Historicity of Narrative and Identity Formation

Summary:

Recent turns in narrative studies suggest a universality to narrative that begs questioning. These newer theories maintain a cognitive focus that claims the act of narrative is fundamental to identity formation. This trend also challenges a previous tradition in literary studies that argued for a historicity of narrative form.

This research project seeks to reintroduce a historical approach that takes into account the universal claims of narrative studies, especially as they pertain to identity formation in writing the self and life stories. We plan to reopen dialogue between these two approaches and theorize a middle ground that would articulate certain universal elements while also paying close attention to historical developments.

Frederic Jameson theorizes on the notion of modern depthlessness, stating that we are in "a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum". He goes on to say that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time”. In other words, contemporary life has lost a knowledge of history. Not only do we need historical breadth for our study, but historical depth: this is fundamental to our theoretical approach. Given both of our backgrounds in literature and historical approaches to literature, we will attempt to move beyond the historical depthlessness of the new trends in narrative theory. We hope to offer greater insight into questions such as “how does the narrative impulse manifest itself universally and historically?”, “in what ways does identity formation take on different historical forms, and what historical factors contribute to this?”, and “why have narrative studies moved away from historical approaches to literature, instead making universal assertions and concerning itself with identity formation?”. These fundamental questions will guide our research, and allow us to, in the end, examine the relationship between social media and identity formation in our contemporary moment.

As the prime focus of the project is bringing into dialogue more recent narrative studies and studies that foreground historicity, the bulk of our research will be an annotated bibliography that covers key sources in both fields. The final written project will articulate a thesis regarding the points of contact and dissent between the two approaches to narrative studies and assert a conclusion that makes sense of these varying approaches.

The attempt to bridge the two different approaches to narrative studies is only just beginning to be done in the field. The dominant trend in narrative studies that asserts universal claims lacks a crucial historical element, which we will reintroduce; by reconciling the historical approach with the dominant trend being practiced today, we are helping forge a complex and interdisciplinary approach in the field of narrative study.

1 Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Capitalism, p. 6
2 Ibid. p. 16
Research:
While conducting our research, we will not only look at theories of narrative, but also theories of history and the notion of history as narrative. In approaching narrative studies that emphasize historicity, we will briefly study approaches to history in general.

From the Enlightenment period arose a new historical consciousness. Grand theories, such as those of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx, sought to introduce a logic into a history. Such a pursuit, however, stands in contrast to recent postmodern studies of history. For example, postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard called into question and the very possibility of grand theories or metanarratives, and instead posited the localization of narratives. Moreover, postmodernist Hayden White examined the value of narrativity and the ways in which narratives arise out of specific historical realities and carry a self-conscious narrator. These varying theories of history will be part of our foundational research and aid in our approach to historiography and history as narrative. Questions of historicity and universality are intertwined with both the study of history and narrative; thus, we will make sense of these questions by conducting our research through both a historical and narratival lens while being conscious of the dialectical relation between the two.

As outlined below in our syllabus, we will examine both new theoretical studies of narrative and engage with texts that closely evaluate historical developments that occurred periodically in narrative. Since the social totality in which a writer operates is both historical and cultural, we will try to make sense of certain universal elements while also recognizing the necessarily historical character of texts.

We will apply our findings to life writing throughout history, using a nuanced synthesis of both approaches. Applying such an interdisciplinary approach to life writing has not been done before in the field. We will closely examine narrative’s role in identity formation and how writers in different periods employ narrative in order to conceptualize, or perhaps even define, the notion of “self.”

Contemporary Concerns/Relevance:
The issue of narrative and its relation to identity formation is very relevant today. The internet and social media have radically changed the medium in which identity formation takes place. The impulse to narrate our selves and life stories through social media creates a new form of narrative that is intimately tied to our historical moment.

Analyzing how identity is represented through social media will constitute an end question of this narrative studies project. We will explore key issues, such as: what happens to narrative in these new technological mediums? Is narrative still universal historically as an essential method of identity formation?

Methodology:
Our methodology will be interdisciplinary. We will employ narratival, historical, and theoretical approaches throughout our research, with the objective of finding intersections between narrative studies that assert universal claims and historical approaches to literature. These two methodologies - universal and historical - will be used in order to form a methodology that
incorporates both. Our method will thus manifest itself through praxis.

**Preparation:**
I (the student) bring to this research project an extensive background in narrative and historical studies with an interdisciplinary perspective. As a double major in English and Classics with a concentration in Comparative World Literature, I have the historical breadth to be able to analyze key changes in narratives of identity formation. In addition, my work in sociology and IPHS (Classical Social Theory, German Social Theory, Postmodernism, IS: Dialectic of Modernity, etc.) provides me with a strong theoretical base, one that will allow the creation of a methodologically nuanced approach. I have completed a number of research projects on narrative already, including papers on epistemology and “self” in Modernist texts, performative identity in Jane Austen’s novels, and the failure of Dostoevsky’s Underground Man to form an identity due to his liminal state. I will also complete three more research papers by the end of this semester, for which I plan to conduct research related to this project in order to enhance my summer research to the highest degree possible.

Lastly, I have also already worked independently on a research project with Professor Elkins in an Independent Study last semester. We will collaborate effectively and with the hope of introducing insightful research into the discipline.

**HISTORICITY OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH SYLLABUS**

In this research project, I (the student) will read approximately two books per week. Each Friday, I will write annotated bibliography entries for the two sources read that week. After each major section of the project, I will spend a week writing up the key elements of each section and their significance for the overall project, while also consulting other research articles if necessary. By the time we reach Week 10, I will have a completed annotated bibliography and a significant amount of writing from weeks four and seven. We will thus be able to finish the final written paper of our project and draw up our conclusions during Week 10.

**WEEKS 1-3: THEORIES OF NARRATIVE**

- Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*
- Martin McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader*
- David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, Robyn R. Warhol, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*
- James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz (Editors), *A Companion to Narrative Theory* *(Compilation of Essays by Various Authors)*
- Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*
- Kathleen Roberts, *Alterity and Narrative: Stories and the Negotiation of Western Identities*

**WEEK 4: WRITING**

- Write up significance of sources thus far, weeks one through three.
WEEK 5: THEORIES OF HISTORY
- Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflection on the Philosophy of History*
- Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe*

WEEK 6: HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE
- Robert Scholes, James Phelan, Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded*
- Dominick Lacapra, *History, Literature, Critical Theory*
- Richard Lebow, *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves*

WEEK 7: WRITING
- Write up significance of sources from weeks five and six, synthesizing work with writing from week four.

WEEKS 8-9: NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY FORMATION
- Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (Editors), *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*
- David Parker, *The Self in Moral Space: Life Narrative and the Good*
- Owen Flanagan, *Performing Oneself* (Essay)
- Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*
- Ruth Page, *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction*

WEEK 10: WRITING: CONCLUSIONS AND THEORIZING OUR NEW APPROACH
- Finalize annotated bibliography and draw up conclusions to project.