

## Three phases of literary minimalism

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### Abstract

Literary Minimalism elaborates new method of writing a text that advocates ordinary stuff, simple writing, and common life. It is away from all complex writing of the past that is based on action rather than reflection. It uses a method which eliminates nonessential details of a text and creates a new way of writing identify as Neo-realist, K-mart realism, and Dirty realism. Such writings are characterized by visual quality hence, focuses on visualising the story. This paper discusses the development of three phases of Literary Minimalism.

**Keywords:** minimalism, realism, ordinary stuff, and common man etc.

### Introduction

Minimalism emerges as a movement between 1960s-80s though it is influenced by the postmodern writing like neo-realism, metafiction, and by several other art forms such as Painting, Architecture, Music but basically it makes its ground through the writings of Earnest Hemingway. Minimalism divides into three phases as first phase of literary Minimalism deals with the writings of Earnest Hemingway, second phase comes up with the writings of Raymond Carver, and third but not the last covers the writings of Frederick Barthelme.

### First Phase of Literary Minimalism

Ernest Hemingway is the most influential American writer of the twentieth century. His innovative writing style is characterized by simple diction, statement, and short declarative sentences. Hemingway uses several minimalist techniques such as repetition, ambiguous narrators, and omission to alter the plots which completely change the background of American fiction. He has written numerous highly acclaimed novels as well as short stories which explore minimalistic tone such as "Big Two-Hearted River," "Hills Like White Elephants," "A Canary For One," "Cat in the Rain," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* etc. His major contribution in literature is "iceberg" theory or the theory of Omission that paved the ground for the minimalistic writing. Hemingway's Minimalism was a reaction to a tradition of violence as sensational, hyperbolic and even desirable in all its grotesqueness. It assumes a role that the reader must subsequently recognise in order to make sense the narrative, following Hemingway's deliberate omission. In doing so, the story expands beyond personal significance to represent the grief for what became known as 'the lost generation', those whom found life difficult following the First World War. (Greaney 159)

In the opinion of Hemingway omission is usually stated in well-written story. It often removes unnecessary points as impressive works sometime omit essential information and replace it through hints or gaps leave for the reader, "He hired a method by which he would leave out vital data of the story underneath the belief that oversight can occasionally add

strong point to a story" (Darzikola 1)<sup>[11]</sup>. According to him an amateurish writer damages a story by omitting vital information without any mark. Whereas, if there is skilled writer practices omission, it will strengthen a story as they invite readers to apply their own ideas. Moreover, writer also provides life experiences and moral values to the work, potentially resulting in deeper and more meaning of the text. As Hemingway says, "A few things I have found to be true. If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave out or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless" (Hemingway qtd in Johnston 68)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Hemingway himself learned minimalistic ways of writing through Journalism. As, during his education his tutor taught him, how to write an impressive report in a brief way. "Tell your whole story in the first paragraph; develop details in relation to their importance; leave the least important things until the end" (Griffin 25)<sup>[5]</sup>. During work as journalist Hemingway began to write short fiction. It is his idea in which he suggests to read newspaper like a manifesto. Hence, he advocates short and simple sentences with short paragraphs. He also believed to use vigorous English that should focus on positive rather than negative opinion.

It is well expressed that Ernest Hemingway's work gave birth to a new trend of writing that influenced other writers. He discusses crucial elements about Minimalistic writing first time. His pattern of writing was followed by several writers. He believes that good writing is compact like a writing of a journalist. Therefore, he is known as an originator of minimalistic writing who is anticipated many of the significant elements of the Minimalism. Minimalism is an individual response in which writer's task is to establish the exact context so that reader comes in contact with its basic idea.

### Second phase of literary Minimalism

Second phase of Minimalism started in the 1980s with the work of Raymond Carver (1938–88). Suddenly it becomes a kind of rampant where writers try to provide a precise and final demarcation to discover the diverse cultural activities of America called it "minimalist aesthetic", "...minimalist writing as being "terse, oblique, realistic or hyper realistic,

slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction....” (Trussler).

Raymond Carver is known as the father of Minimalism, titled as “The American Chekhov” is also considered the undisputed king of “dirty realism”. The main contribution of Raymond Carver in Minimalism is the use of epiphany. He employs epiphany as a means of subverting conventional reading patterns where the reader is left with an interpretative gap to fill.

Carver’s stories must be carefully differentiated with regard to the question as to what the characters are looking at, how their gazes are qualified, and what they see. Three types of looking are particularly relevant since they take on a reflexive quality: looking into mirrors, watching television, and closely observing mundane objects or scenes. Looking into mirrors is a traditional device for the motif of self-analysis. (Decker 39) He applies one of the important elements of literary Minimalism that is the use of an absent and vague narrator who himself peep insight the story as a reader. Moreover, like Hemingway, Carver also portrays and depicts the minute details of everyday objects as a significant element in revealing important and suggestive details of the characters within the stories. In “Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence,” Graham Clarke writes:

Carver’s status as a short story writer has been very much bound up with the ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ debate. And although Carver declared, ‘who cares finally what they want to call the stories we write’, he remains the quintessential minimalist, seemingly reducing to an absolute sparseness both his subject matter and his treatment of it. (Bailey 68)

After Carver, Richard Ford is one of the major writers of dirty realism who writes about the middle class but, “Dirty realism was just too constrictive for him to be able to continue on its lonely highways” (Evers), so he joined the group of minimalistic writers. Richard Bausch, and Tobias Wolff with their odd flash of inspiration and Jayne Anne Phillips, with her uses of kinetic and hallucinatory places join the group of Carver by sharing the same sense and sensibility with minimalistic tone in their writing. One more important writer Cormac McCarthy is also one of few other writers who continue to be influenced by the minimalistic style.

### Third phase of literary Minimalism

Frederick Barthelme (1943-) comes up as one of the major writers of the third phase of literary Minimalism. As Raymond Carver introduces the literary technique like epiphany as one of the major devices to present minimalistic tone, Frederick Barthelme focuses on content rather than technique such as using the “ordinary stuff in middle class’s common life” as a main theme in his writing, “Frederick Barthelme has always been a master at cramming a lot of meaning into a small space” (Pendarvismay). The most pervasive examples of Barthelme’s iconoclastic ambition can be found in his rejection of what he calls “extraordinary circumstances” the subjects of what he sees as conventional fiction. His stories have been described as dealing with fear of loneliness, hostility. He describes neo realism or dirty realism as “K-mart realism”. In comparison to Carver’s realism Barthelme’s writing is more naturalistic, “It’s always a pleasure to be back in the understatedly funny world of Frederick Barthelme, where the central characters lack ambition, nastiness and guile, and the world’s mundane terrors come along so

predictably and relentlessly you have no choice but to laugh at them” (Bradfielddec).

Another important contribution of Barthelme in Minimalism is the role of reader which becomes more important and complicated in his writings. Barthelme makes his text a kind of puzzle in which he leaves certain clues for the reader to draw a picture so that the reader can solve the riddle, “[T]his new fiction is as good as fiction was when the literature was rich and resplendent with the bountiful harvests of many fabulous and worldly imaginations (some of which harvests were silly, but which we’re pleased to recall fondly anyway)” (Barthelme 9). Barthelme’s readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of meaning. The reader has to peep inside the text, follows indirect hints and suggestions that lead the direction given by the writer. Few other contemporaries of Barthelme who share minimalistic writing are Amy Hempel, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Charles Michael Palahniuk etc.

Amy Hempel’s contribution in minimalistic writing is visible in the first person narration including one or two characters who are struggling with the emotional pain. While, Charles Michael Palahniuk’s minimalistic writing reflects in limited vocabulary, repetitions, and short sentences etc. to imitate the way in which an ordinary person tells a story. Moreover, Bobbie Ann Mason writing is more personal in comparison to other writers. Her minimalistic approach aspires from home and the working-class people. Her writing labels as “shopping mall realism”, “Bobbie Ann Mason’s portrayal of small-town life in contemporary western Kentucky is rooted in her developing understanding of the cultural influences upon her own childhood and adolescence there” (Price 1).

Meanwhile, it is clear that Minimalism is a modern description of realism. It is visible in the writing of contemporary writers with its different perspective. As postmodern writers believe in presenting ordinary reality which they feel and see by their own eyes. The present group of Literary Minimalism describes neo-realism that illustrates day to day life of ordinary people and their common struggle for regular stuff, “Post-modernism was going to get it –that’s what you imagined, anyway, since that neatly suited your purpose” (Barthelme 7). Literary Minimalism believes in the notion of communication which refers to the simplicity of design in writing. Moreover, it welcomes a new reader who is user friendly and alludes to the importance of non-verbal forms of communication. It helps to examine closely the act of looking and interrelating images with subject and also contributes to the emergence of different ways of self-knowledge.

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