



## Reasons of *Copenhagen* Ending in Such a Way: From the Perspective of Postmodernism

XU Hongyan<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 1 September 2013; accepted 6 December 2013

### Abstract

Postmodernism arose partly as a continuation of the ideas of modernism in western literature, art and architecture, and other forms of thinking and expressions since the late 1940s. This paper tries to use the features of postmodernism to analyze the reasons of *Copenhagen* ends in such way. Subverting the subject, humbling history, transforming time, the terrorism of truth and etc are such features. In *Copenhagen*, the author provides the possibilities to explain the event by three attempts of the three characters' trying to find out the real fact. It is coincidental with the disputed character of the event. In such way, Frayn provides a new version of the 1941 mysterious meeting.

**Key words:** Postmodernism; Features; Multiple ending

XU Hongyan (2013). Reasons of *Copenhagen* Ending in Such a Way: From the Perspective of Postmodernism. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(3), 100-104. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130703.3008>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130703.3008>

### 1. DEFINITION OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism emerged in Western literature, art and architecture, and other forms of thinking and expressions in the period of late 1940s, and is still in progress. The name "postmodernism" appears to be a strange contradiction. It suggests a time after the modern, perhaps "the future". It is important to emphasize the affixes; *post* and *ism*. The *ism* means we are dealing with a movement, rather than a chronological division;

the *post* means *after*. Postmodernism is the movement which followed modernism, and the name emphasize the relationship between the two movements. Postmodernism did not simply follow modernism, it was a consequence of it. Modernism created conditions necessary for postmodernism to happen.

Inevitably modernism, which had been shocking when it first appeared, began to look less unconventional and more institutionalized. Its key writers appear on English literature syllabuses throughout the world; it has become the "official culture". To some extent modernism has been culturally "defused"; it does not change the way people think as much as it did at first.

Postmodernism arose partly as a continuation of the ideas of modernism, in that it continues to challenge cultural forms and push back the limits of how we represent the world. But postmodernism pushes many of the questions and ideas further, it is more extreme and anarchic (Thronborrow & Wareing, 2000).

Rosenau in her book discusses some features of postmodernism, which is the framework of my analysis of the reasons of that the playwright ends *Copenhagen* in such way. Rosenau (1992) discusses subverting the subject, humbling history, transforming time, the terrorism of truth, abandoning the author, transforming the text and re-orienting the reader.

### 2. DEATH OF THE SUBJECT: FRAGMENTARY AND UNCERTAIN CHARACTERIZATION OF HEISENBERG

Subjectivity refers to "individuality and self-awareness—the condition of being a subject. Post-modernists are not like modern philosophy of science discourse defines "subjective" as referring to feelings and "objective" as referring to some independent, external reality. Post-modernism offers a primarily negative assessment of the

modern subject. The subject, the postmodernists contend, is fictitious, in the extreme a mere construction, “only a mask, a role, a victim, at worst an ideological construct, at best a nostalgic effigy” (Rosenau, 1992, p.42).

The most extreme of the skeptical postmodernism consider the subject to be a linguistic convention or an effect of thinking on language. The subject is not the origin of “action, writing or other forms of expression”; rather language constitutes and interprets subjects and objects. Postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida argue that the self is only a “position in language,” a mere “effect of discourse” (Rosenau, 1992, p.43).

The post-modern opposition to the subject is not entirely original but influenced by Freud and Nietzsche. In announcing the death of the subject the skeptics are also influenced by more recent structural precursors. For the structuralists, relinquishing the subject meant reducing the role or individuals, and character development in literature. Following the lead of structuralists, there are no longer character descriptions in post-modern literature. We are not told about a specific individual having a certain color hair and being or large and small stature. The subject in postmodernists’ works is neither unified nor entirely coherent. The skeptical postmodernists are critical of the central role of the subject. (Rosenau, 1992, p.43).

This paper will analyze the incoherent and disunified character—Heisenberg, whose characterization contributes greatly to the ambiguity and uncertainty of the 1941 meeting.

### **2.1 Heisenberg’s Stay in Germany**

It is hard to define his stay in Germany during the Second World War. Why did he stay when all the top Jewish scientists left in spite of he got two offers from two universities from America? (Frayn, 1998, pp.8-9). Why did he still teach Einstein’s relativity in Germany for it was called Jewish physics in spite of most terrible attacks? In addition, he was called “White Jew” because of his teaching relativity in Germany. He might want to rebuild German physics after Hitler went or just want to serve for Hitler’s atomic bomb project (Frayn, 1998, p.9).

### **2.2 Heisenberg’s Attitude Towards Dealing With Atomic Bombs**

Does he have the moral responsibility to stop both German and the Allies’ building of atomic bombs with Bohr for the whole world? In this play he shows deep concern for the stopping producing the atomic bomb for its vastly deconstructive force. Does he want to be the first to produce self-sustaining reactor in the world to realize his ambition? He also admitted that his mad efforts in producing the reactor? Does he come to Copenhagen for spying the development of the Allies for he wants to build bombs for Hitler? Or does he just want to disclose the advancement of the German atomic project to Bohr to let the Allies know? (Frayn, 1998, pp.41-51). Does

Heisenberg come to consult Bohr to stop the study of the nuclear bombs together or he just come to show off because of his irreplaceable position in German? Margrette thinks that Heisenberg’s coming because he wants to show himself off to them. In 1924, Heisenberg was a humble assistant lecturer from a humiliated nation, grateful to have a job. Now he is back in triumph—the leading scientist in a nation that’s conquered most of Europe (Frayn, 1998, p.76). He is anxious to let the Bohrs know that he is in charge of some vital piece of secret research and he’s preserved a lofty moral independence so famously and successfully that he is in a moral dilemma to face (Frayn, 1998, p.77).

### **2.3 Heisenberg’s Attitude Towards Dropping of Atomic Bomb**

Does he really condemn the bombs dropped by the Allies? Heisenberg strongly condemns what the Allies do.

They dropped the bomb on anyone who was in reach. On old men and women in the street, on mothers and their children. The scientists play happily with toy cap-pistol. Then someone else picks up and pulls the trigger... and all at once there’s blood everywhere and people screaming because it wasnot a toy at all... (Frayn, 1998, p.43).

Here he refers to the scientist’s producing bomb out of interest but ignoring the deconstructive force of it. Does he simply condemn or because he does not produce bomb earlier than the Allies according to Margrethe? Margrethe says Heisenberg transfer his burden to Bohr (Frayn, 1998, p.47). However, Heisenberg and his colleague were madly going on the reactor and expecting to achieve the first self-sustaining chain reaction in the world, which is inconsistent with the previous talk that he does not want to build nuclear bombs (Frayn, 1998, p.51).

### **2.4 Heisenberg’s Reason of Not Producing Atomic Bombs**

He did not want to build bombs at all or because he could not build because of the miscalculation of the critical mass.

When Margrette says that Heisenberg did not build bomb because he could not, he even did not understand physics. He did not understand the crucial difference between a reactor and a bomb (Frayn, 1998, pp.81-82). Heisenberg says he understood very clearly and did tell others with evidence and witness. Bohr says Heisenberg could have done bombs without ever building the reactor (Frayn, 1998, p.86). His miscalculation of the critical mass, which was the most important to establish the chain-reaction, was due to his unwillingness to build bomb like Bohr (Frayn, 1998, p.88).

In this part, we can see it is hard to pin down what kind of character Heisenberg is because the three characters hold different opinions. We cannot say that Heisenberg has moral rights to stop the study of bombs together with Bohr, we also cannot say that he is the collaborator of Nazi. We cannot tell whether he really concern the vastly

deconstructive force of bombs or because his ambition to be the first one to produce bombs in the world. We cannot tell his failure of producing the bombs before the Allies is due to his inability or his unwillingness to produce.

Therefore, so many mysteries about Heisenberg have not been disclosed. It is impossible to pursue the ultimate meaning of the 1941 meeting because of the disunified and incoherent of the characterization of Heisenberg, who is the main character of the 1941 meeting.

---

### 3. NO TRUTH IS TRUTH

---

First let us look at the postmodernist views about time, space and history, which are closely related to postmodern views of truth.

These concepts are taken for granted: knowledge of history is essential for comprehending the present; time is linear; and space is fixed, constant, and measurable. But postmodernists propose modifications of these ideas. They doubt (i) the idea that there is a real, knowable past, a record of evolutionary progress of human ideas, institutions, or actions; (ii) the view that historians should be objective; (iii) that reason enables historians to explain the past; and (iv) that the role of history is to interpret and transmit human cultural and intellectual heritage from generation to generation. Thus, besides postmodernism, the New History movement and the End of history philosophy are important centers of opposition to conventional history. The post-modernist criticize conventional history. They contend that history is logocentric, is a source of myth, ideology, and prejudice, and a method assuming closure. They attribute little importance to history for its own sake. They reject history as reasoned analysis focused on the particular or the general (Rosenau, 1992, p.63).

The skeptical post-modernists reject any understanding of time as chronological or linear; they attribute to this conception the pejorative term, “chronophonism”. The modern understanding of time is said to be oppressive, measuring and controlling one’s activities. Linear time is viewed as offensively technical, rational, scientific, and hierarchical. The postmodernists offer a view of time as anarchical, disconnected, and misaligned rather than linear, evolutionary, or intentional. The postmodernists’ views on time receive support from modern science. In *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking, a theoretical physicist and mathematician, argue that “imaginary time is really the real time, and what we call real time is just a figment of our imaginations.” In real time, “the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down. But in imaginary time there are no singularities or boundaries.” He contends there is no “unique absolute time,” that “clock carried by different

observers would not necessarily agree. Thus time became a more personal concept, relative to the observer who measured it.” In addition, there is “no important difference between the forward and backward directions of imaginary time” (Rosenau, 1992 pp.68-69).

The skeptical postmodernists see space as tantamount to hyper-space. Postmodern hyper-space can be invented and with equal ease commanded to vanish, or it can be expanded with the aid of mental gymnastics by pure intellectual construction (Rosenau, 1992, p.69).

Postmodern fiction sets the trend for violating conventional conceptions of both time and place. Postmodern authors deliberately violate linear sequences. Stories “fold back upon themselves and endings turn out to be beginnings, suggesting and endless recursivity” (Rosenau, 1992, p.70).

Postmodern views of history, time and space are closely intertwined: The postmodernists’ view on history, time and space are revealed in the narrative structure of the literary works. The story is not told in linear order and cause-result relations. The space is floatable. It is not very important to begin and end a story because time and space become meaningless. Thus, it is no use to pursue the ultimate meaning of everything (Rosenau, 1992, p.75).

The postmodern view—there is no truth, and all is construction—is itself the ultimate contradiction. They argue that claims of truth can never be independent of language, that truth is an “effect of discourse”. The relationship between name and meaning, the signified and signifier, is problematic. If, as postmodernist argue, language produces and reproduces its own world without reference to reality, then it is impossible to say anything definite because language as purely an artificial sign system cannot assure truth. There is no precise meaning for words, no definitive versions of a text, in short, no simple truth. postmodern truth is, then, necessarily fragmentary, discontinuous, and changing.

The postmodernists’ understanding of truth is consistent with their view of the author, subject, presence, history, time, and space. Truth implies an author. Thus, rejection of truth conforms closely with their view that no single person can tell us what a particular text really means. Nor can one reader argue that s/he has the “truth reading” of a text. Postmodernism abandons the subject, and this makes sense because truth requires a distinct object and subject so that someone can stand outside and discover what is true. Truth assumes a belief in presence and the ability to distinguish between what is actually present and absent, and, as we have seen, postmodernists argue presence is never absolute: the absent is always present to some degree, and the present is always absent.

It is impossible to pursue the ultimate truth of the 1941 meeting because of the following factors:

### 3.1 Two Involvers of the 1941 Meeting Holding Different Views of the Event

Frayn emphasizes “The question of what they actually said to each other has been even more disputed, where there’s ambiguity in this play about what happened, it’s because there is in the recollection of the participants. Much more sustained speculation still has been devoted to the question of what Heisenberg was hoping to achieve by the meeting.” The main characters—Bohr and Heisenberg have their own word for this event. Therefore, it is impossible to find the truth of the 1941 event because the two men could not agree with each other about the event.

### 3.2 Different People’s Opinions About the Event

Frayn in postscript of the play says “All the alternatives and co-existing explications offered in this play, except perhaps the final one, have been aired at various times, in one form or another” (Frayn, 1998, p.97). In this sense, we can see the author puts all possible answers together in his play and adds his own interpretation in his unique way. Since there are different versions of the 1941 meeting, there is no an agreed version of it.

### 3.3 Thucydides’ View About History

Frayn tries to know the train of the characters’ thought according to Thucydides explains in his preface to the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, “I have found it impossible to remember of their exact wording. Hence I have made each other speak as, in my opinion, he would have done in the circumstances, but keeping as close as I could to the train of thought that guided his actual speech” (Frayn, 1998, p.99). Here, we can see that all the accounts about the event are trying to get hold of the fact itself; yet it is the fact itself. No one can know the truth; even though the two main characters could not agree on each other. states “The great challenge facing the storyteller and the historian alike is to go inside people’s heads, to stand where they stood and see the world as they saw it, to make some informed estimate of their motives and intentions—and this is precisely where recorded and recordable history cannot reach. Even when all the external evidence has been mastered, the only way into the protagonists’ head is through the imagination. This is indeed the substance of the play” (Frayn, 1998, p.99). Here, we can see that what the author is trying to imagine the exact wording according to the character in his circumstances. What the author depicts in his play is impossible the character’s real wording.

### 3.4 Shifting and Elusive Thoughts and Intentions of People

Frayn states that “He (Heisenberg) has at least as many contradictory pressures at the time to shape the actions he later failed to explain, and the uncertainty would still have existed, for us and for him.... Thoughts and intentions, even one’s own—perhaps one’s own most of all—remain shifting and elusive. There is not one single thought

and intention of any sort that can ever be precisely established” (Frayn, 1998, p.101). The circumstances of the event have been changed, it could not be correctly defined. Furthermore, the shifting and elusive of one’s thoughts and intentions hinder the grip of the event.

### 3.5 Systematic Limitation of Knowing People

Frayn also states “What the uncertainty of thoughts does have in common with the uncertainty of particles is that the difficulty is not just a practical one, but a systematic limitation which cannot even in theory be circumvented” (Frayn, 1998, p.101). This adds more difficulty of knowing exactly about thoughts because of a systematic limitation.

All the above factors cause the impossibility of tracing exactly what happened during the meeting.

---

## 4. POSTMODERNISTS ABANDON THE AUTHOR, TRANSFORM THE TEXT AND RE-ORIENT THE READER.

---

The postmodernists dramatically revise the conventional roles of author, text, and reader. They diminish the importance of the author and amplify the significance of the text and the reader (Rosenau, 1992, p.25).

In a modern context there is a general consensus about the definition of an author and his or her role. It seems reasonable to assume that the modern author has an advantage in determining what s/he meant. The text is regarded “as the product of genius”. Then the prestige of the author is enhanced. The meaning of a text is simple function of the author’s intentions, conscious or unconscious, and the reader need only discover these to understand what the text is all about. Because of his/her assumed superior position, the modern author’s role is to educate, instill moral values, or enlighten the reader (Rosenau, 1992, p.27).

Postmodernists challenge the power and authority of the author and claim the death of the author. No postmodernist really believes the author has the right answers for a postmodern world. They begin by arguing it is a mistake to give a modern author the final word as to the meaning of his or her text.

A modern text is traditionally viewed as written communication. It is an attempt to convey a precise message to readers. The postmodern text is a collection of “relatively unconnected fragments, which challenge the literary code that predispose the reader to look for coherence”. The postmodern text is a plural text, so open (or vague) as to yield to an infinite number of interpretations. It is called a “writerly text” because it is rewritten with every encounter (reading). The opposite one is “readerly text” which is to be read for a specific message, destined for a passive reader, and which resists being rewritten by the reader. A writerly text is assumed superior to a readerly text because “the more plural a text

is, the more it will be impossible for the reader to find any origin for it, whether it be in the form of an authorial voice, a representational content or a philosophical truth". The more open the text, the greater is the range of potential interpretations (Rosenau, 1992, pp. 34-35).

No longer is the reader a passive subject to be entertained, instructed, or amused. S/he is given the freedom to attribute meaning to the text without consequence or responsibility. The postmodern reader enters at center stage and assumes an unexpected autonomy (Rosenau, 1992, p.37).

Historically, the modern reader has been taken for granted for receiving end of this complex relationship between the author and the text. The postmodernists permit the reader unlimited freedom in reading, complete autonomy, the liberty and license to interpret the text without restraint (Rosenau, 1992, p.37).

The reader and text are inter-referential. Meaning does not inhere in a text; it resides in the interaction between the text and the reader. In a post-modern situation one reads and writes not in a pursuit of truth or knowledge but for the pleasure of experience (Rosenau, 1992).

*Copenhagen* is such a writerly play which invites the reader to rewrite when they encounter it. In this play, the three characters have their own interpretations of the meeting, which varies from the others'. Parts of each version cannot provide the whole version, yet they conflicts with the other character's version. For example, there is the question about Heisenberg's loyalties. Was he sympathetic with the Nazis? And if so, how deeply? Then there is the question of whether Heisenberg was working on the atomic bomb. Did Bohr believe this to be true? And if so, is that why he went to the United States to help that nation produce the atomic bomb first? Would Bohr have done that if he did not believe that Heisenberg would have done it first for Germany? And what is the role of the scientist in a time of war? Is it the scientist's duty to use the results of the most recent and significant research to help to protect his homeland, even if it means the destruction of thousands of lives? Or does a scientist have a moral obligation to use his research to improve life on this planet? Who made the better decision between Bohr and Heisenberg? Was it Bohr, when he helped create the atom bomb, thus saving the world from several cruel dictators, despite the cost to Japan? Or did Heisenberg make a better moral decision, if in fact he did thwart the creation of an atomic bomb and thus disallowed the Nazis the upper hand in World War II? Can one even talk in terms of morality when the discussion of war is raised? Or do all morals go out the window in times of dire circumstances such as a war? How can the social and

political circumstances surrounding two people strain their friendship? If Heisenberg had created the atomic bomb and given it to the Nazis earlier, what would the world be like? What did they say during the meeting? Why did Heisenberg go to Copenhagen at that time? Which is the most explanation of the event supplied by the playwright?

So many questions remained unanswered, it needs the reader to think, to choose and to make decisions by themselves. The following is a typical example which testifies the communication between the play and the reader. The reader has freedom to experience the pleasure. The author gives up its authority as the final word of the text. He leaves the event open even after three attempts of supplying explanation.

---

## 5. SIGNIFICANCE OF MULTIPLE ENDINGS IN COPENHAGEN

---

The author provides a lot of possibilities to explain the event by three attempts of the three characters' trying to find out the real fact. It is coincident with the disputed character of the event. A lot of people have tried and still more people who are trying to give his answer to the event according to the materials he has got. However, there is no agreed version of the event. Thus, the playwright has more space to deal with the 1941 meeting in his unique way by putting all possible explanations into his own play through multiple endings. It is Frayn's contribution of dealing with the famous meeting, which is quite different from others. By using multiple endings, the reader has more space to know more the event. Additionally, if the reader wants to pin down the real fact, he will be interested to read more books and collect more materials. The reader also can choose to accept the possible answer he likes. In another way, we can say that the playwright can avoid the attacks or criticisms from others because he does not give the final word of the event. We can say that the playwright is clever to deal with the event by using the multiple endings and thus he provides a new version of the 1941 mysterious meeting.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Frayn, M. (1998). *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama.  
Ge Ge (Trans.). (2004). *Copenhagen*. Shanghai: Shanghai Science and Technology Press.  
Roseunau, P. M. (1992). *Post-modernism and the social sciences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.  
Thronborrow, J., & Wareing, S. (2000). *Patterns in language: An introduction to language and literary style*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.