UNIT 6: RICHARD KEARNEY: "ON STORIES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the life and works of Richard Kearney
- explain the content of the essay "On Stories"
- discuss the relevant theme as reflected in the text
- discuss the style and language employed in the essay
- gain a better idea on the transforming narratives of stories and story telling

6.2 INTRODUCTION

Story-telling is perhaps as old as mankind itself and almost everyone enjoys a well narrated story or anecdote. Our own lives are replete with countless stories that make us laugh or cry. We all have our share of personal narratives that capture the lessons of life and it is precisely from human

experiences that stories are born or created. Time and again storytellers have spun the magic of their narrative yarn and enchanted our minds with their fascinating stories. Can the existence of stories and storytelling be at stake? Let us explore the essay "On Stories" by Richard Kearney to find an anwer to this question.

6.3 RICHARD KEARNEY: LIFE AND WORKS

Richard Kearney (born 1954) was born in Cork, Ireland and is widely known among literary and intellectual circles owing to his **meritorious** scholarship. An intellectual in his own right, Kearney haswritten and published over twenty books and several other academic publications. He has also received several awards and honoursfor his contribution to inter-disciplinary studies that include Philosophy, Literature, History and others. He had pursued his higher studies at the University of Dublin, McGill University, winning a Masters Travelling Studentship, at the National University of Ireland in 1977 and completed his doctoral studies at the University of Paris.

As an academician, he has widely lectured across various American universities and has held several academic posts notably the Chair of Film School at University of Dublin (1993-2005) and currently holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College since 1999 and the Chair of the Institute for Critical Philosophy at The Global Center for Advanced Studies since 2012. Also, Richard Kearney has been associated with the Arts Council of Ireland, Royal Irish Academy (to which he was elected in 1994), International Association of Philosophy and Literature, Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, American Philosophical Association, American Association of Religion, Global Aesthetic Research Project, Society for Ricoeur Studies among several others. He was also part of the drafting of proposals for the series of Northern Irish Peace Agreement.

A few of his literary works include *Sam's Fall* (1995), *Walking at Sea Level* (1997) and *Angel of Patrick's Hill*. Some of his most recent works include the two co-edited books *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (2015) and *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015) apart from other

books such as*Anatheism: The Returning to God After God* (2011), *Navigations* (2006), *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (2004), *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva* (2004), *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), *On Stories* (2002) and *The God Who May Be* (2001). His other works that dwell widely on philosophy, politics and culture are titled: *Post nationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*; *Poetics of Modernity*, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern and Postmodern*, *Transition: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* etc.

Among the literary awards that Kearney had won, one can mention the 'Choice Book Award for Outstanding Academic Publication' in 1988', 'Ranconteur Short Fiction Award' (1995), 'Guardian Book of the Year Award' (1997) and'FNAC Book Selection Award' (1998). He has met and interacted with leading intellectuals namely Paul Ricouer, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Luis Borges, Noam Chomsky, Stanislas Breton through the course of his intellectual journey. The learner shall come across some of these names while studying Literary Theory. Let us then explore the text of the essay "On Stories" which highlights the continuing tradition of storytelling that has transformed its style and structural modes, **retaining** its position as a major literary form in the modern world.



Meritorious: someone who has merit or credibility.

Retaining: continue to hold a position.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on Richard Kearney.

Q2. Name the literary works by Richard Kearney.

Q3. Name the literary awards won by Richard Kearney.

6.4 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

The author begins with the reflection that the short story may have reached its tail end as suggested by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard and the German philosopher Carl Hempel. But he also interprets the German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's opinion that when he had

highlighted the threat to the art of narration or stories in the information age, Benjamin certainly did not mean that stories as a narrative form would die away. And according to the author, it is possible that Benjamin was only pointing towards the dying forms of the age-old traditions of storytelling that had rolled down the ages. These oral narratives had traditionally survived and had travelled down across centuries, through countless generations simply by word-of-mouth andthe joy of sharing stories.



Linear: pertaining to a direct progression.

Mnemonic: a system such as a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations which assist in remembering something.

Epistolary: it refers to letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings and other such series of documented writing.

Deterritorialise: to break the boundaries of territory or territories.

Verdict: formal finding and declaration of fact.

Criss-cross: a mix pattern.

Nouveaux: new.

Coherent: forming an unified whole.

Narrating stories was a **linear** tradition that was woven into the fabric of the day-to- day life of people. But the advancement of technology such as the computer and the World Wide Web posed as challenges to these continuing traditions. Today the advanced telecommunication systems and the digital web of information have rapidly replaced the old "**mnemonic**, **epistolary** and print modes of expression". These advancements, as you will most certainly agree with, has in turn transformed the world into a "**deterritorialised** world" or in other words, all forms of barriers transcending both space and time have been broken down.

Although, this modern day reality cannot be denied, the author suggests that we could challenge or question the **"verdict"** on the death of stories as a form. Thus, in the words of the author, "[s]torytelling will never end" and that there will always be someone "who will respond "Once upon a time…"". In fact, the old stories have undergone changes with regard to style and variation and the modern reader will find that short stories have branched out and given birth to more "multi-plotted, multi-vocal and multi-media" forms. Then there are the layered "micro-narratives or post-narratives" and stories that are narrated backwards like Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* or stories with simultaneously **criss-crossed** plots at the same time as in Mike Figgis's digitally shot film titled *Timecode*.

The author suggests that the declaration of the "**nouveaux-**romanciers" 'that the story must be obliterated' in the 1960s and the 1970s, they were short-sighted in their attempt to do so. He does agree that narratives need not necessarily represent a linear world where "everything [is] aimed at imposing the image of a stable universe, **coherent**, continuous, univocal and wholly

decipherable" world. But, he also suggests that writers like James Joyce who had experimented with the fictional form had "revolutionised the whole storytelling process." The changing of the literary form from age to age does not necessarily mean that they are short of disappearing. Therefore, he counters the arguments of the "literary **obituarists**" stating that the story telling undergoes changes and is 'recreated' every time its narrative thread wears out. Thus, if writers like Alaine Robbe-Grillet (French writer) claims that "novels that contain characters belong truly to the past", it could be a definition of his own novels without his knowing.



Decipherable: something that can be easily understood.

Obituarists: refers to those critics who suggest that story telling has died; obituary in general is a news article that reports the recent death of someone.

Ethics: ethics is also known as moral philosophy.

Hermeneutics: it is the theory and methodology of textual interpretation.

The author suggests the positive approaches of some of the theorists such as the philosophers Paul Ricoeur (French), Charles Taylor (Canadian), Scottish Alasdair MacIntyre (Scottish), Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum (both American), andHollywood Development Executive Christopher Vogler. For an instance, the author of *The Writer's Journey* (2007) Voglerstates that the beginning of cyber culture is rather a "catalyst for new possibilities of interactive, non linear narration". Vogler writes that "[t]he fact is that no matter how much technologies transform our modes of storytelling, people will always 'enjoy going into a story trance and allowing themselves to be led through by a masterful story weaver.'"

Thus, to elucidate "the irrepressible art of the story", the author divides the essay under five main headings with the model of Aristotle's *Poetics* in mind. The *Poetics* is one of the first works that provides a foundation of both dramatic and literary theory. The most important elements of a narrative includes:(1) plot (*mythos*) (2) recreation (*mimesis*) (3) release (*catharsis*) (4) wisdom (*phronesis*), and (5) **ethics** (*ethos*) in order to interpret creative texts which fall under **Hermeneutics**. The author aims to take the support of some of the ancient and modern theories regarding the same. We shall briefly discuss each of these six elements.

In order to discuss the concept of 'Plot or Mythos' we could take up the example of our own lives. Just like a story the pattern of our lives is structured in terms of beginnings, middles and endings in other words: "…our existence is already pre plotted before we ever consciously seek out narrative in which to reinscribe our life as life-history". Further, Aristotle was one of the first

philosophers to have identified that human life is defined in terms of action directed towards a particular end. In his *Poetics*, the Plot represents the life of action in terms of (a) a telling (b) a fable or fantasy and (c) a crafted structure. According to the philosopher Saint Augustine, "life [was] a **temporal** plot in search of an ultimate author" that was God. Others like the German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer, as well as, Paul Ricoeur had their own strands of interpretation with regard to the same. One of the interesting lines found in this passage is that "Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of a midwife".

The essence (*eidos*) of our lives is what Aristotle calls 'Recreation or Mimesis'. It highlights the "potential truths" of this world and "re-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits."The frame of existence is best defined or narrated through the means of "verbal **recounting**" and the recreation of the plot. In this regard, the passage reads thus:

> "*Mimesis* is 'invention' in the original sense of the term: *invenire* means both to discover and to create…It is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds."



Temporal: relating to time.

Recounting: tell someone about something; give an account of an event or experience.

Empathy: the experience of understanding another person's condition from their perspective.

Holocaust: refers to the historical tragedy of the mass killing of six million Jews by German Nazis.

'Release or Catharsis' which is also referred to as Purgation is the next important element in narration. This calls for the play of free imagination which is "[t]o know what it is to feel like to be in someone else's head, shoes or skin." Thus, cathartic release of emotions involves both pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) and one tends to relate to the kind of emotional element infused in a story. Thus, if one reads Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* which is the story of a "passionate woman" who dies a tragic death in the novel, he or she would almost relate to the pain experienced by the broken-hearted character of Anna. Thus, stories have a cathartic element through which we could relieve our emotional thoughts and feelings. The humanitarian quality of **empathy** is extremely necessary in our day-to-day lives. Historical tragedies like the **Holocaust** which you must have read took place because of this missing element of 'empathy' among the Nazis. In this regard, the author writes thus,

> "[t]he power of empathy with living things other than ourselves - the stranger the better- is a major test not just of poetic imagination but of

> ethical sensitivity" and "[i]f we possess narrative sympathy-enabling us to see the world from the other's point of view- we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love."

Another quoted passage from this essay by Elizabeth Costello reads thus:

> "The heart is the seat of faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another…There are people who have capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination."

A good story also bears a therapeutic element or in other words the power to heal. The creation of narratives is like a spell, which makes the impossible seem possible and sustains our interest and curiosity. This element is also known as the 'literary belief' which is essential to make narratives credible.

In narratives, the interplay of fiction and history enables fiction "to portray the 'essential truths of life'" and history "to portray a credible sense of particularity". The element of 'Wisdom or Phronesis' is defined as "…a form of practical wisdom capable of respecting the singularity of situations as well as the nascent universality of values aimed by human actions." Narrative wisdom accepts the fact that there is always an "element of fictionality" in the representation of history.

The author discusses the concept of 'Ethics or Ethos' and notes that "…stories make possible the ethical sharing of a common world with others in that they are invariably a mode of discourse." The act of storytelling involves someone (a teller), telling something (a story) about something (a real or imaginary world), to someone (a listener) at the receiving end. As highlighted by the author the act of storytelling is critically studied in different ways such as:

(1) **Romantic idealists and Existentialists:** The intentional role of the teller.

(2) **Structuralists:** The linguistic aspects of the 'story'.

(3) **Post-Structuralism:** The receptive role of the 'reader'.

(4) Materialists and Realists: The referential role of the 'world'.

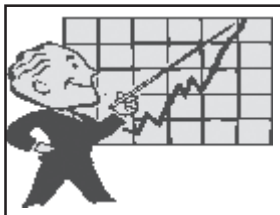
(5) Hermeneutics: All the above aspects in a balanced narrative.

Narratives also have a larger moral or ethical function.They can unravel a range of essential human values and inspire sensitivity to ethical values in readers.

Finally, we are all born to a certain "inter-subjective history" that is invariably connected to our lives and existence. Perhaps, this is why the author says that "[w]e are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own". Stories are integral to human lives and as long as the human race lives, stories will always live. Thus, the author sums up with a very interesting note:

> "Storytelling invites us to become not just agents of our own lives, but narrators and readers as well. It shows us that the untold life is not worth living. There will always be someone there to say, 'tell me a story', and someone there to respond. Were this not so, we would no longer be fully human."

The essay "On Stories" is part of Kearney's book published in the year 2002 with the same title and is almost thirty one pages long. Therefore, important extracts from the texts have been provided in the course of the explanation itself. However, you could search for a copy of the text on the internet for reference and to enhance your own reading.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. What did Walter Benjamin highlight with regard to storytelling and narration?

Q5. What are the advancements that has deterritorialised the modern world?

Q6. What are the most important elements of a narrative?

Q7. What are the two factors involved in the cathartic element of a narrative?

Q8. What are the four aspects involved in the act of storytelling?



LET US KNOW

Romantic Idealists: It is a reference to the Romantic idealism of the 1800s when the Romantic Movement is thought to have begun in Europe.

Existentialists: It refers to philosophy known as Existentialism of the late 19th and 20th century that laid emphasis on existence, freedom and choice.

Structuralists: Structuralism began in Europe in the early 1950s that studies the structural representations of language and linguistics.

Post-Structuralist: Post-Structuralism is an intellectual movement that had emerged in the late 20th century in philosophy and literary criticism in opposition to structuralism. It studies the ways by which knowledge is produced.

Materialists: It refers to the philosophy of materialism and has a long history which studies material interactions with human life or existence.

6.5 MAJOR THEMES

Can you possibly remember any memorable story (or stories) that might have remained with you even after years of reading it? Let us discuss some of the major themes highlighted in the text to which you may also add your individual analysis of the text.

Story and Storytelling :

It is commonly said that, 'everyone loves a good story' and strong plots or storylines always tends to capture the interest of a reader. In fact, good stories always leave a lasting impression on our minds. Although the essay begins on the note that "the end of story" is at hand as we "pass into the third millennium", yet the author through the discussion of his essay argues for the promising future of stories and storytelling.

Kearney notes that the advancement of technology has not taken away the

joy of stories but has rather improvised ways of sharing them. In fact, authors like Christopher Vogler believe that 'cyber-culture' does not hinder the development of story but rather, introduces newer trends and possibilities with regard to stories and the art of storytelling. The narrative form shall constantly evolve with the passing of time and undergo significant changes in its form and function. Thus, there would always be a rising demand for new kinds of stories and unique ways of storytelling.

When it comes to story and storytelling, it is important to note in the words of the author that, "Every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller), telling something (a story), to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world)." Stories are inseparable from human lives and we inspire stories as both the "storytellers" and the "story-followers." And narratives always tend to be open-ended in the way they are narrated and the way they are received. Thus, we are as much the narrator or reader as much as the actor. We inspire stories and stories inspire us.

The Significance of Stories :

In truth, stories are unquestionably born of human experiences and there are countless narratives within each individual that longs to find a creative expression. If this is true, then we can never imagine an end to this vast sea of stories.The author writes that, "[s]tories alter our lives as we return from stories to action" which suggests how stories are closely intertwined with our own lives. And often it is through the commonalities of human experiences (transformed into stories) that we are able to acknowledge the universal significance of the narrative form.

Stories have the power to enrich our minds with wisdom and necessary values. Through the narration of stories, we gain practical wisdom, new insights and "emotional sensitivity". Further, when silenced voices or untold stories find a vent or outlet in the form of historical narrative or other creative modes of expression, they also extend a therapeutic effect on readers or listeners.

Towards the end of the essay, the author opines that storytelling "shows us that the untold life is not worth living". Thus, instead of accepting the negative judgment on the fate of Stories, the author encourages readers to raise questions on such unfavourable opinions put forth by leading critics and theorists today. As stories are here to stay and also adapt to newer creative modes of narration, the author writes that, "[t]he simple fact that story-forms mutate from age to age does not mean they disappear". As long as the human race survives, storytelling will continue to live.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. What does Christopher Vogler believe with regard to the advancement of technology and its effect on the development of story?

Q10. What happens when silenced voices or untold stories find an outlet?

6.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The essay begins with the following quote: "There are three points about stories: if told, they like to be heard; if heard, they like to be taken in; and if taken in, they liked to be told." Stories have always captivated the minds of human beings since the beginning of time. Right from the pre-historic etchings of stories on cave walls to the present day storytelling practices, the narration of stories has continued to enrapture the human mind. The modes of storytelling and narration are constantly transformed in order to suit the tastes of listeners. And hence comes in the role of both the style and language in the presentation of stories as well.

With regard to the present text of the essay, it must be said that the essay is well structured and the style of presentation reflects the author's depth of study. Infact, the constant cross references to various theorists and thinkers together with the clash of their ideas are signs of a well read author. Although, the language used is relatively simple, yet the learner may initially find it difficult

to grapple with the text owing to the criss-cross of references. Thus, an apparent unfamiliarity with the references to the leading intellectuals, their ideas or expositions, literary movements, historic-political examples, theoretical discourses and controversies might take away a lay reader's interest from exploring the text at length. The essay presupposes that the reader is well-read on the areas of discussion. And although, it may not be necessarily so, the supplemented explanation of the text in the unit highlights the important points of the essay.

Some of the important components of a story propounded by Aristotle in his *Poetics*(335 B.C) are taken up in Kearney's discussion of the essay. These are namely: Plot (*Mythos*), Re-creation (*Mimesis*), Release (*Catharsis*), Wisdom (*Phronesis*) and Ethics (*Ethos*). In his own additions to each of these elements of a story, Kearney makes an attempt to argue and "champion the irrepressible art of the story". As the essay unravels its lengthy discussion on the promise of stories, it stresses on the structural elements of stories and their respective functions through a range of examples derived from the author's wide reading.



ACTIVITY

Dear learner, when was the last time that you read or listened to a story?

For all you know, you could possess the gift of storytelling without ever realising it. You could look around for an interesting picture that stirs a story in you. The picture could be from an old photograph, magazine, newspaper cutting or any other such source. And, then try the mind boggling activity of spinning a story in such a way that it would leave your readers or listeners craving for more.



6.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you will be familiar with the life and works of Richard Kearney. The explanation of the essay "On Stories" will

give you a detailed idea on the important elements of stories and storytelling. Further, it will enrich your idea on the significance of stories in our lives. The major themes together with the aspects of style and language have been discussed with reference to the text of the essay. Thus, the learner will gain a detailed insight into the structural functions of stories.



6.8 FURTHER READING

1. Kearney, Richard. (2002) *On Stories*. London: Routledge.

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6.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Richard Kearney (born 1954) was born in Cork, Ireland and is widely known among literary and intellectual circles owing to his meritorious scholarship. An intellectual in his own right, Kearney has written and published over twenty books and several other academic publications. He has also received several awards and honours for his contributions to inter-disciplinary studies

Ans to Q2: *Sam's Fall* (1995), *Walking at Sea Level* (1997) and *Angel of Patrick's Hill* are some of his literary works.

Ans to Q3: Among the literary awards that Kearney had won, one can mention the 'Choice Book Award for Outstanding Academic Publication' in 1988, 'Ranconteur Short Fiction Award' (1995), 'Guardian Book of the Year Award' (1997) and 'FNAC Book Selection Award' (1998).

Ans to Q4: Walter Benjamin had highlighted the threat to the art of narration or stories in the information age

Ans to Q5:The advancement of technology such as the computer and the World Wide Web posed as challenges to the continuing traditions of

storytelling. Today the advanced telecommunication systems and the digital web of information has rapidly replaced the old modes of expression. These advancements have deterritorialised the world.

Ans to Q 6: The most important elements of a narrative includes: (1) plot (*mythos*) (2) recreation (*mimesis*) (3) release (*catharsis*) (4) wisdom (*phronesis*), and (5) ethics (*ethos*)

Ans to Q7: The cathartic release of emotions involves both pity (*eleos*) band fear (*phobos*).

Ans to Q8: The act of storytelling involves someone (a teller), telling something (a story) about something (a real or imaginary world), to someone (a listener) at the receiving end.

Ans to Q 9: Authors like Christopher Vogler believe that 'cyber-culture' does not hinder the development of story but rather, introduces newer trends and possibilities with regard to stories and the art of storytelling.

Ans to Q 10: When silenced voices or untold stories find a vent or outlet in the form of historical narrative or other creative modes of expression, they also extend a therapeutic effect on readers or listeners



6.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Briefly discuss the life and works of Richard Kearney.

Q2. Explain the text of the essay "On Stories" in your own words.

Q3. Discuss some of the important themes pertaining to the text of the essay "On Stories".

Q4. Explain the style and language of the text of the essay.

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