinking. As Kaplan notes, the Semitic model is characterized by parallelism: the thought in the text does not develop directly but through a series of similar assertions, where something is first negated and then affirmed. The Oriental model, in turn, presents thought indirectly, as if in a circle. The theme is revealed gradually, through hints and comparisons, showing what it is not rather than what it is.

Analysis. The structure of the novel resembles a synthesis of these two models: two parallel lines form a spiral. In our view, this choice of narrative form allowed Colum McCann to come as close as possible to the culture and art of storytelling of the Semitic peoples, both Arabs (Palestinians) and Jews (Israelis). The use of the spiral, where the idea of peace and a kind of plea to end the senseless conflict that only divides, takes away, and destroys, is reinforced by the insertion of various symbols (for example, birds) and real historical figures (Jorge Luis Borges, George Mitchell, Philippe Petit, etc.). This guides the reader toward the author's ideological intention and encourages a deeper understanding of and empathy for the characters in the novel.

One example of such parallelism in the structure is the description of Abir Aramin and Smadar Elhanan. The author reveals in parallel the details of their lives and their personalities, thereby showing how two different, yet at the same time identical, people, living in different parts of the same planet, born to different parents, from different cultures, histories, and value systems, live and die in the same way, have the same goals in life, the same problems and desires.

Parallelism in the description of Smadar and Abir begins with their names. The author devotes separate chapters to the meaning of the girls' names: "Abir. From the ancient Arabic. The perfume. The fragrance of the flower." (McCann, 70) As noted in the novel, the name Abir, translated from ancient Arabic, means "aroma," "fragrance of the flower." In the context of the work, it acquires a profound symbolic meaning. Abir is a symbol of transience: like a spring flower, her life was short, but she managed to bring beauty, tenderness, and vitality into the world of those around her. For Bassam, Abir became precisely such a spring flower: her brief existence filled his life with warmth and fragrance, but like a flower, her life quickly faded. The fragrance of a flower is perceived only for a moment, and then it disappears, leaving behind only memory. Thus, the name Abir becomes a symbol of the fragility of a child's life, tragically cut short by war and violence.

The name Smadar also carries deep symbolic meaning. It comes from ancient Hebrew and is first mentioned in the *Song of Songs*. Smadar means "The grapevine. The opening of the flower," "a blossoming vineyard," "the first bud of the grape," "the beginning of flowering." (McCann, 35) This name embodies youth, tenderness, and fragility, a moment in life when everything is just beginning. Smadar died at the age of 14, in the very prime of her life, like a bud that never had time to fully open. Her name becomes a symbol of a young life tragically cut short.

Parallelism can also be seen in the description of the girls' characters. The author emphasizes that from childhood Abir dreamed of becoming an engineer, for her 10th birthday she asked for a book about Galileo. The novel also notes that Abir was a diligent student. On page 313, McCann reproduces a copy of her report card, from which it is clear that she did very well in all subjects: "She is a model student in all classes." (McCann, 313) As readers, we see that Abir is a disciplined, neat, focused girl with a marked interest in knowledge.

Smadar, in turn, is described by her father as "a bundle of energy." Her parents believed that she would become a doctor or an officer. At age 13 she was just beginning to grow up: she cut her hair short, had her nose pierced, and fell in love for the first time. Smadar's mother, Nurit, accidentally finds a heart drawn in her daughter's notebook, inside which are lines in Hebrew, either a poem or a song. This episode speaks of first love and the beginning of the internal life of a girl just entering adolescence. Like Abir, Smadar did well at school. McCann reproduces her report card, which reflects her strengths and weaknesses. The girl has high marks in Hebrew, literature, and physical education, but low marks in religious studies and mathematics. She is curious, emotional, expressive, unafraid to speak her mind, easily enthused, but sometimes disorganized and easily distracted.

The report cards of Abir and Smadar in the novel do not function as mere background details, but as forms of memory, as evidence of their formation. Both girls, with different characters, interests, and destinies, were on the path to adulthood; both possessed brightness, energy, and aspiration.

Another interesting detail is the game Smadar used to play. The point of the game was to hold her breath for the entire length of the cemetery. Every time they approached it, she would unbuckle her seatbelt, lean forward, tap her father on the shoulder, pinch her nose with her fingers, and start rotating her other arm, urging the car to go faster for as long as she could hold her breath. The game had clear rules: do not breathe until you have passed the place of death. Later Bassam tells Rami that Abir played exactly the same game. This parallel is not accidental. The game is built on the symbolic opposition of breathing, that is, life, and the cemetery as a symbol of death. For a child, this is a simple, comprehensible way of interacting with something that resists rationalization. Death is perceived through a physical gesture, through holding the breath, as a form of self-protection. McCann uses this game not only as a description of character, but also as a form of structural rhyme. He shows that despite cultural, political, and territorial differences, children share similar experiences, similar logic, and a similar perception of the world. This subtle coincidence becomes an important point of contact, a link connecting the two fathers and the two destinies.

Conclusion. The analysis of *Apeirogon* shows that McCann's refusal of linear, teleological storytelling is not merely an aesthetic experiment but a deliberate way of thinking historically and ethically. Read through Jameson's notion of the historical horizon, the spiral structure, two parallel narrative lines that constantly return to key scenes and images, embeds the conflict between Palestine and Israel in a form that foregrounds repetition, return and the impossibility of closure. At the same time, Kaplan's models of Semitic and Oriental rhetoric help illuminate how *Apeirogon* comes stylistically and structurally closer to the narrative logics of the cultures it depicts. Thus, the novel's structure itself becomes a statement: an appeal to recognize in the "other" not an enemy, but a reflection, and to imagine

reconciliation within a narrative form that holds multiple truths in parallel rather than subordinating them to a single dominant line.

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