

## Beyond Literary Boundaries: A Postmodern Analysis of the Cinematographic Adaptation of Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride*

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### **Abstract:**

Postmodernism is the new flanged artistic movement that has turned up; it sought a break from all preceding trends. In literature, the postmodern condition is characterised by a set of assorted devices, which makes it contrasting to all the prior movements. Postmodern fiction as well witnessed an abundance of alterations on all levels, from metafiction and intertextuality to fragmentation and the non-linearity of narrative. Thus, this research paper probes into the postmodern devices present in the movie *The Longest Ride*, written by the American novelist and screenwriter Nicholas Sparks. At first, the study embarks upon the elucidation of each postmodern theory apiece; then it presses on with the analysis of these theories within the confines of *The Longest Ride*.

**Keywords:** postmodernism; metafiction; intertextuality; non-linear narrative; fragmentation.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Over the span of the years, many literary movements have shrivelled, with each one playing on its own pendulum. Postmodernism, albeit controversial, has been established as a challenging notion to be pinned down in the theoretical sphere. In a broader sense, it can be regarded as the sharp departure from the idealistic perspectives of modernism, a radical vision that splintered the already established mechanism of literature. Its upsurge goes back in time “to the end of the 1950 or the early 1960s” (Jameson, 2003, p. 1).

In this light, postmodernism branched down into a set of devices that embellished the literary tradition with uniqueness and diversity. One of such literary ensembles is intertextuality, a device that endorsed the interconnectedness of each and every literary text. Whereby its current association with postmodernism, which in turn, is associated with “pastiche, imitation and the mixing of already established styles and practices” (cited in Martin, 2011, p. 5). This latter has provided fertile ground for metafictional tendencies. Metafiction which, according to Gerald Prince, did not purely belong to the postmodern world, but it was then that it flourished as a fictitious work aware of its own technicalities (cited in Elias, 2012, p.12).

Likewise, as a deviation from the conventional patterns of narration executed in early writings, postmodernism adopts non-linear narratives that confound temporal and spatial settings (Harrison-Kahan, 2009, p.267) that in turn has set the basis for fragmentation. D'Lugo (1997) asserts that: “fragmented novels also serve to rupture the seamless narrative associated with the nineteenth-century literary canon” (para 1, chapter 1). Nevertheless, these postmodern notions did not confine to the bound of literature but dived into the cinematic scenery. Hence, this paper aims to implement these techniques in order to examine *The Longest Ride* (2015), a contemporary movie based on the eponym novel written by Nicholas Sparks. Ergo, some research questions reflect on:

- What is postmodernism?
- What are the main postmodern devices?
- How did Nicholas Sparks employ these devices in *The Longest Ride*?

## **2. Postmodernism Defined**

Postmodernism as a concept is very difficult and knotty to be marked out since every scholar has his particular conviction and distinct viewpoint when defining it. Some theorists designate the postmodern notion as the brand-new intellectual trend in all the fields, depicting it as the state-of-the-art unconstrained from all sorts of autocratical restrictions. They assume that modernism as a

movement became invalid and lapsed in terms of ideas, and postmodernism was the retort to this expiry. While many others, on the alternative side, for the most part, define it in terms of modernism, i.e., the move that appears after modernism, and so to utterly discern postmodernism, one has to perceive modernism initially. Even those researchers who are not enthusiasts of postmodernism's gist doctrine approve that this latter made tremendous changes in various disciplines (Jennings & Graham, 1996, pp. 269-270).

Postmodernism became apparent in the second half of the twentieth century. Still, it started transpiring by the end of the Second World War as a reaction to the prodigious political and economic alterations occurring back then. Perry Anderson (1998) has another viewpoint regarding the roots of the postmodern movement since he associates it with Federico de Onis' theories of *postmodernismo* and *ultramodernismo* that appeared way before that postmodernism turns out in the Anglo-Saxon world, precisely in 1934. The leading luminaries of postmodernism are Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and in literary criticism Frank Lentricchia. They tried to decipher reason because it leads directly to empowerment, and this is how Europeans monopolised the entire world. Postmodernism opposed logic since all atrocities resulted from reason men used on women, whites over blacks, and the rich against the poor.

The American literary critic Fredric Jameson deems postmodernism an 'attempt' to consider 'the present' in a ground-breaking style. According to him, both modernism and postmodernism share concern in the 'concept' of the new.' While the first concentrates on the notion itself, the last-mentioned centres on speculating its exclusive circumstances of 'possibility.' In other words, postmodernism sought a break from all prior movements, i.e., it considered for a more striking split second. Postmodernism first put into words acute and lasting yearnings that precedent moves did not accomplish. It shifted to control and avert its peculiar notions from every other pre-existing drive (Jameson, 2003).

### **3. *The Longest Ride's Synopsis***

*The Longest Ride* is a cinematographic adaptation of the novel with the same label, written by the American penpusher Nicholas Sparks and first published in 2013. The movie which George Tillman Jr. directed is acutely faithful to the novel with slight changes to serve the silver screen needs. The story sets about when the female protagonist Sophia Danko, a Wake University student, went to a Rodeo event with her fellow sorority friends. There, she gets to know Luke Collins, a cowboy returning to bull riding after a dire injury. The moment he saw her straight in the eyes, it was evident that a great love story is in the process of budding, albeit

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they were coming from divergent worlds; while he was a rancher who spent all of his days in North Carolina, she was an art student with great endeavours of following a career in grand galleries.

During their first date, Luke knew that Sophia was different from the girls he mingled with before, yet when Sophia told him that she was leaving for New York in less than two months, their story seemed to end ahead of its outset. While returning from their date, Luke noticed a burning car on the road, so they rushed to check out what was happening; it was then when they found a swoon older man (Ira Levinson). Sophia refused to leave the aged man alone in the hospital, so she stayed and started looking at the letters she found in the box that was in his car. When he woke up in the morning, he confessed to her the concrete account behind them; while reading one of the letters, he told her about his love story with his late wife Ruth, the woman he did everything to make her elated.

Ruth Levinson was a European Jew migrant who settled with her family in North Carolina in the 1940s. There, she met Ira, and their turbulent love story started. For him, it was all he wanted, yet the Pearl Harbour attack made him go to fight like all other men of his age, leaving her waiting. Ira got harmed in the front line, and the doctor revealed to him that he could not have kids. Coming back to the United States, Ira did not want to see Ruth, in that he did not want to her deceived, since he knew that her biggest dream was a big family. The days grew long for Ira after the leaving of Ruth; nevertheless, she came back to him by the end. To fill their days with joy, they developed an interest in collecting rare paintings.

The same thing happened in the modern-day story when Sophia made Luke pick between her and the bull riding. In the beginning, he refused to quit his hobby, notwithstanding he returned to her and ask her for marriage, as he genuinely loved her. After getting married, Ira passed the way, and to commemorate his memory and that of Ruth, Sophia and Luke opened a museum that contains all the pieces the Levinson's had. The story comes about in two different eras, the first one during the present time of the events, whereas the second one in the mid of the 1940s through flashbacks. So, whenever Ira is talking about his past, an analepsis occurs to portray that moment in Ira's life. For instance, Ruth did not live till the days when Sophia and Luke got together.

#### **4. Postmodern Devices in *The Longest Ride***

The postmodern devices are abundant, yet for the aim of this paper, only metafiction, intertextuality, non-linearity, and fragmentation are to be studied.

##### **4.1 Metafiction**

The forms of fiction are continually altering, considering that human beings, time, and societies are consistently changing. One of these changes transpired because of the advent of postmodern poetics, as writers started adopting a self-reflexive attitude towards literature. In his essay “Philosophy and the Forms of Fiction” (1970), William H. Gass framed the term metafiction while commenting on 1960s fiction; for him, metafiction is dissimilar to the concepts of the ‘anti-novel’ and the ‘anti-fiction’, seeing as it imbibes all the broad views of literary criticism into the fiction course of action. In other words, metafiction endeavours to either carps or go beyond the fiction principles (Scholes, 1970, pp. 106-107).

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as any fiction that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Cited in Hamza-Reguig Mouro, 2013, p. 41). Strictly speaking, metafiction is a theory that grips the readers’ attention to how fiction functions and in what manner meaning is produced. Metafiction plies a set of generally employed approaches in tandem, and the convergence of numerous tools enables texts to exhibit fictional qualities and self-consciousness (McCallum, 1996, p. 398).

The metafictional devices are profuse, yet the first to be disclosed is the existence of sundry narratives and/or stories within the very same fiction, considering that metafiction is a “fiction about fiction” (Lodge, 1992, p. 206). In *The Longest Ride*, there is more than one narrative; the first to be mentioned is the story happening in the latter-day and involves the round characters, Luke and Sophia Collins from their pristine meeting up till their conjugal life, including their encounter with 91 years of age Ira Levinson. The subsequent story is the one that ascertains Ira Levinson’s lifetime, from his union with his wife, Ruth, in the mid of 20th century till his demise. Besides, both narratives come across when Luke and Sophia save old Ira.

Another metafictional stratagem is the presence of multitudinous narrators present within the selfsame fiction (Pantaleo, 2014, p. 326), and this is the case of *The Longest Ride*, where there is more than one chronicler extant within the confines of the story. Ira Levinson is the first narrator reporting to the audience what happened to him and his late wife, Ruth Levinson, when they first met during their teenage days back in the 1940s until the wife’s passing. All that happened in the past is recounted from Ira’s viewpoint and the letters he wrote to put on record his life stages with Ruth. At least for the spectator, the second narrator is unknown, seeing that he is not manifested as a character. Nevertheless, the audience gets to know what happens in the story’s present time from this unknown narrator.

The following metafictional attribute is the existence of characters that

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explicitly make a comment on the advance of the story or the presence of characters that converse openly with the narrator (Waugh, 1984, pp. 36-37). In *The Longest Ride* (2015), Sophia, the female protagonist of the movie, plainly discusses the course of Ira's and Ruth's story since the minute she met aged Ira and read the letters he wrote to chronicle his days with his defunct wife. Sophia interacts with Ira's yarn as if she can change the course of the story that has hitherto occurred in the 1940s. Aged Ira, too, is directly talking about his existence from the moment he got to know Ruth, his days as a soldier in the front line during the Second World War, arriving at the day when the wife of the boy, he once wanted to adopt Daniel McDonald visited him and told him that this latter passed the way.

The metafictional wiles extant within *The Longest Ride* (2015) are abundant, among them the assorted of genres, styles, dialects and languages within the same fiction (Pantaleo, 2014, p. 326), seeing as both Luke and Sophia have different dialects, he is a cowboy, whilst she is an art student from New York. The same goes for the story of Ira and Ruth; he is an American Jew fluent in English, whereas Ruth is an immigrant Jew from Vienna who speaks English with an unusual accent. Furthermore, there is an amalgamation of the romantic genre portrayed in the love stories involving Ira and Ruth in the past and Luke and Sophia in the present-day time; Tragedy evoked in the sadness Ira lived after the death of his beloved Ruth, and War fiction depicted in the part when Ira went to fight in the Second World War.

Intertextuality and the non-linearity of narratives are also included under the umbrella of metafiction. Any text that comments on other pre-existing texts or on itself is considered intertextual (Allen, 2000), and metafiction as well shares an interest in this notion. In regards to the non-linear narration, McCallum (1996) utters that metafiction consists of 'narrative fragmentation and discontinuity, disorder and chaos' (p. 400).

#### **4.2 Intertextuality**

Intertextuality is a theory of meaning and meaning production; it is Julia Kristeva who is credited for the invention of this term. In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" (1969), Julia Kristeva states that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (cited in Hamza Reguig-Mouro, 2013, p. 26). Intertextuality itself has not been used ahead of the 1960s, yet the core theory can be traced to Aristotle's 'theory of imitation' (Alfaro, 1996, p. 269). Since then, the term intertextuality is commonly used to refer to the kinship between different texts through different strategies (Lesic-Thomas, 2005, p. 2).

Intertextuality can be manifested through adaptation, which according to the

*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008), adaptation is the course of action of making a new work of art based on an already existing one using a medium, often literary. Adaptation existed since ancient times, where plays were adapted as opera, fairy tales as ballets, and nowadays novels as movies or even T.V. series. For Linda Hutcheon, adaptation incorporates “not only film, television, radio, and the various electronic media, of course, but also theme parks, historical enactments and virtual reality experiments” (cited in D’Angelo, 2010, p. 34). *The Longest Ride* (2015) is a movie adapted from the novel written by Nicholas Sparks and holds the same title. The medium for sure changes, seeing as the original work is a novel, and the adapted work is a movie, and according to Hutcheon, some forms serve better in showing and telling, and this is the case of the *Longest Ride* since it gave vividness to the story that appeared first in the form of a novel.

Another strategy of intertextuality is retro. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines retro as a copycat of a given style or fashion from a recent past. According to Paul Grainge (2000), “retro borrows from the past without sentimentality, quotes from the past without longing, parodies the past without loss” (p.55). Frederic Jameson (1991) brought in what he labelled ‘nostalgic mode’ to depict how postmodern works pastiche the past; this latter does not involve only movies about the past (p. 116). Both retro and nostalgia act to show the good old days of the past. The use of retro in *The Longest Ride* (2015) is abundant, especially with the imitation of prior styles like the Romantic one described in the love stories the two couples lived; Tragedy when Ira lived desperately after the passing of Ruth; and even war narratives, depicted in the events Ira lived during the Second World War. Nostalgia is also developed whenever Ira talks about the elated and ecstatic days he lived with his late wife, Ruth. Aged Ira even wished to die just because he was so nostalgic to see Ruth once again since he really misses her.

Appropriation is also considered an intertextual device. It is defined as the act of borrowing or stealing others’ meaning (Cartwright, 2000, p. 350). Schwartz (1996) states that “copying is assimilation, reenactment is appropriation, appropriation is creation” (p. 246). Incorporation does not involve copying from others’ works only, yet it is also considered appropriation, any work taken from folk culture or even real-life (D’Angelo, 2010, pp. 36-37). The real story behind *The Longest Ride* is not appropriated in the more precise meaning of the word, yet the account of Ira and Ruth Levinson is based on the real-life of Herb and Dorothy Vogel (Sharkey, 2015, para. 3). However, Sparks changed everything related to them so to make it look more fictitious, the setting got changed, the era, and even their names became Ira and Ruth instead of Herb and Dorothy, respectively.

Pastiche and parody are also among the wiles of intertextuality. Pastiche is

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defined according to *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2010) as any piece of art that copies and mixes different genres and styles. Frederic Jameson claims that all postmodern works of art are to a certain extent, pastiches past works that he labels as parody without any given purpose (D'Angelo, 2010, p. 37). On the other hand, parody is defined as a 'scornful' imitation of any work of art, i.e., an imitation that makes an author's style or a work look ridicule (Baldick, 2008). In brief, the difference between pastiche and parody is that the first to be mentioned is unintentional, and the aim behind it is not mockery; instead, it looks at bringing a new work of art; the reason behind the latter is undoubtedly mockery and derision. *The Longest Ride* (2015) is not a parody, yet it pastiches the recent past. Moreover, it mixes distinct styles from narration and characters' to the different genres present within it.

### **4.3 Non-linear Narrative**

A narrative reports a story being oral or written, where the narrator is recounting a line of factual or made-up events to the narratee. In other words, a narrative incorporates a series of events that are told in the way of narration, and they are put in order according to the plot (Baldick, 2008). On the whole, fictions' narratives follow a chronological order in narration, i.e. 'a linear series of events which are organised in the narrative in the same order as they occurred (cited in Sternberg, 1990, p. 910); in other words, the incident that happens first is mentioned beforehand. Nevertheless, contemporary fiction seems to challenge the norms of linearity when the events are being narrated; the narrative tends to be more innovative, where the events do not follow the order of their proceeding (Isaacs, 2005).

**Fig.1.** Linear Narrative

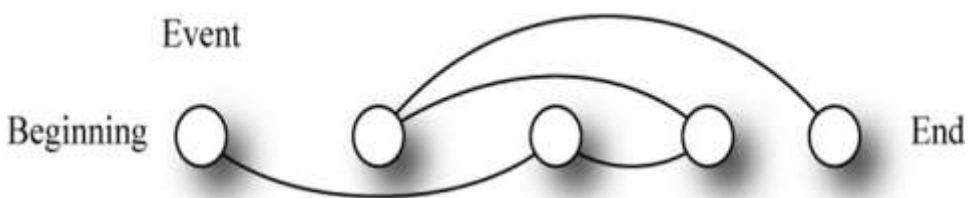




**Source:** Grace, 2008

A narrative is deemed non-linear when multiple stories with distinct settings occur in the same fiction, id est the narrative hierarchy is missing (Kouta, 2020, p. 4). Gérard Genette asserts that the Western literary legacy is “inaugurated by a characteristic effect of anachrony”, where anachrony is a misalignment between the order in which the story’s events occur and the arrangement in which they are presented to the readers in the plot. Anachrony can be manifested in two sorts, analepsis and prolepsis. (cited in Frame, 2012, p. 4).

**Fig.2.** Non-linear Narrative



**Source:** Grace, 2008

Analepsis or flashback is a break in a literary work’s chronological narrative that relates events from a previous time. It is a term employed to depict any scene in a work of fiction that is inserted to display events that occurred at a given point in the past. It is a kind of interruption to the present-day events in a vivacious

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reminder from the past. Flashbacks are used to reflect on both pleasing and jaundiced experiences that characters underwent previously and their kinship to their actual existence (Gebeyehu, 2019, p. 1). On the other hand, prolepsis or flashforward is a kind of rupture in the narrative, yet here a future event intrudes the course of the present-day events of the fiction. Prolepsis is regarded as the contrasted anachronous of analepsis (Baldick, 2008).

*The longest Ride* (2015) is not conveyed in a linear, directional narrative; instead, it departs away from the standard conventional notions of narrative. It is marked by its narrative non-linearity, seeing as there is no sequential order that unites the narrative's events. This movie which is directed by Geroge Tillman Jr., unfolds two different stories that happen in two distinctive settings. The film's exposition takes place when Sophia Collins, née Danko, joined her friend Marcia to attend a rodeo event for the first time; there, she got to meet Luke Collins, a professional bull rider coming back from a drastic injury. The next time Sophia and Luke came across each other was during their first date. Till now, the events seem too linear, yet the twist began when they were on their way back from their date, more precisely when they saved an aged man by the name of Ira Levinson.

At this level, the narrative hierarchy starts losing its linearity as the events plunged into another timing that comes way before the present-day time of the story. The first flashback took lieu when Ira started reading one of the letters he wrote to his late wife Ruth to Sophia. At this point, the audience gets to discover who is Ruth through a flashback that portrays her arrival along with her family to the United States and her first acquaintance with Ira. The story resumed in the present time of the story when Sophia showed her enthusiasm about the story. The events carried on with Sophia's and Luke's love story that grew day after day, yet whenever Sophia or Luke was reunited with Ira, a flashback occurred to portray the events Ira was recounting.

Through flashbacks, Ira's departure to the front lines of the Second World War was portrayed, showing him and Ruth in a very emotional way. Not only that, even how he got mangled while saving a friend from dying is depicted. At this level, one may think that the exciting love story that Ira and Ruth lived was the only situation depicted through flashbacks; nevertheless, this is not true. The viewers knew what happened to Luke and how he got injured previously in a tragic bull riding incident through another flashback. In brief, all the events that took place ahead of the present-day story are represented through flashbacks.

Flashback was not the only type of anachrony displayed in the movie; flashforward was also patent in this film. By the end of the movie, there is also a

gap in the narrative; after Ira's death, an auction took place to sell his collection, Sophia and Luke were invited to attend, and they finished having the entire collection. Here, a flashforward occurs, taking the narrative to a year later, where now married Sophia and Luke opened a museum to honour Ira and Ruth Levinson's memory. Though spectators do not know the ups and downs in the narrative gap, they know for sure that the end is happy since Luke and Sophia wedded after all.

#### **4.4 Fragmentation**

A fragment is a word derived from Latin *fragmentum*, which means 'a break'. It is a part split from the whole, i.e., cut from the unity. Metzger (2012) states that "a fragment appears incomplete, be it a sliver cut off from a larger whole, an unfinished work, or a work that seems insubstantial" (p. 106). Fragmentation as a device started within modern fiction and transpired within the postmodern one. On this, Alan Wilde utters that "postmodernism has given up Modernist attempts to restore wholeness to a fragmented world and has accepted the contingency of experience" (p. 42). Fragmentation is highly blatant within the order of the narratives of any given fragmented fiction (Guignery, 2019, pp. 5-7).

*The Longest Ride* (2015) is fragmented in its narrative, seeing as there is a sort of rupture in the chain of events constructing the whole story. The beginning of the movie starts in the present-day time, the sequences of the story seem united in a good way, till the point where the first flashback occurs; at this point, the viewers start noticing that the narrative is not conveyed through a straightforward united narrative, instead, it is conveyed through fragments.

Although the story's events generally happen in two distinct eras, one in the mid-twentieth century and the second in the modern age (the date is not specified). Nevertheless, even the events occurring in the same period are not united as a whole. Instead, the story's exposition starts in the present-day time; then it shifts to the past through a flashback, then the present. So, the story, all in all, is cut into several fragments.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Like the many literary traditions which came before, the postmodern literary wave came as a reaction to what preceded it. Its rebellion against the modernist condition laid it as the new craze of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It did not only challenge tradition, but also allowed literature to explore new spheres.

This literary condition nourished and helped develop several literary devices and techniques. From intertextuality as the patchwork of all that is literature to metafiction as the mindfulness of fictionality. It also adapted fragmentation and

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non-linear narratives as the tool to be for telling its stories. The postmodern uncertainty was reflected through such a non-traditional narrative path. Hereafter the amalgam of these devices served a higher purpose in this research, as they served as practical utensils to scrutinise postmodernity in the cinematographic work entitled *The Longest Ride* (2015), seeing as this contemporary film unfolds as many postmodern wiles.

The movie, based on the bestseller written by Nicholas Sparks and first published in 2013, discloses multitudes of postmodern devices. It is highly metafictional, seeing as it presents two different stories that are separate from one another. Intertextuality is present in the movie, considering that it is adapted from a novel. Plus, it is introduced in a non-linear, fragmented narrative, where the two stories happen in two disconnected eras. In a nutshell, *The Longest Ride* (2015) is a contemporary movie that outlines the postmodern condition's leading devices.

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