The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and Postmodernist Zadie Smith

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald [...] turned with the others to watch it complete an elegant swoop toward the pinball machine and somersault straight into the slot. Immediately the huge old beast lit up; the ball shot off and began its chaotic, noisy course [...] until, with no one to assist it, no one to direct it, it gave up the ghost and dropped back into the swallowing hole. (White Teeth 377)

In White Teeth, Zadie Smith demonstrates the problems of living in a postmodern world, as her characters constantly collide with each other in the pursuit of meaning and truth. Like Archie Jones, the coin-flipper of the previous passage, Smith’s characters struggle with their attempts to find happiness in a fractured and chaotic world. Her characters seek answers, seek meanings, but find themselves caught between various binaries: the religious and the secular (Millat), Eastern and Western values (Samad), the past and the present (Irie), internal and external history (Archie), randomness and predestination (Marcus). The chaotic, mixed-up nature of life in a postmodern society is intolerable to these characters, a condition made evident, for example, in the rift that forms between Samad and Alsana Iqbal. When Samad sends their son Magid back to India, Alsana responds by speaking to him only in half-measures, refusing to answer definitively any of his questions: “Through the next eight years she would determine never to say yes to him, never to say no to him, but rather to force him to live like she did – never knowing [...]. That was her promise, that was her curse upon Samad, and it was exquisite revenge” (178). When Magid returns eight years later, Samad’s punishment ends: “The only upside was the change in Alsana. The A-Z? Yes, Samad Miah, it is in the top right-hand drawer, yes, that’s where it is, yes. The first time she did it, he almost jumped out of his skin. The curse was lifted. No more maybe, Samad Miah, no more possibly, Samad Miah. Yes, yes, yes. No, no, no. The fundamentals” (351). Alsana’s punishment is an appropriate one in the world of White Teeth, as none of its major characters are capable of dealing with the uncertainty of life in a postmodern world.

Thus we see Smith rejecting absolutes, “the fundamentals,” and embracing a postmodernist perspective, as she picks apart traditional understandings of the world by poking holes in language, religion, culture, history, and other structures through which people typically give meaning to their lives. The result of White Teeth is the inevitable failure of the fundamental truths that the characters pursue and the systems of order and control that underlie them. We see these failures play out in various ways throughout the novel at the expense of the majority of the characters as they follow their various extremist, fundamentalist perspectives until they inevitably crash into each other. The final scene shows the result of these clashing perspectives, each character chasing his/her own fundamental truth, leading to the escape of Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse. Like the coin of the passage above that miraculously finds its way into the pinball machine, the mouse miraculously escapes from the crush of the various warring factions attempting to exert their influence on it, released into a life beyond their attempts to control it.

However, while Smith’s outlook may be postmodernist in its rejection of absolutes, her novels are determinedly modernist in their construction. Each of her three novels relies on a stable exterior structure that governs our reading experience. White Teeth consists of four sections of similar length, each of which contains five chapters, begins with an epigraph, centers on a different character, and focuses on two different years. The Autograph Man is structured around the Kabbalah,
as the chart of the novel’s protagonist appears before the book and serves as a guiding presence for the movement throughout the novel. On Beauty contains perhaps the most binding structure, as the novel uses E.M. Forster’s Howards End as its palimpsest, atop which Smith presents her modern revision (updating, for example, the letters that begin Forster’s novel with a series of emails). Thus it often seems as though Smith’s loyalties are divided, and the structure and the content of her novels often feel at odds with one another. Compared with someone like Samuel Beckett or Salman Rushdie, whose postmodernist sensibilities permeate into the structures of their works as well as the content, Smith’s novels are surprisingly content to behave structurally in ways that we expect novels to behave. Unlike many postmodernist writers, she is not interested in fracturing the traditional literary experience, in playing with the narrative perspective, or in making readers question the existence of the worlds in which her novels take place.

Thus, while her narratives demonstrate that structures are an ineffective method of controlling the world or of meting out the stuff of life, Smith continually relies on such structures to give shape to her novels. Furthermore, while the novels demonstrate the failure of various characters to exert their authority and autonomy in a postmodern world, the narrators are confident, in total control of their narratives, rarely demonstrating the uncertainty or fracturedness that is common in postmodernist fiction. The traditionally modernist structures that Smith employs to present her novels are the same ones she is arguing for the impossibility of maintaining in a postmodernist, postcolonial world, where stable boundaries are constantly being obliterated and where meaning is constantly shown to be unstable. In this essay, I look at this disconnect between postmodernist tale and modernist telling in both White Teeth and On Beauty, in hopes of moving us toward a better understanding of the ramifications of this rift on our understanding of Smith’s fiction.

Because the words carry so much baggage, I would like to discuss briefly what I consider to be an essential difference between “modernist” and “postmodernist” writing. In his book Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale makes use of Roman Jakobson’s notion of the dominant to explore the blurry line between modernism and postmodernism. McHale moves away from the traditional system of setting modernism and postmodernism in binary opposition to one another, attempting to “interrogate modernist and postmodernist texts with a view to eliciting the shifts in the hierarchy of devices,” with the goal of answering the question of “what emerges as the dominant of modernist fiction [and] of postmodernist fiction?” (8). By establishing the dominants undergirding modernism and postmodernism, McHale avoids the typical problems with listing the differences between them: “such catalogues […] beg important questions, such as the question of why these particular features should cluster in this particular way – in other words, the question of what system might underlie the catalogue” (7). Ultimately, McHale argues that “postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues” (xii):

The dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as […] What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? (9)

As he turns to postmodernist fiction, McHale discusses “postmodernism’s bracketing of modernist epistemological questions and the defamiliarizing effect of this move” (26):

The dominant of postmodern fiction is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like […] Which world is this? What is to be done in it? […] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there,
how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? (10)

Thus McHale concludes that, while modernist fiction focuses on epistemological questions designed to make sense of the world around us, postmodernist fiction puts these questions aside and asks ontological questions designed to open up larger possibilities, often prompting readers to question the very foundation of the narrative world presented in the text. The modernist aesthetic, then, is one of closure, taking place in a closed-off world and forcing readers to work out answers which allow them to understand the characters and the themes of the work. Appropriately, given the nature of the modernist aesthetic, McHale describes the logic governing the modernist novel as “that of a detective story, the epistemological genre par excellence. […] Characters in many classic modernist texts […] sift through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a ‘crime’” (9). The postmodernist aesthetic, however, is one of openness, in which the narrative experience is often fractured to open up possibilities and provoke further questions that are not readily answerable in the text. McHale discusses this movement in terms of the genres of science fiction and the fantastic; like these genres, postmodernist fiction avoids questions of origin (why is the written world different than the real world?) and looks instead at the possibilities offered by this bracketing of the epistemological concerns of modernism (what freedom do I have when I stop worrying about conveying the “real world”?). Postmodernist fiction takes the reader out of his/her comfort zone, often subverting the traditional tropes of fiction and asking us to reconsider the preconceptions that we bring to the act of reading and foundations upon which we build our lives.

McHale uses Beckett’s trilogy as an example of the movement from a modernist to a postmodernist aesthetic. Traces of a modernist aesthetic appear in Molloy and can be seen in the traditional two-part structure of Molloy’s and Moran’s narratives, which Beckett sets beside one another, implicitly calling upon readers to compare and contrast in order to recreate some sort of meaning. However, in Malone Dies and especially in The Unnamable, Beckett sloughs off the tropes of traditional fiction, fracturing the narrative experience and constantly asking readers to ask ontological questions about the world in which the narrative is set. As each successive narrator is revealed to be the creator of all previous narrators, the trilogy moves away from the relatively stable perspective of Molloy and of modernist fiction. Beckett mirrors this movement in the style and perspective of each successive narrative. As we strip away each layer of the narrative onion (a metaphor Beckett famously used in his essay Proust) on our way to its “ideal core,” it becomes clear that there is no core, no answer, no culmination to our knowledge-seeking journey. Instead, we find increasingly unhinged narratives, as Beckett strips away various literary tropes with which we are familiar. By the final narrative, paragraph breaks, punctuation, and any sort of coherent narrative have been abandoned. The point here is that we see Beckett’s perspective (that authority is doomed, that nothing we say or do will ever move us any closer to a true, fundamental understanding of the world) reflected in the chaotic structure of his narratives.

Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children provides an interesting comparison to Smith’s novels, particularly White Teeth, as both explore the complicated relationship between history and the present, delving into the gaps and holes that permeate both history and any attempt to recreate it in memory or in writing. Like Smith, Rushdie presents a narrative that deals with the difficulties of adhering to a modernist paradigm (of faith in absolutes, structures, and the ability of art to uncover truth) in a postmodernist world (of mix-ups, randomness, and the failure of art to represent reality); Midnight’s Children presents the frustrating and fractured narrative of Saleem Sinai, born at the stroke of midnight on India’s first day as an independent nation. Saleem views his act of narrating as a modernist one, creating a typically modernist puzzle by dividing his story up into thirty pickle jars;
however, by the end of the novel, he comes to realize that the modernist attempt to present a coherent picture of reality is doomed. Unlike the confident narrator of *White Teeth*, who manages to weave together a masterful narrative of various characters and stories, Saleem’s attempts to keep his various stories separate fail utterly. Thus, by making the entire novel a failure to achieve the modernist goal of creating art that effectively mirrors reality, Rushdie demonstrates structurally the thematic concerns of the novel. This can be seen in the result of Saleem’s endeavor, as, instead of thirty separate stories that add up to a faithful rendering of history, Saleem is left with chutney.

The problem with classifying Smith’s fiction, then, is its determinedly straightforward, traditional presentation of narrative and its relatively uncomplicated narrative voice. Rather than presenting us with the kind of tortured, unremitting narratives that Beckett presents us with, or with the kind of mixed-up, chutnified narrative that Rushdie presents us with, Smith’s narratives are leisurely paced, elegantly structured, and written from the perspective of a confident, omniscient narrator.

**Postmodernist Tales**

Both *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* are populated by families of characters trying to come to terms with failing ways of interacting with the outside world. *White Teeth* revolves around members of the Jones/Bowden, the Iqbal, and the Chalfen families; *On Beauty* revolves around the Belseys and the Kipps, taking place within the insular world of Wellington University. In both novels, Smith is concerned with the overly definitive worldviews held by her characters, demonstrating the problems caused as a result of these clashing perspectives. When neither side is willing to change or modify their viewpoint (as, the books demonstrate, it is necessary to do in a postmodern world), conflict necessarily arises. These conflicts nearly always undo the characters that are unwilling to accommodate alternate, oppositional lifestyles. For example, the battling perspectives – both academic and social – of Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps ruin the careers of both men in the novel’s final chapters, as their public and private clashing results in Kipps’ falling from his pedestal of respectability and Howard’s loss of both his family and his chance at tenure. Samad’s unwillingness to accept the Americanizing of his sons causes him to send Magid back to India, his unwillingness to share parental responsibility with his wife leads him to eight years of her ambivalence, and his unwillingness to waver from his Muslim ideals of perfection leads him to commit adultery with his son’s music teacher.

While similar in their demonstration of the importance of openness, the novels differ in the subject of their focus. In *White Teeth*, Smith demonstrates the important but fractured relationship between the past and the present, as her characters approach their relationship with history from various perspectives. Characters constantly attempt to control their interaction with history, viewing it either as wholly predetermined – if I understand my history, then I will understand my present and future – or as wholly arbitrary – if I ignore my past, then it will not be able to influence my present and future. However, *White Teeth* demonstrates the impossibility of escaping history or of living entirely outside of its influence. Magid, for example, is essentially uprooted from his family and from his history, and he tries to construct an identity entirely separate from it. However, he is unable to escape their influence, as the novel’s final section finds him reunited with his twin brother and entangled with Irie. In the end, the interaction of the past and the present is messier and less predictable than the characters want it to be; the roots provided by history can neither be studied as a faithful forecast of our future nor can they be entirely pruned away.

Samad views history as an accurate reflection of the present, and, accordingly, he spends much of his life trying to come to terms with the role of his family history in his own life. He feels that, if he changes public perception of his traitorous great-grandfather Mangal Pande, he will become a better person. This unhealthy preoccupation with revising history can be seen in his steadfast attempts to rewrite the history of Pande: “The story of Mangal Pande […] is no laughing
matter. He is the tickle in the sneeze, he is why we are the way we are, the founder of modern India, the big historical cheese” (188), and in his vicious defense of Pande’s legacy from contemporary historians: “Just because the word exists, it does not follow that it is a correct representation of the character of Mangal Pande. The first definition we agree on: my great-grandfather was a mutineer and I am proud to say this. I concede matters did not go quite according to plan. But traitor? Coward? The dictionary you show me is old – these definitions are now out of currency. Pande was no traitor and no coward” (209). Samad is unwilling to relinquish this history because he believes fervently that history shapes the present; if Pande is a traitor and a coward, then he might also be: “What I have realized, is that the generations, […] they speak to each other, Jones. It’s not a line, life is not a line – this is not palm-reading – it’s a circle, and they speak to us. That is why you cannot read fate; you must experience it” (100). The narrator tersely and sympathetically summarizes Samad’s position: “When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended” (212).

Samad’s perspective on history can also be seen in O’Connell’s, the place where he and Archie meet regularly to discuss their lives: “Everything was remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed” (160-61). O’Connell’s serves as a “neutral place” for Archie and Samad, one filled with its own shared history and one in which outside history cannot touch them: “Simply because you could be without family in O’Connell’s, without possessions or status, without past glory or future hope – you could walk through that door with nothing and be exactly the same as everybody else in there. It could be 1989 outside, or 1999, 2009, and you could still be sitting at the counter in the V-neck you wore to your wedding in 1975, 1945, 1935. Nothing changes here, things are only retold, remembered. That’s why old men love it” (203).

While these “old men” want to use their relationship with the past both to blame their failures on and to attribute their successes to, the younger generation in White Teeth takes a much different approach to history. Living in the wreckage of her family history, Irie Jones wants to prune away the roots she feels clutching at her. Her father’s willful obscurity – “I’m a Jones, you see. ‘Slike a ‘Smith.’ We’re nobody… my father used to say: ‘We’re the chaff, boy, we’re the chaff” (84) – and her mother’s embarrassing secret – which Irie discovers upon kicking over the glass holding her false teeth – provide enough reason for Irie to want to escape the clutches of her past: “This was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths, this was another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret history, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumor you never unraveled, which would be fine if every day was not littered with clues” (314). The discovery of her mother’s secret prompts Irie finally to cut ties completely with her parents and move in with her grandmother.

When Irie moves in with her grandmother who, while technically a part of her past, poses no real threat to her autonomy, she finds a “well-wooded and watered place. Where things sprang from the soil riotously and without supervision, […] fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future – a place where things simply were” (332). She goes on to imagine this place in detail: “No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because homeland is one of the magical fantasy words like unicorn and soul and infinity that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of homeland, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page” (332).

Samad and Irie hold opposing viewpoints regarding the importance of history in the present, but, in the novel’s final chapters, they both begin to accept the messy reality of things. Samad begins to understand that history cannot alone sustain him; we see this first in his reluctant memory of a story from when he first arrived in America, as he acknowledges this embarrassing incident in
which he used his bleeding thumb to write his name into the stone beneath a park bench: “A great shame washed over me the moment I finished, […] because I knew what it meant, this deed. It meant I wanted to write my name on the world. It meant I presumed. Like the Englishmen who named streets in Kerala after their wives, like the Americans who shoved their flag in the moon. It was a warning from Allah. He was saying: Iqbal, you are becoming like them” (418-19). Rather than continuing to bury an embarrassing moment in his history, which, as we see a number of times, causes Samad problems throughout his life, here he willingly remembers it, confronts it, and, if the final scene in the novel is any indication, begins to move past it.

Samad’s final act in the novel occurs during the FutureMouse demonstration, as he is sent outside to quiet the protesters, including Hortense Bowden. Rather than stop them, however, Samad allows them to continue: “He knows what it is to seek. He knows the dryness. He has felt the thirst you get in a strange land – horrible, persistent – the thirst that lasts your whole life” (439). Here Samad moves closer to Smith’s position, which is a recognition that, although your history may be hopelessly entangled with your present-day existence, it alone does not have to constitute that existence. In other words, it is possible to move beyond it and stake out a place for yourself, outside of your individual family history. Irie has the same realization as Samad does, although she approaches it from the opposite extreme. As Irie contemplates the complicated history that her unborn child, fathered by either Magid or Millat, will be presented with, she concludes that it is impossible to escape one’s history entirely: “After weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind, she thought: whatever, you know? Whatever. It was always going to turn out like this, not precisely like this, but involved like this. This was the Iqbal’s we were talking about, here. This was the Joneses. How could she ever have expected anything less?” (427). Like Samad, Irie ultimately realizes the messiness of the relationship between the past and the present, that, although we might wish to, we can never control the way that our roots reach into our lives.

Smith’s view of the relationship between the past and the present is one facet of her postmodernist outlook, as, toward most subjects in her novels, she wants her characters to see that things are messier and less definitive than they would like them to be. Another subject that Smith deals with in both novels is the authority of language, which she continually pokes holes in. Clara’s dialect, for example, which she slips in and out of, often with little control, is one way in which this manifests itself in White Teeth; in addition, the symbol of the white teeth, “floating silently to the bottom of a glass” (77), suggests the importance of language as a symbol of intellect and of culture. The relationship that characters have with language is also important in On Beauty; living in the isolated, academic community of Wellington, the Belseys and the Kipps continually put too much faith in the power of language, until, toward the end of the novel, even Howard Belsey, for whom language is a weapon, begins to understand that words are not always the best tool for describing beauty.

In Wellington, language is a tool used to express intellect, to battle with other wielders of language, and ultimately to gain power over them. For example, when Zora Belsey meets with Dean French in an attempt to get into the class of Claire Malcolm, the woman with whom Howard had an affair, it is only after she uses a certain word that she really gets his attention: “Inappropriate,” repeated French. All he could do at this point was to aim for damage limitation. The word had been used” (146). It is the word, not what it represents, that wields the power in Wellington. Later in the same scene, as Zora continues to confront directly the reason for her inappropriate treatment, Dean French continues focusing on the language rather than the act: “Jack wished very much she would stop using that violent phrase. It was drilling into his brain: ‘Professor Malcolm and my father, Professor Malcolm and my father. The very thing that was not to be spoken of this fall semester […] was now being batted around his office like a pigskin filled with blood’” (146).
Like his sister Zora, Levi Belsey also attempts to use language to his advantage; however, rather than using it to further infiltrate Wellington (as Zora does), Levi uses it to escape the confines of Wellington, trying out a different language instead: “This faux Brooklyn accent belonged to neither Howard nor Kiki, and had only arrived in Levi’s mouth three years earlier, as he turned twelve” (11). Confident that this will effectively change his identity, Levi attempts to construct a self outside of the world of Wellington. However, Levi is never able to convince others of his identity, which is seen in his unsuccessful attempt to lead a revolt at the music mega-store where he works, where “it was immediately noticeable that only the white kids had showed up for the meeting” (186). His attempts to upset the work atmosphere lead him to be confronted by Bailey, his forty-something manager: “I know where you’re from. Those kids don’t know shit, but I know. They nice suburban kids. They think anyone in a pair of baggy jeans is a gangsta. But you can’t fool me. I know where you pretend to be from […] because that’s where I’m from – but you don’t see me acting like a nigger” (191-92). Bailey’s confrontation of Levi results in his immediate retreat to the comforts of home.

In Wellington language holds power even over those who attempt to live outside its realm of influence. Kiki, the character least enthralled by the power of language and most open to new ideas, disagrees strongly and loudly when Carlene Kipps suggests that “I don’t ask myself what did I live for […] I ask whom did I live for […] I see very clearly recently that in fact I didn’t live for an idea or even for God – I lived because I loved this person” (176). Kiki reacts violently toward this suggestion, unwilling to believe that either she or Carlene is as passive as that language suggests. However, in their fight following her discovery of Howard’s lengthy affair with a colleague, Kiki recycles this phrase a number of times: “I staked my whole life on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that” (206). The power of this phrase – and perhaps also the frightening truth of it – results in Kiki’s repeated use of it in their fight, each time in a slightly different form and with slightly different emphasis, as if she is not quite certain whether she believes it or whether she is wielding it properly: “I gave up my life for you. I don’t even know who I am any more” (206). Finally, near the end of the fight, she resignedly repeats it: “I staked my life on you. I staked my life” (207). Kiki’s repeated use of this phrase suggests that she is testing this language, trying it out, seeing how she feels about it. She is also aware of the power of language, as, seeing that her repetition of Carlene’s statement is not affecting Howard in the way that she hopes, she tries a different approach, turning to the vulgar in an attempt to provoke the desired reaction from Howard: “And don’t kid yourself: honey, I look at boys all the time – all the time. I see pretty boys every day of the week, and I think about their cocks, and what they would look like butt naked” (208). The important point here is that, like the other Wellingtonians, Kiki is exploring the power-relationships attached to words and using them to exert power over Howard in their fight.

The use of language in On Beauty culminates in Howard’s lecture on Rembrandt. Having forgotten his notes, having lost everything in his life that is important to him, and having nothing else to lose, Howard finally allows himself to appreciate silently the paintings that he has made a living criticizing. Howard’s gesture, as appropriate and necessary as it appears to readers, is lost on his audience: “Howard pressed the red button. He could hear Jack French saying to his eldest son, in his characteristically loud whisper: You see, Ralph, the order is meaningful. […] The rest of his audience were faintly frowning at the back wall” (442). When he reaches the final painting, only he and Kiki appreciate it, presumably understanding finally that sometimes it is necessary to stop talking, to stop playing the games of language. The novel moves toward an understanding of language as a flawed vessel, toward the realization that the power of language is only avoided in silence. And while there is no indication that this realization will be a lasting one for Howard and Kiki, and while his audience may stare confusedly at Howard’s moment of momentary enlightenment, Smith’s audience is made aware of the messy, complicated position that language holds in our interaction with the outside world.
Modernist Tellings

While *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* are built around demonstrating and championing a postmodernist perspective, their construction is decidedly modernist. In an essay on Forster, Smith discusses this aspect of Forster’s fiction: “Forster wanted his people to be in a muddle; his was a study of the emotional, erratic and unreasonable in human life. But what interests me is that his narrative structure is muddled also; impulsive, meandering, irrational, which seeming faults lead him on to two further problematics: mawkishness and melodrama” (“Love, Actually”). Smith points to the muddled nature of Forster’s narratives, which she views as commensurate with the state of his characters. However, unlike Forster’s determinedly clumsy narrative structures, designed to echo the emotionally clumsy characters described within them, Smith’s narratives are structurally sound and clearly marked.

Like a Joycean schema, the Table of Contents prefacing *White Teeth* makes visible Smith’s interest in constructing a web of parallels and correspondences among the four parts of her novel. It is a carefully controlled narrative, and close analysis demonstrates the extent to which Smith uses exterior structures such as chapter titles to govern its presentation. Each of the four parts is named after a character and contains two important years in that characters life: “ARCHIE 1974, 1945,” “SAMAD 1984, 1857,” “IRIE 1990, 1907,” and “MAGID, MILLAT, AND MARCUS 1992, 1999.” Apart from the last section, which is different in a number of ways (perhaps because of its movement from present to future, rather than from present to past), there are numerous parallels among the sections devoted to Archie, Samad, and Irie. Each of the five-chapter sections begins with a similarly constructed chapter title: “The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones,” “The Temptation of Samad Iqbal,” and “The Miseducation of Irie Jones” (the final section shares this construction, beginning with “The Return of Magid Mahfouz Mursheed Munbasim Iqbal”); each includes a chapter title that concerns teeth: “Teething Trouble,” “Molars,” and “Canines: The Ripping Teeth”; and each includes a “Root Canal” chapter: “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal,” “The Root Canals of Mangal Pande,” and “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden.”

The complicated and comprehensive exterior structure through which Smith presents *White Teeth* encourages readers to look at the structural level to find meaning, which is a common feature of modernist novels. In order to understand fully the various parallels and connections between these sometimes disparate characters, we must connect the dots, we must become textual detectives, and we must understand the ways that their lives, perspectives, and outlooks mesh together when viewed in the way that Smith presents them to us. The narrative perspective maintains its distance, for the most part, although it has no qualms about intermittently intruding, as it does with, for example, a running joke about verb tenses (“past tense, future perfect”). The following passage is perhaps the most direct intrusion by the narrator: “Yes, Millat was stoned. And it may be absurd to us that one Iqbal can believe the breadcrumbs laid down by another Iqbal […] have not yet blown away in the breeze. But it really doesn’t matter what we believe” (419). Even in this minor intrusion, the most direct in the 450-page novel, the narrator is apologizing for interfering and pleading ignorance. And yet, despite this plea that what we believe “doesn’t matter,” the novel is carefully crafted to make us believe certain things very strongly.

If we look, for example, at the cyclical nature of the novel as a whole, it becomes clear that there is some ordering narrative force shaping and molding (in short, interfering) in our reading experience at every step. This can be seen in the novel’s final chapter, as events at the launch of Marcus’ FutureMouse exhibit escalate, with each fundamentalist organization mounting an assault on the mouse. Interrupting the narrative flow in the novel’s final pages is the story of Archie’s mysterious encounter with Doctor Sick. Unlike the previous flashbacks (or “root canals,” to use the novel’s term for them), this incident is neither explained nor introduced as either a memory or as a
story being told to another character. Instead, it simply appears at the most suspenseful, chaotic point in the narrative. As Archie wrestles with his mixed-up feelings about killing the Nazi, he eventually flips a coin to decide: “The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong” (447). Using the same words that he/she earlier uses to describe the coin’s “elegant swoop” into a pinball machine, the narrator draws together various themes and parallels in a seemingly epiphanous moment.

This moment, as Archie leaps between Marcus and the gun pointed at him, serves as the culmination of every major character’s progression throughout the book; Magid and Millat are on opposite sides of Marcus’ research, Irie is pregnant with either Magid or Millat’s child, Clara attempts to prevent Hortense’s interference, Samad decides to allow Hortense to interfere, and Archie, of course, leaps between Millat and Marcus. But rather than allowing the moment to play out on its own, the narrator intervenes, crosscutting the scene with the narrative of Archie’s war injury. It is a climactic event, one that ties together nearly every character and theme together in a relatively neat and tidy bow; by harkening back to Archie’s section (and the gap in which it is revealed how Archie got shot in the leg), to the other “root canals” documented in Samad’s and Irie’s sections, and to the earlier coin tosses (particularly the one that lands in the pinball machine). It is a typically modernist move, one intended to guide readers toward knowledge – paradoxically, we are being led toward the message that randomness and chaos prevail over resolution and closure. The point here is that the modernist structure problematizes the postmodernist message that the final scene reveals to readers. While it is perhaps an overstatement to suggest that the final chapter ties everything together in a tidy bow (many questions are left unanswered as the mouse scurries off the table and into an air vent), Smith does provide a way out for both the mouse and for Irie’s unborn child. There is certainly an attempt at closure in the two “snapshots” of “Irie, Joshua, and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean Sea […]”, while Irie’s fatherless little girl […] feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings,” and of “Alsana and Samad, Archie and Clara, in O’Connell’s” (448), as the pieces of Smith’s modernist puzzle fall together neatly in the novel’s final pages.

The structure being imposed upon *On Beauty* is even more prominent than it is in *White Teeth*. Smith models the story of the Belseys and the Kipps on Forster’s *Howards End*, modernizing the narrative and the theme (“Only Connect”), including clever references, both in form and content, throughout the novel, compelling readers to “get into the research end of things” (374). In other words, the allusions throughout the novel reward the intertextual critic, both referencing and building upon the original in interesting and important ways. Smith herself comments on the importance of this connection in the Afterword: “My largest structural debt should be obvious to any E.M. Forster fan; suffice it to say he gave me a classy old frame, which I covered with new material as best I could.” Revision is a common trope of postmodernist fiction, as many important postmodernist novels – such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* – rewrite older novels to present different sides of the original stories or to demonstrate something lacking in them. However, Smith’s treatment of *Howards End* is more like Joyce’s use of the Odyssey in *Ulysses*, as it serves primarily as a structural model and a general inspiration for *On Beauty*. The epigraph “Only Connect,” for example, that precedes *Howards End* is a serious matter in *On Beauty*, as the novel is populated with characters utterly incapable of the kind of connection that Forster values. Furthermore, although she claims that the novel is merely a “classy old frame” and in interviews plays down any attempt to adhere strictly to the plot of *Howards End*, *On Beauty* at times suffers because of Smith’s strict faithfulness to its confines. For example, the scene in which Carlene Kipps tries to convince Kiki to come with her to Amherst – “No, dear, now – let’s go now. I have the keys – we could get the train and be there by lunch. I want you to see the pictures – they should be loved
by somebody like you. We'll go right away when this is wrapped. We'll be back for tomorrow evening” (268-69) – feels forced and unnatural. This scene, if not for the link to Forster, is completely unnecessary, as neither of the characters behave similarly to how they behave in the rest of the novel. The point here is that, particularly in this awkward scene, Smith struggles to fit her narrative into Forster’s frame even when it does not seem natural to the progression of the characters or the story. This kind of moment exemplifies the difficulty of reading Smith’s work in terms of the modernist/postmodernist division; one on hand, her story obviously pulls her away from the kind of straightforward, modernist relationship that she fosters between her novel and Forster’s, but at the same time she feels compelled to adhere to it.

The narrative perspective is another important site for analysis regarding the modernist qualities of On Beauty’s structure, and it is another way in which Smith models the novel on Howards End. This narrator, like the narrators of both Howards End and White Teeth, is confident and in total control of the novel’s world: “We must now jump nine months forward, and back across the Atlantic Ocean” (42). The narrator maintains his/her authority over the world of the novel, and is not afraid to pause the narrative flow to provide lengthy descriptions of the setting, and at times the effect of this is to make the novel feel Victorian in its attention to detail regarding setting and character. The following passage is typical of these digressions:

A tall, garnet-coloured building in the New England style, the Belsey residence roams over four creaky floors. The date of its construction (1856) is patterned in tile above the front door, and the windows retain their mottled green glass, spreading a dreamy pasture on the floorboards whenever strong light passes through them. They are not original, these windows, but replacements, the originals being too precious to be used as windows. Heavily insured, they are kept in a large safe in the basement. A significant portion of the value of the Belsey house resides in windows that nobody may look through or open. (16)

The description, which continues for approximately three pages, is in no way disguised as part of the narrative; in other words, this information is presented plainly, in an almost journalistic style, and, at first, without value or judgment placed on it. However, as the description continues, the narrator comments ironically on the house’s unused windows, allowing the audience to extend the metaphor to its occupants.

Furthermore, Smith uses free indirect discourse, a common feature of modernist fiction, throughout the novel to provide insight into various characters. Modernist fiction impels the reader to use the tools of writing to piece together its meaning, as we must essentially engage in literary interpretation in order to cobble together information about the characters. If we look, for example, at a passage from Joyce’s Dubliners, perhaps the most famous example of free indirect discourse, we see how this process works and why it is classified as a modernist enterprise:

Maria was a very, very small person indeed but she had a very long nose and a very long chin. She talked a little through her nose, always soothingly: "Yes, my dear," and "No, my dear." She was always sent for when the women quarrelled over their tubs and always succeeded in making peace. […] She had lovely ferns and wax-plants and, whenever anyone came to visit her, she always gave the visitor one or two slips from her conservatory. There was one thing she didn’t like and that was the tracts on the walks; but the matron was such a nice person to deal with, so genteel. (101)

Here we see a description of Maria, a lower-class Irish maid, presented through free indirect discourse. In other words, her image of herself influences the description of that image which is presented to us. The tip of her nose does not literally touch the tip of her chin; thus we realize, either at this point or through the accumulation of evidence throughout the story, that Maria is not well-educated and has an extremely negative self-image. The style of the passage both reflects and
gives evidence for the facts gleaned within it; she is uneducated (the repeated use of “very,” or the awkwardly constructed sentences) and unattractive, which we learn both through the narration’s statement of those facts and through the ugly, unattractive style in which it is written.

The following passage, from early in On Beauty, describes Kiki’s experience of watching Mozart with her family:

Mozart’s Requiem begins with you walking towards a huge pit. The pit is on the other side of a precipice, which you cannot see over until you are right at its edge. Your death is awaiting you in that pit. You don’t know what it looks like or sounds like or smells like. You don’t know whether it will be good or bad. You just walk towards it. [...] In the pit is a great choir, like the one you joined for two months in Wellington in which you were the only black woman. [...] The choir is [...] every person who has changed you during your time on this earth: your many lovers; your family; your enemies, the nameless, faceless woman who slept with your husband; the man you thought you were going to marry; the man you did. (69)

By allowing readers to experience this through Kiki’s eyes, by essentially allowing her to assume temporary control over the narrative, Smith engages in a typical modernist exercise. We learn about a character through the act of interpreting his/her narrative, by seeing how his/her narrative ability and style compare with the narrator’s. The Kiki-influenced narration is far more literate than Maria’s, for example, and it is clear that she is a deep-thinking yet haunted and unhappy woman. The frightening images of the choir hidden beneath the precipice demonstrate both her feelings of uneasiness regarding her marriage and her unwillingness to confront them. The passage (which goes on for several pages) is extremely perceptive and intuitive of this new experience, which we also learn are characteristics of Kiki. If we compare it to the description of the Belsey home, the description of Mozart’s Requiem is far more emotionally evocative and, although it contains little concrete external description, far more effective at conveying the experiencing of this event. Smith includes this passage of free indirect discourse essentially as an interpretive test designed to teach readers that Kiki is, although less educated, far more insightful than many of the other Wellingtonians we meet in the novel.

Finally, like White Teeth, On Beauty moves toward a moment of reconciliation and understanding for the majority of its characters. In her essay on Forster, Smith discusses his determinedly cryptic endings:

This lack of moral enthusiasm finds an echo in every part of the structure; his endings, in particular, are diminuendos, ambivalent trailings off, that seem almost passive. This deliberate withholding of satisfaction that Forster produces has irritated many critics, Katherine Mansfield’s account being as damning as any: “E.M. Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot. He’s a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. Is it not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain’t going to be no tea.” (“Love, Actually”)

Unlike Forster’s “warm tea” endings, Smith sets her endings to full boil. The last chapter of On Beauty finds the Belsey children in good spirits despite their parents’ divorce, and they each demonstrate their autonomy in their interaction with Howard; Zora reprimands him a number of times, Jerome defends her mother’s love of the painting given to her by Carlene Kipps, and Levi refuses to accept his father’s money. Finally, as Howard drives off to his lecture, the children collectively give him the finger. Following this scene, in which Howard appears to be turning into his father (seen in his prejudice toward a lesbian), he arrives incredibly late at his lecture and forgets his notes in the car. While, as previously discussed, the point of this moment is Howard’s realization that it is no longer necessary to demonstrate his intellect by criticizing Rembrandt, that he can finally admit “I – like – the – tomato” (312), nevertheless Smith presents this as an epiphany, a real true
point of possible growth and change for Howard. The relationship between Howard and Kiki, certainly the central relationship of the novel, is, although recently ended and a long way from healed, momentarily rekindled: “Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. Kiki looked up suddenly at Howard – not, he thought, unkindly. Howard said nothing. Another silent minute passed” (442-43). Rather than ending with the suggestion that these characters will continue their selfish ways after the novel ends, the final pages soften in their view of Howard, and we see the world through his eyes which, as a result of losing nearly everything, finally open up to both the beauty in the Rembrandt paintings and the beauty he once saw in his wife.

*The Flipping Coin*

The verdict is still out, the coin is still hanging in the air, regarding Smith’s place in contemporary literature. Discussing Smith’s fiction in terms of modernism and postmodernism demonstrates a clear division in her work between form and content, between postmodernist tales and modernist tellings. A confident, omniscient narrator relates a tale of characters that learn the necessity of relinquishing their authority in the chaotic real-world. A narrative about the messiness of the relationship between past and the present has clear divisions between tales of the present and tales of the past. A story about the failure of art to structure life is built upon the structure of a work of high modernism. And while there are moments in the telling when the narrator winks or when the larger structure bends, and while there are moments in the tale when the characters benefit from the fundamentalist beliefs they cling to, this rift is a prominent feature of both *White Teeth* and *On Beauty.*

It remains to be seen whether Smith is interested in ironing out these complexities in her future works, or whether she will reflect the fracturedness of her characters in the structure or the narrative perspective. As it is now, her fiction is like that coin tossed by Archie – landing on neither one side nor the other, rolling somewhere no one can predict, elegantly swooping and somersaulting its way into oblivion – and like Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse: “Archie […] watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down” (448). Smith’s novels are alive and kicking, unable to be labeled either modernist or postmodernist, and rushing away from us just as we attempt to pin them down.
1 Although McHale discusses the detective genre as definitively modernist, it should be noted that many postmodern novels use the detective genre in order to demonstrate the failure of the modernist novel to express the true nature of mysteries. Thus, unlike the modernist mystery, which can be solved by careful textual analysis, the postmodern mystery – seen, for example, in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* or Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* – refuses to be solved. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see McHale (20-30).

2 It must be said that, while McHale provides a useful paradigm for distinguishing between the general systems underlying modernist and postmodernist fiction, his use of Jakobson’s dominant does not wholly prevent him from succumbing to the problems he attempts to avoid through it. In his book, McHale too often constructs a straw modernism against which he defines postmodernist writing. In other words, the closed-off, hermetically sealed modernism that he describes sometimes seems designed solely to contrast with the openness of postmodernist writing. However, his paradigm is still more useful than most, such as Ihab Hassan’s famously rigid lists of modernist and postmodernist qualities in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*; furthermore, it is useful in this context, as it deals nicely with the aspects of authority and control that I am interested in discussing.

3 However, this is not meant to suggest, as a number of critics do, that in these narratives Beckett somehow moves beyond the tropes of fiction. Paul Davies, for example, concludes that in *The Unnamable* “there is a resolution of emotion and intention that we do not find earlier” (85). The point of the trilogy is that, even after they attempt to kill traditional elements of narrative (such as characters, punctuation, etc.), these narrators are bound by them because that’s all they are. They exist solely in language, and they (like Beckett, and like Beckett’s readers) are bound within it. By the end of the Unnamable’s narrative, he has created characters, written hundreds of pages, used metaphors, and engaged in all the familiar literary tropes that he supposedly moves beyond in the opening pages. We even talk about this supposedly unnamed narrator using a name – the Unnamable.

4 This perspective is also championed by J.P. Hamilton, the elderly war hero for whom a young Irie, Millat, and Magid deliver groceries through a school program: “But while you’re still young, the important matter is the third molars. They are more commonly referred to as the wisdom teeth, I believe. […] They are the only part of the body that a man must grow into. […] Have them out early […] You simply must. You can’t fight against it. I wish I had. I wish I’d given up early and hedged my bets, as it were. Because they’re your father’s teeth, you see, wisdom teeth are passed down by the father, I’m certain of it. So you must be big enough for them” (145). Hamilton’s unfounded certainty that wisdom teeth are “your father’s teeth” is, like Samad’s obsession with his past, a manifestation of his desire to link concretely the present and the past.

5 Irie’s grandmother, Hortense Bowden, represents the opposite perspective, arguing for the necessity of keeping the boundaries in place between different races: “Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up. […] ’Im want everybody to keep tings separate. […] When you mix It up, nuttin’ good can come. It wasn’t intended.” (318)