Chapter 3

From Text to Hypertext
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The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book, even if, even today, it is within the form of a book that new writings - literary or theoretical - allow themselves to be, for better or for worse, encased. It is less a question of confiding new writings to the envelope of a book than of finally reading what wrote itself between the lines in the volumes. That is why, beginning to write without the line, one begins also to reread past writing according to a different organization of space. If today the problem of reading occupies the forefront of science, it is because of this suspense between two ages of writing. Because we are beginning to write, to write differently, we must reread differently. - Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology

Jacques Derrida here talks about the end of “linear writing” and, with it, the end of the book. The linear nature of writing was a consequence of the print medium in the form of a book. Every medium (or “writing space”) on which writing is done structures the possibilities within which a writer can write (Bolter xi). Each kind of “writing space” entails a specific mode of writing (xi). In other words, literary writing, instantiated in the “writing space” of a page, to use Bolter’s words again, allowed a particular mode of writing and “organization of space” (Derrida 86). Derrida also hints at the emergence of “new writings” which are breaking away with
this tradition of linear writing, although the medium in which these new kinds of writing practices are encased is still predominantly ‘the book’ (Derrida 86). Arguing in a similar vein, Robert Coover wrote a provocative article in the *New York Times Book Review* (1992), titled “The End of Books”. Coover’s argument was somewhat similar to Derrida’s when he hailed the hypertext as a technology which, for the first time, enabled writers to break “the tyranny of line” (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 706). The attempt to break free from the constraints of the line and the page, as has been discussed in previous chapters, has been going on in the form of many artistic movements right from the start of the twentieth century. This means the contemporary era of experimentation in the field of literary writing can be situated with the rise of new media, in a much longer and broader tradition experimental writing practices.

The coming of hypertext greatly extended the possibility to experiment with its (hypertext) functionalities in the literary domain and to invent a new kind of non-linear, multi-sequential, and topographic “mode of writing” (Bolter 6). The idea of non-linear, polyphonic and multi-sequential nature of writing has already been argued by many poststructuralist literary theorists. Jay David Bolter in his book *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* comments that the electronic space of writing is “…not only topical,” but also “topographic” (36). Each kind of writing technology (the clay tablet, the papyrus roll, the codex, the printed book or the page) is a kind of space available for the writer to exploit. He writes:
The computer’s memory and central processing unit are intricate hierarchies of electronic components. Layers of software in turn transform the machine’s physical space of electronic circuits into a space of symbolic information, and it is in this space that a new kind of writing can be located. (Delany and Landow 107)

For Bolter, every space has some in-built characteristics which are them activated in the act of writing. The electronic space of writing, he says, is “extremely malleable” (Bolter 32). Lori Emerson argues in a similar vein when she characterizes the digital realm as something which “…offers us the opportunity to represent (not necessarily conceive of) space in a different or expanded terms than that of paper-based writing” (Emerson, “Numbered Space and Topographic Writing” par. 3).

The conception of space is fundamental to the art of writing. “Writing is always spatial,” declares Bolter (Delany and Landow 105). The topographic mode of writing, where the spatial relations become fundamental, “challenges the idea that writing should be merely the servant of spoken language” (112). He further says that “topographic writing as a mode is not limited to the computer medium, for it is possible to write topographically for print or even in manuscript” (Bolter 36). His use of the metaphor of topography is very close to Derrida’s idea of “organization of space” (Derrida 86). Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem “A Throw of Dice Never Will Abolish Chance” is an excellent example of the centrality of space and typography to the art of writing. Mallarmé was a French poet and critic. He was a major symbolist poet and his practice of the art of writing anticipated many of the revolutionary artistic innovations of the twentieth century.
Mallarmé conceived his last major work *Un Coup de Dés* as explicitly breaking with the linearity of the page and inventing a kind of typographical arrangement which would highlight space as an essential constituent of the art of writing. Mallarmé laid great emphasis on the importance of arrangement of words, typography, blank spaces and margins in his artistic works. Another work which significantly experimented with the spatial contours of writing was Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1865. In this text, Alice tells a tale of a Mouse, which was printed in the physiology of a real mouse.

Following Mallarmé, there emerged a new understanding of the relationship between the medium on which writing is inscribed and the art of writing. As a result, writers increasingly started experimenting with the topographical space of the page to compose their creative writing, making the physically of the medium constitutive of the overall effect.
In “Writing and the Page: Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valery,” Robert Pickering says that for major literary figures “… an active interface between writing and the page assumes a particular significance” (56). This focus on the physicality of the page and its conscious use as a writing space thus prefigures Bolter’s understanding of writing space. The page no longer remains “… in passive subservience to the former [writer], but on the contrary [formulates] its own problematical autonomy, its own input to, and feedback from, the activity of writing” (Pickering 56). Concrete poetry was also a kind of poetry in which the writer freely played with the typographical scheme of words to convey the effect of the poem, like the meaning of words, words, rhythm, rhyme, and so on. Guillaume Apollinaire and e.e. cummings are two of the most famous “concrete poets” who experimented freely with typographic conventions in their poetry. The tradition of experimentation with the typographical
schemas basically refers to the art of playing with the space of the medium in which writing is instantiated.

A new awareness was beginning to take hold of the imagination of the writers where the spatial dimension of writing and its inevitable dynamic relationship with the physical medium (on which writing is inscribed) becomes constitutive, and in some cases, paramount to the whole art of writing. As a result, the page loses “its connotations of parameter, and becomes the stage for the inscription of dynamic configurations which create their own space and their own depth, independent of the page spatial limits” (Pickering 57). Commenting on Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés*, Pickering writes that “[t]he intricacies of its typographical disposition constantly invite interpretation in terms of proximity and of distancing, generating an adventure of reading of which the theatre and central focus is the page itself” (Pickering 63). The same is true of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* where again “…the expressiveness of words as being linked inseparably to the white spaces of the page surrounding them” becomes constitutive of the overall effect of the work (Pickering 60). The physical attributes of the medium became an inseparable part of the art of writing. Derrida’s *Glas* is another example: it not only foregrounds the importance of spatial arrangement in writing but also breaks away with the linearity of writing associated with the medium of page. J. Hillis Miller makes an important observation on Derrida’s *Glas*:

*Glas* and the personal computer appeared at more or less the same time. Both work self-consciously and deliberately to make obsolete the traditional codex linear book and to replace it with the new multilinear multimedia hypertext that is rapidly becoming the
characteristic mode of expression both in culture and in the study of
cultural forms. (qtd. in Bolter 111)

Maurice Blanchot later made a comment on Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés* in his
work *The Book to Come*, which aptly describes the emergence of a new relationship
between the art of writing and the writing space; and he says that “*Un Coup de Dés*
was born from a new understanding of literary space” (Blanchot 235).

Blanchot’s idea of literary space is significant in so far as it foregrounds
space as central to the art of writing. This understanding of literary space was an
attempt to re-define the possibility of new writing practices within the medium of
the page. Bolter corroborates Blanchot when he writes:

> Each writing space is a material and visual field, whose properties are
determined by a writing technology and the uses to which that
technology is put by a culture of readers and writers. A writing space
is generated by the interaction of material properties and cultural
choices and practices. (Bolter 12)

What Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valery, Apollinaire, Cummings and Derrida were trying
to achieve was to carve out a new understanding of writing or literary space. They
played with the material properties of the page, broke cultural conventions and made
new choices and relationships to invent new practices of literary writing.

Writing as an artistic practice is not only about noting down your thoughts
and ideas on some material medium. It is also about a writer’s attempt to play with
the medium, mobilizing it into ever new possibilities. The interface of writing
includes the surface of the page, the font, the spacing between the lines, the title
page, its design, the typography etc. All these constitute a ‘text’ and are significant as far as the art of writing is concerned. Moreover, the acts of thinking and writing are not really linear, as they include writing, cutting, composing, and recomposing, jumping from one place to another, from one idea to another (associatively) without any linear relationship between two consecutive ideas other than their spatial contiguity in the mind. In this chapter, we shall study Michael Joyce’s two well-known works of hypertext fiction, *afternoon, a story* and *Twelve Blue*. Both works employ hypertext technology innovatively, and attempt to exploit its potential for the creation of new kinds of literary artworks for the digital and electronic landscape of late twentieth century.

### 3.1 *Afternoon, a story*

One of the first writers to venture into the field of hypertext fiction was Michael Joyce. He started his literary career with *The War Outside Ireland* (1982). It was a print novel and it earned him the Great Lakes New Writers Award. He moved into the electronic space of writing and created his first hypertext fiction titled *afternoon: a story* (1987) published by Eastgate Systems. This work is available in many versions and a critical study of these has been undertaken by Matthew Kirschenbaum in “Save As: Michael Joyce’s *afternoons*”. Following these Joyce wrote two long hyper-fictions, *Twilight, A Symphony* (1996) published by Eastgate systems and made available on CD-ROM, and *Twelve Blue* (1996) published by *Postmodern Culture* and later by Eastgate Systems in 1997. This work has recently been published again by Electronic Literature Organization in 2006 in an electronic anthology at [http://collection.eliterature.org/1/](http://collection.eliterature.org/1/). Other than fiction, Joyce has also

Along with Jay David Bolter and John B. Smith, Michael Joyce is one of the founding designers of the hypertext authoring tool known as *Storyspace*, later developed and distributed by Mark Bernstein of Eastgate Systems. This software comes with certain inbuilt capabilities for writers to create their works of fiction. To use this software, one does not have to be familiar with computer programming. Robert Coover hailed it as “the software of choice among fiction writers in this country” (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 706). There was a time when most of the works of hypertext fiction were authored using this software. Hypertext fiction was one of the first experimental genres of a new field of literary writing which emerged during the 1980s. This kind of fiction is characterized by “linking structures” (Hayles 6). Hypertext created the possibility of what Michael Joyce always wanted to achieve in writing. Joyce says:

> I wanted, quite simply, to write a novel that would change in successive readings and to make those changing versions according to the connections that I had for some time naturally discovered in the process of writing and that I wanted my readers to share. In my eyes, paragraphs on many different pages could just as well go with paragraphs on many other pages, although with different effects and for different purposes. All that kept me from doing so was the fact
that, in print at least, one paragraph inevitably follows another. It seemed to me that if I, as author, could use a computer to move paragraphs about, it wouldn’t take much to let readers do so according to some scheme I had predetermined. (Joyce, *Of Two Minds*, 31)

In this sense, the technology of hypertext proved redemptive for writers like Joyce to realize their own kind of multi-linear form of imaginative writing. The classics of hypertext fiction include Michael Joyce’s *afternoon: a story*, Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*. These fictions were authored by using Storyspace and published by Eastgate Systems. Later on, more experimental works came on to the scene, which made use of many of the functionalities offered by different kind of technologies for the art of literary writing. All these are now placed in the category of electronic/digital writing.

Story is one of the most fundamental modes of organizing human experience. We have been creating stories since time immemorial. They have become an essential part of our sense of being human. Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* has become a classic of hypertext fiction. Robert Coover hailed it as “…the grand daddy of hypertext fictions…a legend” (NYT). It was first published in the form of a CD-ROM by Eastgate Systems in 1987. It was one of first works of writing in the new media that explicitly made use of hypertext technology. The work has also been included in the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction*. *afternoon, a story* strives, as a work of art, to exploit the possibilities of hypertext to the utmost effect for the creation of one of the first kinds of hypertext fiction which inaugurated a new era of experimentation in literary writing.
The layout of the text of *afternoon, a story* is like any normal software. The reader has to install this story in order to read it. Once it is installed, the reader clicks on the “.exe” file of the story and a window opens. The first window frame of the story is like the following:

![Figure: 3, afternoon, a story](image)

At the end of the installation of *afternoon, a story*, there comes a message which says that the reader should go through a reading guide, installed in the same folder from where the story runs. It tells the reader the possible ways in which the story can be read, which means the reader may proceed through the story by opting out of a given set of options; s/he may click on the links in the lexias or s/he may keep pressing *enter* to go from one lexia to another which follows an inherent logic of segments independent of the reader’s choice; or s/he may open a given menu of links in a particular lexia by clicking the *button* link and decide whichever link s/he
wants to go to. Another way of moving through the story is by answering questions in terms of Yes or No by clicking on respective buttons on the window frame. The reading’s guide also tells the reader that s/he can save her reading, and consequently when s/he returns to afternoon sometimes later, s/he may begin reading the story from where s/he left it.

As soon as the reader clicks on the image in the window frame, the story begins:

I try to recall winter. < As if it were yesterday? > she says, but I do not signify one way or another.

By five the sun sets and the afternoon wind grows again across the blueness into crystal mists and pales of ice - rivers and continents beset by fear; and we walk out to the car, the snow encroaching beneath our boots and the voice echoing in some along the fences line on the horizon, the staring settling like relics, the echoing thundering off bare. This was the essence of wood, there fragments say. And this darkness is as:

Poetry > she says, without emotion, one way or another.

Do you want to hear about it?

Figure: 4, afternoon, a story

The reader is now free to choose any of the reading methods depending on his/her convenience. In each case, the next lexia will be different; it may come out to be same only in a few cases; correspondingly, the unfolding of the story varies with reference to the choices the reader makes. One thing that needs to be noted is that the blank space seen in the above screen shot is also linked to a lexia, which means that the reader may click on any part of the blank space and it will take the reader to
the same lexia. There are lexias from which there is only a single link, and every click takes the reader to the same lexia.

The story is about the supposed death of a son, who died that day in the accident or who did not die. It is not sure; and this ambiguity lurks around like the narrative unconscious of the whole story. The story takes place within the space of this situation, always bordering on the edges of uncertainty. In my readings (more than one) of the story, I have only come across such characters like Peter, Werther, Naussicaa, Lisa, Lolly, Mrs. Porter, and Andrew. I have made three separate readings of the story following three distinct, to use Hayles’s words, “navigational” pathways depending upon the choices I had made. The following interpretation of the story depends on these three readings.

The story unfolds not in the sequence of lexias a reader follows, but in sharp encounters with such lexias which suddenly, like shrapnel, explode into strange possibilities of giving form to one’s reading. For instance, the story keeps moving, in the first reading, on the rhythms of choices made by the reader with no necessary inner logic between any two consecutive lexias, and suddenly, there appears a lexia, like the following, which uncovers something so essential that the reader sees something emerging on the horizon:

1 The most comprehensive interpretations of Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* have been attempted by Jane Yellowlees Douglas in his book *The End of Books-Or Books Without End?* and Jay D. Bolter in his work *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print* and Jill Walker in “Piecing together and tearing apart: finding the story in *afternoon*” available at http://jilltxt.net/txt/afternoon.html. Espen J. Aarseth, in his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, has dealt with the work in a complete different way.
The moment the reader encounters the above lexia, titled “I want to say”, s/he instantly realizes the fact that someone’s son has died or someone has seen his/her son die. The use of “may” evokes this ambiguity. And if the reader is lucky enough, s/he may encounter it as soon as possible; at the earliest it comes out to be the second lexia if one luckily makes the right choice. Consequently, the whole sequence of lexias takes on a new dimension; the events and the situations start making minimal sense at some level. Although it still remains generally incomprehensible, yet the reader gets oriented in a new way. In other words, some lexias turn out to be exceptionally revealing in the sense that they throw completely new light on what the reader has been witnessing in the unfolding of lexias.

Another such lexia is “Die” in which someone is saying to someone that s/he has seen the remains of the accident that had taken place. There is no information of any sort about the time or the place of the accident. The last line of this lexia is quite
interesting since it tries to make a comparison between the real scene of the accident
as seen by the “I” in the lexia with two options: “Blow-Up or the Red Desert”.

Figure: 6, afternoon, a story

Both are the titles of Michelangelo Antonioni’s famous movies. In my reading, I
clicked on Blowup and moved through the story which somehow (I may have
clicked the links button at the bottom of the window and followed the link) led to the
lexia “Always”, a lexia full of sharp allusions to six masters of twentieth century
cinema with an exceptionally brilliant loose composition style. It states:

I always confused them. Antonioni taught us boredom. Truffaut

taught us love.

Godard politics Bergman time Fellini dreams.

Woody Allen prepared us for the eighties and Reagan. Death valley
days.
Following this I went on another such lexia, titled “white afternoon”, which again threw light on the accident as it described the findings of an investigation. In the lexia, the investigator is reported to have found out the person who is at fault for the accident.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure: 7, afternoon, a story**

It is only when the reader gets to read this lexia that s/he comes to understand that someone has been assigned the task of investigating the accident in which the son of someone has died or he has seen his son die that afternoon. At the same time, the reader understands that the pronoun “him” refers to a male character who is struggling to come to terms with this ambiguous situation. It becomes very difficult for the reader to straightaway decode what is happening in the story. Due to the existence of many plotlines, the reader has to return to the story again and again. S/he needs to give two or three readings at least, as far as my personal experience of
reading *afternoon* suggests, before some sense of what is happening within the story-world of the narrative starts to take shape in the mind.

My first reading ends, that is to say I stopped reading, with another interesting lexia titled “work in progress”. I came across some interesting lexias in this reading, which referred to other characters Peter, Wert, etc., but my overall impression has been one of being lost in a labyrinth where it becomes difficult to find one’s way out. The ending, in a strange way, was so interesting that it encouraged me to accept the challenge of reading *afternoon* once again. The content of the lexia are worth quoting at length here, which is like this:

> Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends. Even so, there are likely to be more opportunities than you think there are at first. A word which doesn’t yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like memory, heads off again in another direction.

There is no simple way to this.

It was this lexia which finally instilled in me fresh energy to make another attempt at reading *afternoon*. It leaves the reader with a kind of satisfaction and fulfillment which conventional closure would have given had it been designed as traditional story with a causal chain of events leading to the resolution of the fundamental
conflict of the story. We shall ponder on the implications of this lexia at the end of the chapter.

During my second reading, it begins with the same lexia. This time, I made a different choice from my previous reading which took me to a different pattern of lexias. It is really difficult for the reader to make any sense of the pattern s/he has chosen to follow. But gradually, things start falling into some order as the reader reaches the following lexia, titled “Islands”:

In the above lexia, I came to know about two new characters, Wert and Peter. Otherwise, I was only reading third person narrative which literally makes no sense unless one encounters a character. The next segment of lexias contributed significantly to my understanding of the two characters, and the story overall. It followed the following sequence of lexis: “Islands”, “Lovers”, “touching myself”,

Figure: 8, _afternoon, a story_
“monster”, “self-destruction”, “The Good Soldier”, “dream pools”, “star wars”, “Lolly’s monologue,” etc. until I came upon “white afternoon”. In the second reading, I first came to know about the accident in the lexia titled “Lolly’s monologue” but that made no revelatory impact on my sense of the story. The following lexias titled “1/” and “2/” threw significant light on the narrative, yet the overall sense remained one of confusion and loss. As soon as I encountered the lexia “white afternoon”, the accident became a defining event in my sense-making exercise. As was the case in the first reading, the lexia forced me to see things in a different light in spite of the fact that I was not aware of what had actually happened yet the abrupt appearance of the lexia made a striking impact. In a way, Joyoce’s *afternoon* achieved the aim of shocking the reader in way that his/her entire relationship with the story gets redefined. I finally also understood that Peter, Andrew and Lisa are somehow related to each other. Andrew many be Peter’s son whom he has seen dying or who has died in the accident that afternoon.

I still continued my reading. The narrative continued shedding light on the story as there were detailed descriptions of the place and its surroundings like the roadside lawn and the skidmarks of the car involved in the accident, and other lexias reporting and describing all kinds of stuff and information. And then came another lexia titled “can I help you?” which quite explicitly referred to the accident. It appears that a lady, wearing a silk dress and jogging shoes, who has heard about the accident from her maid who saw two ambulances, is offering some kind of help to the sheriff who is at the scene. The next lexia is titled “no I say” in continuation to
the previous one and the content of the lexia takes the narrative forward in a sequential manner. The lexia immediately following this is titled “transcript” and becomes one of the most important lexias in this particular reading. From this lexia, the reader is able to form some sense of relationships among the characters s/he has encountered. The reader comes to know that Andy is the son who has died or who has been seen dying.

Here again it becomes difficult to know who this “Caller” is; yet one thing is sure that the Caller is Andy’s father. All this information still remains very vague; there are only guesses, rather than concrete trails leading to definitive meaning. The lexia “then I woke”, which follows “transcript”, is again an interesting lexia. This turned out to be the most significant lexia in my second reading of afternoon. The lexia is a kind of self-reflective exercise on the story itself. It is shown in the following figure:
The content of the lexia refers to the quest for truth in a story. It argues that there actually is no truth in any story; each story is an intricate web of pathways which overlap each other like life of individuals. Joyce’s here obliquely alludes to Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphoses” and Borges’s story “The Circular Ruins”. The lexia says that “there is no mystery, really, about the truth. You merely need to backtrack, or take other paths” which is to say that reading *afternoon* is not really about solving the mystery by finding out the truth, rather it is more about explore different pathways through a complex network of lexias, and gradually the reader comes to know what is happening in the story-world of *afternoon* as the lexias says that “[u]sually the silent characters yield what the investigator needs to know”. It looks as if the reader merely becomes an investigator in *afternoon* who put together patches to make a fractured whole of his/her exploration.

Another lexia which mediates on the vey status of the story the reader is reading is titled “me*”. A character says: “I’m not sure I have story. And, if I do,
I’m not sure that everything isn’t my story, or that, whatever is my story, is anything more than pieces of others’ stories”. This makes the reader aware of what s/he is confronting in the form of *afternoon*. It is very difficult to know who is this “I”; it may be a mirror reflection of any reader who reads the story, or it may also refer to the main character in *afternoon, a story*; but it is quite impossible to find this main character if there is any because the comments disperse the main characters in the life of other characters. My second reading ended here.

In my third reading, the longest and most intensive and exhaustive take, right from the start I was able to grasp some vague logic of events as I was moving through the story. I was able to find Werther and Peter as two independent and complimentary characters with distinct personality. A third person, probably a woman, was describing Werther and Peter having particular qualities, tastes, likes, dislikes and merits.

These differences make them attractive. Werth-- so self-centered, rash, raw-- is all energy and comes like a turk, sometimes weeping for all the good he feels, sometimes laughing in the pure joy of what he imagines it must be to conquer.

There is an undeniable benefit to his youth, and, if I had to choose, I would not give him up. It is always better to have a younger lover, for they can be talked to be deceived and can be obsessed, when necessary, by a woman who knows herself. With Werth it is all school, wondrously abstracted and frenetic; I would wear black stocking for him if he asked me to.

Which doesn’t make Peter second, not at all. He is more complicated, more like not in his rhythm and way of weighing. I am apt to divine with him in me or upon me.
For instance, in one of the lexias titled “Lovers,” the two characters are talked about as shown in the above figure. Reading the above lexia, the reader instantly grasps some lines of possible development of plot or something related to what is happening depending on the above lexias. Even the title of the lexia, “Lovers,” tangentially offers some clue in interpreting the lexia. As a result, the reader comes to see both Wert and Peter as lovers of the same woman. This lexia describes her feelings about each of them. The second important thing is the possible paths the reader may follow from this lexia; and strangely, there is only one possible path the reader is the given the choice to follow.

The next lexia is titled “touching myself”. The narrative continues in this lexia as follows:

\[\text{Figure: 12, afternoon, a story}\]

The woman character continues to dwell on the personalities and characters of Wert and Peter as she understands them through her relationship with both of them. In the
above lexia, a small paragraph certainly seems to allude to the relationship the
woman shares with both of them, Wert and Peter. It goes like this:

I am certain they both believe they have me. They share that man’s
sense of cliché: wife and whore, and I am the woman without
complications. Neither understands that I choose them.

Following this thread, in which the next lexia is titled “monsters”, the reader
encounters a sequence of lexias that keep on building the plot in a traditional
sequential way, even though there are only descriptions and no events. But a
continuous stream of lexias do have some affinity that helps the reader to make
some sense of the story as it proceeds in this particular reading.

In the third reading, which I am following now, it is only after encountering
the lexia titled “Lolly’s monologue” that I came to know that some kind of an
accident had taken place, as a result of which the plot moves into an entirely
different direction from here onwards. It is by following this thread that the reader
becomes aware of Peter’s involvement in the accident in which Andrew, his
supposed son and some lady named Lisa, had been injured. One could say that in
some of the reading paths, the reader may keep making the right choices not in the
sense that any choice is wrong within the *storyspace* of the narrative, but rather that
some choices may lead the reader to those logical lexias which build on the previous
lexias. This can be said also true because there are certain shorter sequences of
lexias (up to 3 or 4) which follow a particular thread up to a particular point of time
in a specific direction until the thread finally snaps. This is so because in some lexias
there are only one or two links which the reader may follow, which means that the
choices given to the reader are bare minimum.
I noticed my first attempt to read *afternoon* led me into disorientation, leaving me in a kind of wilderness with no way to go or no hint to move in any direction. In fact, one could say that it vexed me with its daunting absurdity. It became impossible for me as a reader to make any connections between the lexias as I chose them randomly. Although it must be admitted that some of the lexias were exceptionally redolent of the ambience of the story, yet the story remained by and large outside of my grasp.

It is worth noting that the present reader was able to make sense of the lexias encountered in the first go during the third reading, and was able to tentatively join them into a kind of whole primarily as a result of my being aware of the significance of those lexias from my previous readings. Another significant point is that some lexias unfold in specific sequences in each reading. Each successive attempt at reading *afternoon* was built on the cumulative sense that I was able to muster from previous readings. “This incremental mode of reading,” says Ryan “constitutes the most genuinely nonlinear aspect of the hypertext experience” (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 231). In each successive reading I made of the story I encountered some of the most significant of lexias, or “a striking image” in an entirely different context which, in the most fundamental sense, seriously affected my ability to pierce through this labyrinth of lexias without losing my sense of place and learning from the trails left on my mind by former attempts (Ryan 230). Ryan correctly notes that this leads to “the effect [which] is that of an amnesiac mind that desperately tries to grasp some chains of association but cannot hold on to them long enough to recapture a coherent picture of the past” (229). In each reading, the reader
necessarily encounters lexias which subsequently become a kind of pivotal nodes - what Ryan calls, following Espen Aarseth, “an epiphanic segment that discloses a network of interpersonal relations” within the segments of lexias the reader had taken in a single reading session (233). The content of each lexia in a given network of lexias (which the reader has followed in a particular reading) has to filter through such nodal lexias if a meaningful pattern has to emerge. This is so because only in this way the whole web of independent lexias start to form meaningful relationships, and the reader starts to discern a pattern emerging that lends a meaningful form to the logic of events the reader has witnessed in his/her readings.

Each reading brings out the story from a different perspective, and it does seem sometimes as if each time the reader is going through it by means of some character. Consequently, it really becomes difficult to pinpoint who is narrating the story. The phenomenon has been termed as “destabilizing narrators” by Jill walker. This is not to say that Joyce has achieved what he aspired to create, “a novel that would change in successive readings,” since the basic story remains the same in every reading. It is only the way the reader pieces together sequence of lexias to pierce through the maze to construct meaning, which fundamentally changes in every reading the way story is experienced by the reader, exploring new but dimensions.

3.2 **TWELVE BLUE**

*Twelve Blue* (2006) by Michael Joyce is an HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) hypertext fiction. It was authored using *Storyspace*. *Twelve Blue* was Joyce’s first attempt to create a ‘web hypertext’ fiction. It is called an HTML or
web-based hypertext because it was specially created for publication and distribution on the internet. It was also meant to be read online. Many of the significant works of electronic literature, including *Twelve Blue*, have recently been made available on a CD-ROM in a new collection published by ELO because of “…a long tradition in the literary community of cherishing the book as a physical object” (Hayles ix).

*Twelve Blue* is different from Joyce’s previous hypertext fiction. Its increased visuality and different platform makes it fundamentally different. With *Twelve Blue*, Joyce moved into an entirely new form of writing in the new media, that is, web-based hypertext fiction and more complex and dynamic forms of fictions. In the introduction to *Twelve Blue*, Joyce writes that there are two hundred and sixty nine (269) links here among ninety six (96) spaces. He ends the introduction with the following remark: “*Twelve Blue* isn’t anything. Think of lilacs when they are gone”. This remark is about memory, the sense of forgetting, and the desire to recollect and relive the past in memory. For Marie Ryan, it “unlocked of some of [her] favourite childhood memories”, whereas for Gregory Ulmer, the remark took him to the backyard of his childhood home where lilacs grew (Ryan 240). He recalls “the very scarcity of flowering bushes in Montana making their brief but fragrant appearance all the more impressive” (Ulmer, “A Response”, par. 2). Obviously, the words are evocative of readers’ past experiences.

The front-page of *Twelve Blue* published by ELO includes the section titled “Author description”, which is as follows:

A drowning, a murder, a friendship, three or four love affairs, a boy and a girl, two girls and their mothers, two mothers and their lovers, a
daughter and her father, a father and his lover, seven women, three men, twelve months, twelve threads, eight hours, eight waves, one river, a quilt, a song, twelve interwoven stories, a thousand memories, *Twelve Blue* explores the way our lives — like the web itself or a year, a day, a memory, or a river — form patterns of interlocking, multiple, and recurrent surfaces.

These words orient the reader to what s/he will be dealing with. This paragraph is more like a brief summary which highlights certain elements of the work but one still needs to experience the work oneself to stitch together these bits of information. The title of the work and the epigraph to the work foreground the intertextual relationship the work shares with William H. Gass’s *On Being Blue* right at the start. Gass’s work is a philosophical meditation on man’s perception of the colour ‘blue’ and its symbolic, emotional and erotic associations. Roland Barthes’s and Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality is implicit in hypertext, and it becomes more explicit and clear in a hypertext fiction like *Twelve Blue*.

As the reader presses the button BEGIN, the first page of the work opens as shown in the following figure. The layout of the work includes dark blue background with light blue text on it. It contains an image map with twelve threads spread spatially and horizontally from the top to the bottom. All the threads are shades of blue with two of different colours. Some threads interweave and intersect, highlighting the elementary intertextual nature of all life. Below the image map there are eight underlined bars numbered 1 to 8. The underlined bars show the presence of a link or pathway which leads into the work. The reader can also click on the image
map to enter the work. As a result, there are eight different beginnings or entrances to the work. So the beginning is determined by the choice of the reader.

By clicking on the bar, a new page opens with the text on it. On the left side of page there is an image-map showing the pattern of threads into which the reader has entered. At the bottom of the page, the URL of each of these lexias indicates the bar and the thread (for example, 4_10) where the reader happens to be in that particular pattern. The lexias are titled like “How she knew”, “Follow Me”, “Blue room moon flowers” and “touching” etc. There are spaces between the paragraphs in lexias which have hidden links. As the reader clicks on this blank space, the text appears for a brief moment and the next lexia opens. The reader can follow these links as a guiding path, but this does not lead anywhere because there comes a lexia without any internal links. Sometimes these links end in a recursive loop, as a result of which the reader keeps encountering the same fragment again and again. The reader is
stuck in both cases. Just below the numbered bars there is a quotation from Gass’ *On Being Blue* which goes like this: “So a random set of meanings has softly gathered around the word the way lint collects. The mind does that”. We can see that the meaning is not given in the text; rather the mind needs to create and collect it from the relationships and associations she/he is able to form among the lexias she encounters in her/his reading process.

There is no single narrative pattern in *Twelve Blue*. Rather it weaves together different story-worlds with different characters, situations and events existing in varied geographical landscapes, somehow related via chance encounters or familial relations, into a network like structure, all coming together and forming a web. Any kind of relationship which these characters, events, and situations form is purely incidental, circumstantial and contingent. There is no underlying thread which somehow connects everything in the work. In other words, we can say that there are many narrative worlds which crisscross and intersect. The effect of such interweaving of narratives is that the reader can never finish the work in a single reading. In fact, one never ends reading *Twelve Blue*. The sense of closure which has become so natural for us is completely disrupted. We can even say that the sense of closure is directly related to the reader’s choice. She/he can stop at any point of time. In fact, one can never say that she/he has finished reading *Twelve Blue* because it demands re-reading as the narrative unfolds differently each time the reader enters the text. In Jorge Luis Borges’s famous detective story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the character Stephen Albert narrates the story of Ts’ui Pen’s attempt to write
a book in which “…in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive” (32). Reading *Twelve Blue* creates the possibility of this kind of reading because of the structuring of the text. If in one lexia, the character dies, in the next she or he may be alive. The reader has to read many of the lexias again and again but each time its meaning will vary as the context varies because of the different traversal paths chosen by the reader in that particular reading. Moreover, the reader is never able to see the complete text of *Twelve Blue*. She/he always finds herself into this network of lexias but never above or outside it. Paul Ricoeur’s statement that “the text as a whole and as a singular whole may be compared to an object, which may be viewed from several sides, but never from all sides”, becomes literally true in the case of such a hypertext fiction, as the reader is never able to view it all at once (Ricoeur 77). Each reading will open up a new reading both at the physical and the semantic level.

Moreover, there is no thematic unity in the work although our reading habits tempt us to locate some kind of thematic unity among the lexias. One thing that connects the lexias is the recurrence of the word ‘blue’. However, as soon as the reader begins to weave any kind of thematic relationships, she/he is frustrated, often intentionally by the writer, especially when s/he encounters a lexia which completely moves her/him into a new situation. It does not mean that *Twelve Blue* has no theme. There are several themes, involving love affairs, failed marriages, death and illicit sexual relations etc. In his response to Twelve Blue, Gregory Ulmer has remarked that such writing can be defined as “writing with choral words”
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(Ulmer, “A Response”, par. 2). There is no plot. The experiments with the disruption of plot have been made in print literature for a long time. Many postmodern novels consciously break away with the notion of plot. In fact, there are, as we noted above, multiple beginnings but no end. When it comes to characters, there are characters but there is no ‘development’ of the characters in traditional sense. The concept of socio-cultural and political formation of characters stands nullified as the reader encounters characters with ‘inherent’ characteristics. Some of the characters which I have been able to identify in my reading of *Twelve Blue* are Javier, Samantha, Lisle, Lisa, Ed Stanko and Aurelie. Reading *Twelve Blue*, it becomes really difficult to identify characters and their relationships. Samantha is Lisle’s daughter. Lisle is making a quilt in one of the lexias which suggests the patchwork structure of the hypertext. Javier is a cardiovascular surgeon. He was married to Aurelie but they got divorced. Javier then falls in love with Lisle, a Canadian virologist. Gradually, as the reader settles down, s/he realizes the tentative formation of a pattern, some relationships forming, something emerging on the horizon. At the same time, more than one character exist in two avatars like Javier (a doctor and a Portuguese sailor), three Eleanores (George Landow’s student, Eleanor of Castile and Eleanor of Aquitaine), two lees etc. It may be so that different manifestations of the same person are perspective of other different characters. The front-page of the work, as the comment on ELO site puts it, tells “a complex and enigmatic story of memory, desire, lust, truth, and consequences”. As far as my reading is concerned, I have not been able to find a conventional kind of story in it, with a certain coherence and
There are narratives of lust, desire, and memory etc. but no story as such other than some fleeting patterns.

There are passages of excellent lyrical power in the work like the following which is worth quoting at length from *Twelve Blue*:

> Everything can be read, every surface and silence, every breath and every vacancy, every eddy and current, every body and its absence, every darkness every light, each cloud and knife, each finger and tree, every backwater, every crevice and hollow, each nostril, tendril and crescent, every whisper, every whimper, each laugh and every blue feather, each stone, each nipple, every thread every color, each woman and her lover, every man and his mother, every river, each of the twelve blue oceans and the moon, every forlorn link, every hope and every ending, each coincidence, the distant call of a loon, light through the high branches of blue pines, the sigh of rain, every estuary, each gesture at parting, every kiss, each wasp's wing, every foghorn and railway whistle, every shadow, every gasp, each glowing silver screen, every web, the smear of starlight, a fingertip, rose whorl, armpit, pearl, every delight and misgiving, every unadorned wish, every daughter, every death, each woven thing, each machine, every ever after

The above passage is one of the most evocative of all the passages in *Twelve Blue*. The presence of three vertical dots at the top of the paragraph and three underlined horizontal dots at the bottom makes it float in the continuity of a web of stories and
all time. The passage makes every expression, every movement, every thought, in fact every little gesture meaningful as everything in the human world can be read. Reading here becomes the all-encompassing act of rendering the physical world of things and individuals meaningful in the most basic sense.

The imagery of water and drowning has been used in several places in the work. Water symbolizes the flow of life and the fluid nature of the work itself. And drowning signifies the looming danger of submerging in this flow. It may also refer to human mortality since s/he will get drown one day, but simultaneously it also symbolizes the earnest attempt of man to struggle and resist this flow. It also symbolizes the fleeting nature of any reading experience which will never be captured again in its singularity. The reader flows through the universe woven by the web of lexias which are composed into a pattern by the reader. Katherine Hayles aptly remarks that “like sensual lovemaking, the richness of Twelve Blue takes time to develop and cannot be rushed” (64). The reader is unable to rush through the work; s/he is forced to let the work find its own pace; the work and the reader are joined by a thread so slowly and tenderly that as soon as the reader tries to hold on to the work and pull it towards her/himself, the thread snaps. The work thus foregrounds the process of reading itself. Another predominant image used in the work is that of drowning. Many of the characters encounter the image of drowning in one way or another. It suggests the experience of submergence, of being overwhelmed, of disorientation, of radical freedom- the experience typical of entering a web like work.
The basic difference between the two works is in the very form the opening: in *afternoon* each single reading has the same beginning, whereas in *Twelve Blue* the very entry into the work depends on the choice made by the reader. Consequently, *Twelve Blue* better embodies the web-like structure in the very dynamics of its performance through the participation of the reader. There are more openings and endings, depending on the reader’s point of entry and her/his choice to stop. In *afternoon* it was more difficult for the reader to apprehend the sequential flow of narrative, which makes the reading challenging and difficult. In *Twelve Blue*, the image map highlights that the story is basically about the flow of life, and how in this flow certain individuals chance to meet and how their lives intersect with and overlap each other. There is a certain minimal amount of cause-and-effect flow help the reader keep track of the story. But this does not mean that the reader shall be able to comprehend *Twelve Blue* more easily than *afternoon*. The difference operates at the level of composition itself. One of the most significant and common problems is what Ryan has rightly termed as the “referential opacity” (Ryan, *Narrative as VR*, 231). The excessive use of pronouns frustrates the reader since s/he feels unable to find the reference to which a particular pronoun in a given lexia is addressed. This is because two consecutive lexias may be completely different in every sense and yet follow one and another consecutively.

The question of the role of the medium, of the nature of its physicality, its functionalities, and emerging materiality with regard to the signifying strategies employed by a particular writer are now becoming increasingly important with the arrival of the hypertext fiction. Traditionally, this has been ignored or overlooked in
literary studies. As the computer becomes the dominant medium of cultural and artistic expression, it forces us to rethink our conceptions of the practice and future of literary writing. The predominance of the visual in contemporary society indicates the importance of the ‘image’. Writing has always had a visual dimension. Gradually, however it came to be understood as the recording of speech or spoken language. Sybille Kramer notes that the “phonographic doctrine of writing [has repressed] a fundamentally visual-iconographic dimension of writing” (MLN 519). It is thus usually supposed to be secondary to speech. It is only with Derrida’s critical engagement with “the science of writing” (grammatology) that we have come to realize its significance as an independent medium of signification. As Joseph Tabbi argues in his essay “Towards a Semantic Literary Web”, we should approach the advent of electronic/digital writing as an “emerging cultural form” implicated in our contemporary digital and networked culture. The emergence of new writing practices remediates our understandings of writing, reading and ‘the literary’. The question is not whether new media writings are literary or not, the question is what kind of literariness do they embody with reference to the cultural matrix from which they emerge? The coming of such writing practices may also force us to rethink the visual dimension of literature.

Literature is usually understood as a verbal art. It is supposed to be only about words, their combination and mutual relationships, irrespective of the medium on which words are materialized. Our current understanding of literature as we harbour it today has been shaped by five centuries of print. The medium has been overlooked in most instances of sustained critical analysis. There is still a lot to be
done to show how the medium shapes our perceptions and conceptions of literature. The real question is not whether the book will be dead or not; it is to dwell on the “possibility of understanding how deeply literary theory and criticism have been imbued with assumptions specific to print” (Hayles 33).

Reading *afternoon, a story* and *Twelve Blue* is tiring, frustrating, exciting, and in some sense, thrilling. It is altogether a different reading experience as a compared to the experience of reading a printed work. Hypertext fiction thus certainly raises important questions for literary studies. In hypertext fiction, reading essentially becomes re-reading. The metaphor of *re-reading* has been in use in the case of print narratives also, but it was primarily used to refer to the reader’s psychological struggle to keep redefining his/her engagement with a printed work that has been written and *structured* once and for all in a specific form. In hypertext fictions, the very act of reading, moving through the web of complex pathways, gets priority over the *goal* of reading. Hypertext fiction embodies performative textuality in the sense that the experience of reading symbolizes the very textuality of the art-object. Simultaneously, the aesthetics of hypertext fiction are not only limited to the technology of hypertext structuring of a text; the aesthetics emerge at the level of metaphors, similes, allusions and the construction of sentences used in such fiction. Hypertext denaturalizes the experience of literature both at the level of technique and literary aesthetics. It attempts to aesthetically capture a unified sense of de-centering, contingency, mortality that exists at the level of the identity of the self, free flowing emotions, the deferral of meaning and the precariousness of human life.