# *THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE AS SOURCE OF TRANSFICTIONALITY*

**Carmen DOMINTE**[*]

**Abstract***: As a concept specific to narratology, transfictionality represents the process which involves the migration of specific elements such as plot, context or character(s) from one fictional text to another. Following Doležel theory of "postmodern rewrites", there could be distinguished three types of relations between these fictional worlds: expansion, modification and transposition. Applied on different artistic representations, this theory may be extended to all forms of transfictionality. It is the case of Vermeer's painting "The Girl with a Pearl Earring", which inspired Tracy Chevalier's homonymous novel, which later was transposed into film. The study intends to analyse the manner in which the artistic technique of expansion links three distinct artistic fields – painting, literature and cinematography – using the representation of the feminine as the main source of transfictionality.*

**Keywords***: transfictionality, expansion, painting, literature, cinematography.*

## The Concept of Transfictionality

Being a narratological concept, transfictionality represents a literary process based on the migration of particular elements from one narrative text to another. Among these elements the most important ones are the characters, the plot and/or the plot structure and the context. Mostly developed in the postmodern culture, trasnfictionality is an old phenomenon regarded as a means of further literary development. The narrative operation is meant to link the fictional worlds belonging to the two distinct texts by three types of relations: *expansion*, *modification* and *transposition.* (Doležel, 1998: 206)

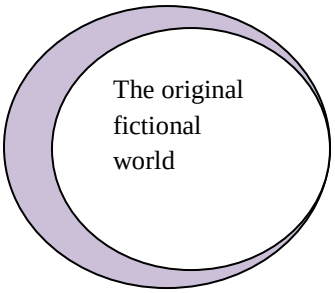
The relation of expansion functions as a possibility of enlarging the original fictional world by adding more extends to it. Thus, the extension may be applied on the axis of space or on the axis of time. In this respect, the characters could visit new regions that were not included in the original story-world, enlarging it or the time could be prolonged covering the original fictional world through sequels or prequels. (Ryan, 2013: 366) Characters[1] themselves are another source of expansion, developing new plots on the same or on different structures, extended the time and the space of the first fictional world. Expansion may be used by the same author or by another one. In each case, the original fictional world is not only included in, but it may also cover a larger or a smaller part of the new one, as it can be noticed in the figure 1.

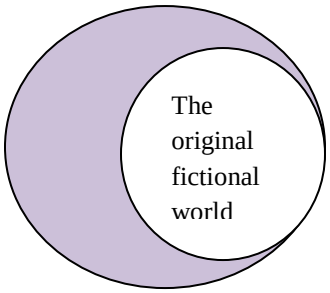
[*] National University of Music, Bucharest, carmendominte@yahoo.com

[1] Jean Rhys's *Wild Sargasso Sea* is a novel that illustrates the life of a minor character taken from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the first wife of Mr. Rochester, who was presented in the original narrative as a madwoman locked in the attic. In the new narrative, she acquires the opportunity to relate her life but this time from her own perspective.



**BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)**



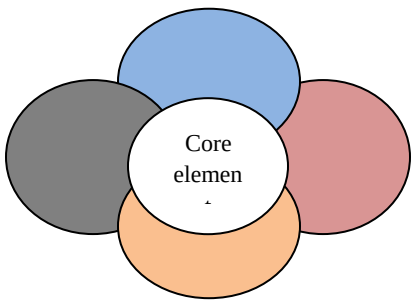




Expansion by the same author Expansion by different author

Fig.1

Modification is another fundamental operation of transfictionality. According to Doležel, new different versions of the proto-world are constructed redesigning the original structure and reinventing the story. (Doležel, 1998: 207) Most of the times, the counterfactual sequence of the plot is followed as expected, but through modification[1] the destiny of the characters is changed.

With transposition[2], the design and the plot of the original fictional world are preserved but the changes are illustrated through different temporal periods or spatial settings. Besides these changes, the plot is adapted to fit the new environment while the structure remains mostly the same. (*Ibidem:* 206) Whenever transposition is preferred for expanding an original fictional world and its story into another one, it is also used modification. Transposition without modification is very rare[3]. Both fundamental operations (modification and transposition) take the original fictional world as the core element for the new possibilities of developing new fictional worlds. The same core functions as the site of multiple possible storylines which are to spring from it, as notices in figure 2.




Modification and Transposition
Fig.2

In the case of modification as well as in the case of transposition the relationship that they bear to the original fictional world is that of an *overlap*. Opposed to this situation,

[1] One of the best examples is given by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). The main character of both texts, Robinson in the second version does not engage in any of the heroic feasts as in the original story and he neither keeps a journal.

[2] In the case of transposition, a good example is provided by Ulrich Plenzdorf's *The New Sufferings of Young Werther* which transplants the original plot of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* into the German Democratic Republic of the 70's. Opposed to the original story, the main character of the second version does not commit suicide but dies in an accident.

[3] A genuine case of modification could be illustrated by the case of staging the Greek tragedies in modern costumes.



BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)

expansion is regarded as a more world preserving, not requiring any changes of the facts which were asserted in the original version. That is why the relationship that expansion bears with the original fictional world is either of *inclusion* or of *enlargement*. Taking into account Ryan's theory of transmedial story system[1], the worlds of trans-fictional texts can relate to original fictional world in three different ways: overlap, inclusion and enlargement (same fictional world but bigger). (Ryan, 2013: 367)

**The Representation of the Feminine in Painting, Literature and Cinematography**

Generally speaking, the feminine in most artistic works of art has been considered as a generating principle or/and a source of inspiration. It is also the case of Vermeer's painting *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which has inspired other masterpieces belonging to different arts. Known as the Mona Lisa of the North, the oil painting belonging to the 17th century is one of over forty works[2] representing women that the painter created. Regarded as a *tronie*[3], the painting represents a European girl wearing an exotic dress, an Oriental turban and a large pearl earring[4]. Placed in the large middle of the painting, the image of the girl captures the viewer's attention. The dark background creates a three-dimensional effect of the subject whose facial characteristics are accentuated by the use of colours red and ochres. The light source coming from the left frontal area emphasizes the depth making the image of the girl as realistic as possible. The expression of the model's face becomes the look of the manner in which the viewer feels as he is looking at her. Despite of the disruptive otherness of her presence, the image on the canvas is immediate, inward and pre-subjective. As the art critic, E. Snow considers, the model seems to exist inside her eyes as well as at the end of their gaze. (Snow, 1994: 8) The same feminine features such as beauty, sensitivity and sensuality are all to be found in other artistic representations that belong to literature, cinematography and theatre. They were inspired by the same core element that was Vermeer's painting.


The Girl with a Pearl Earring (Vermeer) Fig. 3

In the case of literature, it is Tracy Chevalier's historical novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* which further develops the story using the painting as a starting point. The literary

[1] Along with the three fundamental operations of transfictionality (expansion, modification and transposition), the theory of transmedial story system also includes *quotation*. In this case, an important element is not integrated in the storytelling and thus, the effect is rather of dissonance or incongruity. For example, the mask of Darth Vader used by a character in a plot set in an American background. There are situations when such effects are used on purpose and play an important role as in the aesthetics of surrealism art.

[2] Most of Vermeer's paintings representing women reveal the models in their thoughtful and provoking stillness.

[3] A *tronie* is considered to be a description of a head that was not meant to be a portrait.

[4] In all the analyzed artistic representations the pearl earring functions as a metaphor, in this case something that conveys social status and wealth. It is also a directive to the viewer and/or the audience to dig into the psychological potential within the feminine character's erotic unconsummated bond with the artist, unclear up to that point if it is real or not. (Rizq, 2005: 259)



BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)

protagonist is a modest 16-year-old daughter of a tile maker. Because her father has gone blind, she needs to work as a made in Vermeer's house. Living in that establishment, from the very beginning, Griet reveals herself as a keen observer impressed by the details which she sees and transposes in sensuous images. As the narrator of the story, the girl describes this world in precise and luminous prose. Everything is presented through her vision, the events, the other characters, the tiny details that she discovers while living in the artist's household. The distant Vermeer, his wife Catharina, his sharp-eyed mother-in-low, Maria Thins and his brood of children are literary portraits similar to the portraits painted by the artist. At the same time, she gives information about the components of the paintings, the way in which the colours are mixed using the apothecary materials and the manner in which the final composition is achieved. The tension increases gradually till the moment when Vermeer, truly impressed by her instinctive grasp of colour and artistic composition, makes her his assistant. From that moment on they used to spend more time together and one day she hears him demanding her to pose for one of his paintings. She is asked to wear Catharina's pearl earrings in order to the perfect sting of light that would change the whole vision upon the painting. While posing, Griet is thinking of that particular difference that will turn the image on the canvas on a true masterpiece, fighting at the same time with her own moral principles.

> "'Lick your lips, Griet.'
> I licked my lips.
> 'Leave your mouth open.'
> I was surprised by this request that my mouth remained opened of its own. I blinked back tears. Virtuous women did not open their mouth in paintings." (Chevalier, 1999: 209)

Everything is a secret until Catharina finds out and Griet is forced to leave. The story ends ten years later when, after long being married with Pieter, the local butcher's son, Griet is called back to the house upon the artist's death. There she leans that his will included a specific request that the pearl earring to be given to her. Not being able to wear them, she pawns the for twenty guilders and pays fifteen to her husband pretending that Catharina gave her the coins in order to settle a debt she had with their shop. She keeps five guilders to herself and never intends to spend them on anything.

The whole story is governed by the same core element which is the painting. Although there are mentioned other paintings[1], the main important one remains *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*. In a way the painting itself plays an important part in the story because it is not only the pretext of plot but also the source of inspiration for the literary author in her attempt to present the picture of the 17th century Delft. The novel, described by the journalist R. Z. Sheppard as an exquisitely controlled exercise that illustrates how

[1] The following paintings are mentioned in the novel: *View of Delft, Woman with a Pearl Necklace, The Milkmaid, The Girl with a Wineglass, A Lady Writing, The Concert, Woman with a Water Jug, Girl with a Pearl Earring.*



BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)

temptation is restrained for the sake of art, further inspired other artistic representations[1]. (Sheppard, 2000: 6)

Having the same function, the core element for another artistic production, Tracy Chevalier's homonymous novel inspired the film adaptation, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The film was directed by Peter Webber and the screen adaptation was the work of art made by Olivia Hetreed. The film was launched in 2003, starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth. The cinematographic adaptation is based on the story from the novel but it provides a more subjective narration by having the camera stay fixed on the main character for long moments. (Higson, 2011: 110) The film also shifts the focus from a young girl's evolving consciousness to the relationships concerning the social class and the economic power developed in the story. (Sager, 2008: 185) The film reveals a social, economic, religious and moral aspect of the 17th society more than the novel does. The artistic aspect is not so much emphasized than in the narrative version. There are only few Vermeer's paintings showed in the film than Griet describes in the novel but instead the camera lingers longer over the visual aspect and particulars of the artist's studio.

The representation of the feminine in all these three artistic fields, painting, literature and cinematography reveals the same features using specific instruments. The feminine image is the core element that inspired and linked the artistic domains for further developments and, at the same time, it functions as the source of transfictionality.

**The Representation of the Feminine as Source of Transfictionality**

Regarding transfictionality as a source for further artistic development, the feminine may become a core element that supports it. Each time the feminine model is represented in a manner specific to the particular art it belongs to, it takes further all the previous features of the model and adds new extensions to it. The whole process of artistic expansion started with Vermeer's painting which was the first core element for the literary extension that followed. Then the homonymous novel became the core element for the new kind of artistic representation of the feminine which was the cinematographic adaptation of the novel mentioned. Each time one artistic representation became the core element for another artistic representation. As it could be noticed in fig.2, the first core element is incorporated in the other two artistic representations but in a literary and cinematographic manner.

The whole operation of transfictionality consists of three aspects. First of all, it is the process of trans-coding the original core element which involves a shift of medium: from painting to literature and from literature to film. It is also a shift from real to the fictional, from a historical account, life in 17th century Delft, and a biography, Vermeer's real life, to a fictionalized narrative first literary and then cinematographic. (Hutcheon, 2012: 7)

A second aspect is given by the process of artistic creation. The act of expansion involves both (re)-interpretation and (re)-creation. The author of the novel was not only

[1] The street artist, Banksy has created the painting as a mural in Bristol. He replaced the pearl earring with an alarm box and recalled his artistic product *Girl with a Pierced Eardrum*. The painting also appears in the 2007 film, *St. Trinian's*, which presents the story of a group of schoolgirls who steal in order to raise funds to save their school.



BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)

inspired by the painting but she also needed to re-interpret it in order to develop, to create an entire story based on the same painting. The same thing happened in the case of the cinematographic adaptation of the novel. The director needed to re-interpret the novel in order to create a new artistic product based on the previous one. This time it is involved the painting too, so that the film contains the core element given by the novel and also the core element provided by the painting. In this situation, it is both a case of extension and a case of inclusion. The third aspect is sustained from the perspective of reception. The viewer and/or the audience may experience the expanded work of art through his/her memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation. That is why it is entitled to specify that the entire process of transfictionality is a form of intertextuality too. (*Ibidem*: 7-8)

Each expansion from an artistic medium into another are in fact re-mediations, which is specifically translations in the form of inter-semiotic transpositions from one sign system (the painting) into another (the literary text) and further on, into another one (the film). (*Ibidem*: 8) In other words, the process started with an image then moved into a text and then into motion images/pictures. In a very specific sense, the process may be regarded as a translation, meaning a transmutation or trans-coding that is, as necessarily a recording into new artistic conventions, techniques, strategies and rules as well as signs.

The three artistic representations of the feminine are not derivative products but expanded works. They came second and third without being secondary or thirdly. The process of expansion was on three stages each one was extending the previous one. At the same time, the second expansion included the first one (the painting into the literary text – as a core element) and the third expansion included the previous two (the painting and the literary text in the film – as core elements). Thus, the phenomenon of expansion applied on three distinct artistic fields generates intermediations and inter-semiotic transpositions among arts.

## Conclusion

Even though expansion is specific to the literary field and it is considered the simplest kind of trans-fictional relationship, it always involves the idea of expanding a previous fiction through a trans-fiction that prolongs it on the temporal or more broadly diegetic plane. (Saint-Gelais, 2011: 71) Applied on other artistic domains, other than literary ones, expansion exceeds its part and may become involved into further artistic development. It also can be used as a theoretic instrument for analysis useful for interpreting the connections among particular literary texts and among literary texts and other works of art.

Using expansion as the main operation necessary for trans-fictional development, the representation of the feminine became the main source for such a process. Each time the proto-world was extended the core element remained the feminine model. It did not remain untouched but it added new meanings, adapting itself to the new artistic medium, receiving new values. In the process of transfictionality, it is already known that stories are born of other stories, but even more, art is derived from and born of other art.

***Bibliography***

Chevalier, Tracy, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, London, Harper Collins, 1999



**BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)**

Doležel, Lubomir, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998
Higson, Andrew, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since 1990s*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2011
Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London, Routledge, 2012
Rizq, Rosemary, "Finding the Self in Mind: Vermeer and Reflective Function" in *Psychodynamic Practice* 11, no. 3, 2005, 255-268
Ryan, Marie-Laure, "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality" in *Poetics Today* 34, no. 3, 2013, 361-388
Sager Eidt, Laura, *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2008
Saint-Gelais, Richard, *Fictions Transfuges*, Paris, Seuil, 2011
Sheppard, R. Z., "A Portrait of Radiance" in *Time* no. 9, 2000, 6
Snow, E., *A Study of Vermeer*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1994

***Electronic Resources***

Fig.3 Johannes Vermeer: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*
Source: www.artble.com
https://www.google.ro/search?q=vermeer+the+girl+with+the+pearl+earring+images&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi6rd7zvrPVAhWjAcAKHZ9 (consulted on 31st of July 2017)



**BDD-A29899 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:00:57 UTC)**