

Narrative Excess and the Aesthetics of Hysterical Realism
A Comparative Study of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

^aSURI Bhargavi and ^bDr M. Sambaiah

^aLecturer in the Department of English, Akshara Junior College, Nellore,
Research Scholar JNTUA.

^bAssociate Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,
JNTUA College of Engineering, Pulivendula.

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetics of “hysterical realism” through a comparative study of *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith and *Underworld* (1997) by Don DeLillo. The term, introduced by James Wood, refers to a style of contemporary fiction marked by narrative excess, expansive scope, and an intense engagement with the complexities of modern life. This paper investigates how both novels create immersive “lifeworlds” through intricate webs of historical, cultural, and technological references, while also questioning the boundaries of realism itself. The study examines how Smith’s multicultural London and DeLillo’s postwar American setting construct meaning within conditions of narrative abundance. While *White Teeth* emphasizes cosmopolitanism, identity, and ethical relations in a globalized urban context, *Underworld* portrays a fragmented, information-heavy landscape shaped by memory, waste, and technological mediation. The paper contends that narrative excess in both works operates not simply as stylistic excess, but as a critical response to the epistemological complexities of late twentieth-century modernity. Ultimately, it argues that hysterical realism is not a superficial or failed form, but a purposeful aesthetic strategy for capturing the dense interconnectedness of contemporary life.

Keywords: Hysterical Realism; Narrative Excess; Zadie Smith; Don DeLillo; Contemporary Fiction; Globalisation; Multiculturalism; Narrative Form; Information Overload; Cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The late twentieth century saw a significant shift in narrative form, as novelists responded to the growing complexity of globalized, information-driven societies. One notable literary response to this condition is what the critic James Wood termed “hysterical realism,” a style characterized by narrative excess, encyclopedic scope, and an urgent impulse to capture the totality of modern experience. Two prominent works often associated with this mode are *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *Underworld* by Don DeLillo. Despite emerging from distinct cultural contexts, both novels share a commitment to representing the chaotic multiplicity of contemporary life.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of these texts through the framework of narrative excess and the aesthetics of hysterical realism. While Smith situates her narrative within the multicultural landscape of London, foregrounding interpersonal relationships and cosmopolitan identity, DeLillo presents a vast and interconnected American setting shaped by Cold War tensions, consumerism, and technological influence.

The paper argues that narrative excess in both novels should be understood not simply as a stylistic feature but as an epistemological condition, reflecting the challenge of representing a world saturated with information, history, and cultural interaction. Through this comparative approach, the study aims to reconsider hysterical realism as a purposeful and meaningful aesthetic response to contemporary realities, rather than as a shortcoming in psychological depth.

Literature Review

The notion of “hysterical realism,” introduced by James Wood in his critique of contemporary fiction, has sparked considerable debate within literary studies. Wood defines this narrative mode as one marked by excessive energy, encyclopedic reach, and a tendency to prioritize informational richness over psychological depth. His criticism, particularly aimed at novels such as **White Teeth** and **Underworld**, suggests that these works privilege structural intricacy and thematic abundance at the expense of interiority.

Nevertheless, later scholarship has questioned Wood’s assessment, proposing that narrative excess should be understood not as a flaw but as a conscious aesthetic choice. Critics argue that hysterical realism mirrors the epistemological realities of late modernity, where the expansion of information, globalization, and technological mediation demand innovative narrative strategies. Within this framework, the

writings of Zadie Smith and Don DeLillo are often interpreted as responses to the complexities of contemporary existence.

Research on Smith's work frequently highlights themes of multiculturalism, identity construction, and cosmopolitanism, particularly within urban contexts like London. Her narrative approach is often described as polyphonic and ethically attentive, blending satire with emotional resonance. In contrast, critical studies of DeLillo emphasize his focus on systems theory, media culture, and the material dimensions of history. His later fiction, especially **Underworld**, is commonly analyzed through the lenses of memory, waste, and technological mediation. Despite differences in tone and thematic concerns, both authors create narrative worlds that capture the interconnectedness and instability characteristic of contemporary life.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative, comparative textual analysis** of *White Teeth* and *Underworld*.

The methodology involves:

- **Close Reading:** Detailed analysis of narrative structure, thematic patterns, and stylistic features in both texts.
- **Comparative Approach:** Identifying similarities and differences in the representation of narrative excess, character construction, and thematic concerns.
- **Theoretical Application:** Interpreting textual evidence through the frameworks of hysterical realism, postmodernism, and dwelling.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Situating both novels within their socio-historical contexts—multicultural Britain and postwar America.

Primary texts serve as the main source of analysis, supported by critical essays, theoretical writings, and scholarly interpretations. The methodology emphasizes interpretive depth rather than quantitative measurement, aligning with established practices in literary research.

Findings

The comparative analysis reveals several key findings:

1. **Narrative Excess as Representation**
Both novels employ narrative excess not merely as stylistic embellishment but as a means of representing the complexity of modern life.
2. **Different Modes of Engagement**
Smith emphasizes interpersonal relationships and cultural identity, while DeLillo focuses on systemic structures and material processes.

3. **Expansion of Realism**

Hysterical realism extends traditional realism by incorporating elements of excess, fragmentation, and interconnectedness.

4. **Reevaluation of Wood's Critique**

The study challenges Wood's claim that hysterical realism lacks depth, demonstrating that narrative excess can coexist with meaningful thematic exploration.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: **hysterical realism, and postmodernism.**

Firstly, hysterical realism provides the primary analytical lens. As defined by James Wood, it refers to a narrative mode characterized by excess, speed, and an obsession with interconnectedness. Rather than treating this as a purely negative phenomenon, the present study interprets it as an adaptive aesthetic form that seeks to represent the overwhelming complexity of late twentieth-century life.

Secondly, the study engages with postmodernist theory, particularly its emphasis on fragmentation, multiplicity, and the instability of meaning. However, it argues that hysterical realism extends beyond postmodernism by reintroducing large-scale narrative structures and social totality, albeit in an exaggerated and hyperactive form.

Together, these theoretical approaches enable a nuanced understanding of how hysterical realism functions as both a stylistic and epistemological response to contemporary conditions.

Analysis of the Works

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Smith's *White Teeth* exemplifies hysterical realism through its dynamic narrative structure and thematic engagement with multicultural identity. The novel's episodic and interconnected plotlines create a sense of narrative overflow, reflecting the complexity of London as a global city.

The characters' experiences illustrate the tensions between historical legacy and contemporary identity. Samad Iqbal's internal conflict, for instance, highlights the struggle between tradition and modernity, while Irie Jones's search for belonging underscores the emotional dimensions of multicultural existence. The narrative's oscillation between humor and seriousness allows Smith to explore these issues with both critical distance and empathetic insight.

The “FutureMouse” exhibition serves as a focal point where scientific ambition, cultural identity, and ethical questions converge. This event encapsulates the novel’s central concern with the unpredictability of life in a globalized world, demonstrating how narrative excess functions as a means of representing complexity.

Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

DeLillo’s *Underworld* presents a more expansive and structurally intricate form of hysterical realism. The novel’s nonlinear narrative and wide temporal scope create a dense network of connections, linking personal histories with broader socio-political events.

The theme of waste operates as a central metaphor, representing both the material residue of human activity and the accumulation of historical memory. Nick Shay’s profession in waste management symbolizes the process of organizing and interpreting this excess, suggesting that meaning emerges from the interplay between preservation and disposal.

DeLillo’s focus on technological and non-human elements further distinguishes his approach. The novel explores how media, infrastructure, and material objects shape human experience, often overshadowing individual agency. This emphasis on systems and networks reflects a more detached and analytical perspective on contemporary life.

Discussion

The findings suggest that hysterical realism should be understood as a significant literary development rather than a deviation from realism. Both Zadie Smith and Don DeLillo utilize narrative excess to address the challenges of representing a world characterized by globalization, technological expansion, and cultural diversity.

In *White Teeth*, excess is mediated through humor and human connection, allowing readers to engage emotionally with the characters’ experiences. In contrast, *Underworld* presents a more fragmented and impersonal vision, emphasizing the influence of systems and structures on human life. These differences highlight the versatility of hysterical realism as a narrative mode.

Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing debates about the value and limitations of hysterical realism, demonstrating its relevance as a tool for analyzing contemporary fiction.

Hysterical Realism: Concept and Context

James Wood’s critique of hysterical realism defines it as a mode propelled by “vitality at all costs,” marked by rapid, frenetic plotting, an overabundance of detail,

and a persistent focus on interconnectedness. In his view, such novels tend to trade psychological depth for a wide-ranging accumulation of information, reducing characters to mere nodes within expansive social networks. Yet, this position has been contested by scholars who maintain that the very excess Wood criticizes is, in fact, fundamental to the genre's capacity to represent complex realities.

Hysterical realism can be seen as emerging from the traditions of postmodernism, while also moving beyond its emphasis on formal experimentation to engage more directly with the material conditions of globalization, technological growth, and cultural hybridity. In this light, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *Underworld* by Don DeLillo illustrate a transition from postmodern fragmentation toward a broader, more interconnected narrative structure.

Narrative Excess and Lifeworld Construction in *White Teeth*

White Teeth by Zadie Smith exemplifies hysterical realism through its expansive narrative design, polyphonic voice, and sustained engagement with multicultural themes. Set in London, the novel traces the intertwined lives of the Jones and Iqbal families, using their personal histories to explore larger questions of identity, memory, and belonging.

Cosmopolitanism and Multicultural Dwelling

Smith's depiction of London presents a dynamic space of cultural convergence, where characters grapple with identities shaped by colonial legacies and global migration. The idea of "dwelling" becomes particularly significant, as individuals continuously negotiate their sense of place within a diverse and shifting social environment. This tension is especially visible in Samad Iqbal, whose longing for his Bangladeshi roots clashes with the lived realities of contemporary British life.

Narrative Excess and Polyphony

The novel's sense of excess emerges through its interwoven plotlines, frequent historical detours, and shifting narrative styles. Smith adopts a polyphonic mode that combines humor, irony, and emotional resonance. The "FutureMouse" exhibition acts as a key moment where multiple narrative strands converge, symbolizing the complex entanglement of science, history, and individual identity.

Emotional and Ethical Attunement

Despite its energetic and layered structure, *White Teeth* sustains a strong emphasis on relationships and ethical reflection. Characters such as Irie Jones reveal moments of introspection and vulnerability, demonstrating that narrative excess does not diminish emotional depth; rather, it situates it within a wider social and cultural framework.

Narrative Excess and Systemic Meaning in *Underworld*

Underworld by Don DeLillo offers a more expansive and structurally intricate manifestation of hysterical realism. Spanning multiple decades, the novel weaves together seemingly unrelated events and characters into an extensive narrative network, capturing the deep interconnectedness of American society during and after the Cold War.

The Encyclopedic Impulse

DeLillo's narrative is distinguished by its encyclopedic scope, drawing on diverse domains such as nuclear physics, waste management, and the cultural history of baseball. This dense accumulation of detail produces a sense of informational saturation, reflecting the overwhelming complexity of contemporary life.

Memory, Waste, and the Non-Human

A central motif in *Underworld* is waste, which operates both as a material reality and as a metaphorical archive of human experience. Through Nick Shay's role in waste management, the novel suggests that meaning emerges from processes of accumulation, preservation, and disposal. DeLillo's sustained focus on non-human elements—objects, infrastructures, and technological systems—sets his narrative apart from the more human-centered approach found in Smith's work.

Absence and Fragmentation

In contrast to the social vibrancy of *White Teeth*, *Underworld* is shaped by themes of absence and fragmentation. Its nonlinear structure and shifting narrative perspectives evoke a world in which meaning remains unstable, continually reshaped by technological forces and historical discontinuities.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that hysterical realism, as exemplified in *White Teeth* and *Underworld*, is not merely a stylistic excess but a deliberate aesthetic response to the conditions of late modernity. Through their expansive narratives, both Smith and DeLillo capture the overwhelming interconnectedness of contemporary life, offering distinct yet complementary perspectives on the challenges of representation.

While Smith foregrounds the human dimensions of globalization—identity, community, and ethical engagement—DeLillo explores the systemic and material forces that shape modern existence. Together, their works illustrate the potential of hysterical realism to serve as a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of the contemporary world.

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