Reed's third novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, nominated for a National Book Award is his largest work to date and is one of his most important contributions to the reinterpretation of African-American experience and culture. It is a critique of black and Western literary forms and conventions and of the complex relations between the two. It is a thematic allegory of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s rendered through casual connections with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

*Mumbo Jumbo* became a critical debating ground for description about the merits or faults of Reed's work. Most of the critics of Reed view *Mumbo Jumbo* as the most ambitious and perhaps most important of all his work. It was given a front-page review in the *New York Times Book Review*. The contemporary reaction to the novel is a mixed response. *The New Yorker* summarised *Mumbo Jumbo* as partly intelligible pastiche.* Nation* found it 'too much of the advocate of black story.* The *Library Journal*  

described the novel as a loop-pop version of Thomas Mann and later added that *Mumbo Jumbo* was not of that class. Reviewing in *Black World*, Houston Baker called *Mumbo Jumbo* the first Black American novel in the last ten years that gives a sense of a broader vision. He further says that it offers a conspirational-view of history and a critical handbook for the student of Black Arts. The overall effect is that of amazing talent and flashing genius. To Mason *Mumbo Jumbo* is an example of historical fabulation. Post-structuralist critics such as Louis Gates give close attention to the subtleties his and complexities of the novels narrative device and language. To Louis Gates *Mumbo Jumbo* is the consummate black Post-modern text which through elaborate forms of parody signifies upon key texts of the African-American canon, criticising that tradition's conventions of closure and offering an elaboration of play of indeterminacy. Other critics have praised the novel for stylistic reasons citing the harmonious blend and myth-making in the narrative.

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Mumbo Jumbo is grand signifying riff on Plato's Phaedrus where he treats the trophe of blackness as sign of absence and the figure of blackness as a metaphor for one of the divisions of the soul—that of blackness. It also signifies Socrates' discourse. It is also a critique of Harlem Renaissance which although successful in the creation of numerous texts of art, failed to find its voice which lay muffled beneath the dead weight of Romantic convention. A similar critique of Harlem Renaissance was rendered by Wallace Thurman in his Infants of the Spring (1932). It identifies the cultural dynamics of the Harlem Renaissance with the struggle for control of a sacred text going back to the beginnings of time and civilization in Africa. Mumbo Jumbo is about constructing of future black aesthetic. It uses nineteenth century American Pantheism, Emerson’s and Harriet Beecher Stowe's version of Topsy, Black Nature or a self-growing Pan. Richard Hardack remarks thus:

"Reed appropriates American Renaissance tropes to critique the modernist co-option of the Harlem Renaissance." 7

In Mumbo Jumbo Reed fully develops his aesthetic based on a revisionist reading of the myths of ancient

Egypt, the rituals of West Indian magic and the conjuring power of the darkness. It aims at reassertion of the values of simultaneity, plurality, the black power and culture. Reed is often accused of sacrificing social realism or verisimilitude to ideology or for creating a new myth of black culture.

Moving from ancient Egypt to the Crusades to the twentieth century America, Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* shows a consistent pattern of suppression of non-Western cultures by Judeo-Christian culture. He portrays the eternal conflict between the forces of life represented in the novel by the powers of HooDoo and the forces of death represented by Atonists and Wallflower Order in its broadest possible historical, cultural and mythical contexts. *Mumbo Jumbo* dramatizes the confrontation between Euro-centric and Afro-centric thought and culture. Reed wrote this novel in partial response to white literary critics' remarks that black Americans lacked a literary tradition. It marks Reed's shift from Egyptian symbols and myths to those of African-American aesthetics or what he calls Neo-HooDooism. It is both a satire on Western culture's concern with rationality and an example of the reorientation of older traditions possible under Reed's aesthetics of Neo-HooDooism.
In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed attempts to write about a spiritual system Jes Grew from the African-American historical past. His first task here is to expose the constraints of the traditional novel forms and mould the language to incorporate categories, experiences/concepts that exist outside its discoursive formation. Like many Post-Modernist novels and as in his two earlier novels, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* deliberately defies most of the norms of a realistic novel in its refusal to stimulate reality by creating believable characters, creditable psychological or sociological motivations and causally related events and linear patterns of time.

The seed for *Mumbo Jumbo* was "D Hexorcism of Noxon D Awful" which was published in *19 Necromancers From Now* and *Amistad*. In one of the interviews Reed expresses his intention to write about American civilization in general instead of on a particular period.

I want to write about Nixon administration but later I want to transcend some particular political event and make a statement about American civilization as a whole.8

In another interview he traces the inspiration for his work to a fetish he wrote.

“Mumbo Jumbo was derived from a fetish that I wrote. It was modelled after a sculpture I had seen in museum”.9

*Mumbo Jumbo* is a detective novel, a historical narrative. Its central purpose is to expand a wildly paranoid theory thereby explaining all history from ancient Egypt to the present day. It is a virtual carnival, a circus text. It constitutes what Michel Foucault calls a battle among discourses through discourse. It is what Ronald Barthes calls `a plural text' where the reader must produce the meaning, not just consume it. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a novel about writing itself, not only in the figurative sense of the Post-Modern self-reflexive text but also in a literal sense because "Jes Grew is seeking its word, The Text" (p. 6). Donald Hoffman draws parallels between the quest for the Grail and the quest for the text.10 *Mumbo Jumbo* is what Baktin calls "a carnivalesque text" trying to catch the spirit of comedy. The healing power of laughter is offered as an antidote to the plague of tragedy. In its allusiveness, self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness, it possesses

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some of the features of what Elaine Safe calls "the contemporary American Comic Epic". It shows the features of the comic epics of John Barthes, William Gadis and Thomas Pynchon - parodies of grand themes, satires of established institutions and systems, encyclopaedic listings, mixing of historical and fictional characters, comic tone, the use of myth and legend and creation of new myths and legends. However, it differs from the contemporary comic epic in not sharing its absurdist vision of life. It can be labelled as an comic anti-epic in that it is concerned with an anti-plague which enlivens the host and electrifies life, and because it depicts the world not so much enfeebled by absurdity or irrationality but rather a world suffering from too much rationality. In addition to a satire of cultural politics and the fervent declaration of aesthetic independence, Mumbo Jumbo is a novel concerned with pedagogy and epistemology. Its revisions of history seek to challenge and dismantle and deconstruct our assumptions and conceptions about knowledge and truth.

It exposes the inappropriateness of using Western linguistic conventions to express and to disseminate the African-American experience and focus on the necessity to rediscover the autonomous power of the word as the
instrument of conjuration. *Mumbo Jumbo* itself provides an alternative text which frees language from the rigidly hierarchal relationship of the sign to the signified. Linda Hutcheon views *Mumbo Jumbo* as an example of historiographic metafiction which exposes self reflexively the myth or illusion-making tendencies of historiography.\(^\text{11}\) It situates itself within historical discourse while at the same time refusing to surrender its autonomy as fiction. It challenges the conventions of fiction, history and writing. It turns to inter-texts, history as well as literature. It breaks the barriers between historical fact and fiction.

The action of the novel centres on an outbreak of Jes Grew in America during the 20s. Moving from South to North, it spreads all over the country affecting thousands of people. It is not a plague. It is an anti-plague. It can neither be prevented nor sustained. It has no real immediate embodiment. Evidently a characterization of the innovative energy of the Harlem Renaissance, the Osirian spirit and an embodiment of Dionysian spirit, it is inexplicable, irresistible and unpredictable. Unlike the

ordinary plague cracking with life, ebullience and ecstasy, it enlivens the host. La Bas rightly judges that Jes Grew is seeking its own text (p.6). Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Jes Grew seeking its text is a metaphor for Harlem Renaissance. Richard Hardack remarks that it erupts from beneath the surface of Western culture and tries to reclaim its derived heritage.

Many of Reed's critics including Louis Gates noted that Jes Grew is the central character in *Mumbo Jumbo*. It never speaks and is never seen in its abstract essence but seen in its discrete manifestations or outbreaks. It is the supraforce which gets the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* in motion as all characters and events define themselves against the omnipresent compelling force. Michael G. Cooke remarks that by insisting that Jes Grew cannot survive without a central orthodox text, Reed creates a major internal conflict.

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appears as a spontaneous manifestation, an outburst of life, and, on the other, it emerges as a matter of faith. Reed borrows the phrase Jes Grew from James Weldon Johnson who used it to characterize the creative process of black sacred music. "The earlier Rag time," Johnson says, "like Topsy Je's Grew." It is in short a code word for Black Power or the Black Movement.

Jes Grew cannot be told by words since it cannot be confined by forms. It takes its very existence from improvisation, change and adopting. The Book is never revealed. Jes Grew is essentially a process of discovery, an expression of individuality. Jes Grew is a universal principle through which all things are inter-related and all natural events occur.

It is clear that Jes Grew seeking its text is a metaphor for the Harlem Renaissance which was basically a New York phenomenon. However Hinckle Van Vampton floats the text among fourteen Jes Grew carriers and scatters it all over the country thus providing the means for a resurgence of Jes Grew. The Second Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, it should be noted, was not localized but national with many centres. John G.Parks remarks that Jes
Grew is the American version of polytheism of Osiris. Joe Weixlmann views it as a manifestation of African-American literary tradition and culture. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Jes Grew functions as a working definition of Neo Hoodooism.

Richard Hardack finds a parallel between Reed's Jes Grew and Emerson's Pan which in turn is a version of Osirian spirit. It resembles the way Emerson's Nature, the voice of the representative man. It is a form of American transcendentalism, Nature's Oversoul, Pan possessing and dispossessing individual wills. It is an odd mixture of American transcendentalism and Haitian VooDoo. Mumbo Jumbo transcends the limits of a racial protest novel by creating Jes Grew which emerges as a mythic symbol of cyclic life, creativity, improvisation and Dionysian spirit.


The main dramatic action of the novel revolves around the conspirational efforts of the Atonists and its military wing the Wallflower Order to suppress Jes Grew by locating and destroying the text on one hand and the efforts of the HooDoo defectives La Bas and Black Herman and its military wing, the Mutafikah, to locate and preserve the text for keeping the Jes Grew alive. Henry Louis Gates views the conflict between the Atonists and Jes Grew carriers as a reenactment allegorically of a primal recurring between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, the forces of Left Hand and the forces of Right Hand, the descendants of Set and the descendants of Osiris, between the worshippers of Petro loas and the worshippers of Rada loas. Naomi Jacobs remarks that the Jes Grew - Atonist opposition is not merely a White-Black opposition, but it is essentially a struggle between exuberance and control, joy and self righteousness, pluralism and monism, and Judeo-Christian culture and HooDooism.

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Under Wallflower Order's instructions, Hinkle Vampton, the librarian of Knights Templar, prepares a Talking Android to neutralise the power of Jes Grew. He floats the text among the fourteen Jes Grew carriers. The text falls into the hands of Abdul Hamid, a Black Muslim who translates the text and subsequently burns it. Finally, Jes Grew fades away when the text vanishes. The Atonist order essentially represents Western culture which Reed portrays as not only repressive but repressed. The order can be traced back to the hyper-organized Urizen of Blake's prophecies while Jes Gew would be analogous to the ebullious figure Los. The Mutafikah is multiracial ethnic group dedicated to breaking into Western museums to liberate the artefacts stored and pillaged from colonial nations. Their aim is to restore the artifacts to the people from whom they were stolen. Art, for Reed, is life and in Mumbo Jumbo his intention is to liberate it. The liberation of art is achieved through the efforts of Mutafikah. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that the efforts of Mutafikah to restore stolen artifacts parallels the efforts of Isis to collect the scattered pieces of her husband's dismembered body. It also provides a metaphor

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for Reed’s own attempt to render a true black aesthetic by rescuing it from co-optation, misunderstanding and dogmatism.

**Mumbo Jumbo** ostensibly configures all Western history as a perpetual restaging of the conflict between primitive pre-Western Black or Jes Grew beliefs and the repressed Western creeds. Reed’s theory of history as presented in *Mumbo Jumbo* is a conspirational theory of history. For Reed, civilization becomes a record of power struggle, a rivalry within and among cultures. Reed’s conspiracy theory of history states that a secret society moulds the ideas of the people. Robert Elliot Fox remarks thus:

“What we have in *Mumbo Jumbo* is a mystery war, a war between mysteries between mystery and its absence, the Atonists and the Osirians.”

Andrew Gordon remarks that Reed’s VooDoo history views history as a vast paranoid conspiracy of the White against the non-White.

“Beneath and behind all political cultural warfare, lies a struggle between the secret societies.”

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22Ibid., 56.


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Donald Hoffman remarks that, like the Grail, the text is the embodiment and emblem of a religious mystery and the point of origin of the anthrorative tradition. In Mumbo Jumbo the separation of sign from the signified is used ultimately to formulate a blueprint for the dissemination of Jes Grew, but the initial and traditional misuse of this separation is revealed as being responsible for the failure of the work in the 1920s. According to Reed, words cannot disseminate Jes Grew in themselves. This confounding of the sign is foreshadowed mythologically and concluded structurally by Reed's use of the Osirian legend. The book was originally intended as a basis for improvisation. If the sign and its referent are taken to be rigidly atoned, then the meaning is fixed. The word ceases to live and to be capable of change. It becomes petrified. Thus the Book of Thoth ironically eroded the spontaneity of the Osirian dance. So the dance dies and when it begins to live again, it seeks its Text or expression, still attempting to use it for the wrong purposes.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed experiments with the generation of a text as a living organism. The novel is essentially concerned with the quest of a text by Jes Grew and the advocates of Jes Grew. *Mumbo Jumbo* itself provides an alternative text which frees language from the rigidly hierarchal relationship of sign to the signified Reed attempts to construct a text which can verbally conjure the spirit of Jes Grew through the use of language. This attempt is based on a manipulation of the essential dislocation of the sign and signified which Derrida describes in his Dissemination. Reed invests the meaning to the sign itself. Atonement of sign and signified is precisely contrary to his Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and so he stresses on the separateness of the sign and the signified. Helen Lock remarks that Reed shifts the emphasis from the fossilized forms of the Euro-American tradition to the spirit which is conjured by the power of the word.26

The Book of Thoth or The Text that Jes Grew seeks for is Reed's metaphor for the artist's ability to make a structure for the articulation of Eros. La Bas thinks

that the text is a fixed word. But Reed goes beyond this. From his perspective, the text is a process of continuous movement between form and energy that changes with each reader. The text of Blackness has repeatedly been fragmented like the body of Osiris. The missing text forms not only the meeting point of diverse plot lines but also it is the inadvertent symbol of the central paradox in Reed’s Neo-HooDooism. Reginald Martin suggests that the text Jes Grew has been seeking becomes Reed’s novel Mumbo Jumbo itself.27

Reed adopts Neo-HooDooism as a narrative strategy in Mumbo Jumbo. He fully exploits HooDoo beliefs in his delineation of characters and manipulation of history and time. Reed seeks to take the materials available to him and fashion into a fetish which provides access to the loas. The Vodoun religion of Haiti from which Reed’s Neo-HooDooism in large measure is derived opens worlds of innovation or the new loas. Cornmeal and water drawings called “veves” which are used in Vodoun to invoke the loas are referred to in Mumbo Jumbo as "markings which are invitations to new loas for New Art." (p.49). Mumbo Jumbo

achieves the discovery of new loas by establishing the connections between the past and the present. In an interview Reed says that he uses automatic writing and listens to voices and psychic entities. La Bas refers to the 'knockings' in the novel. Reed believes that HooDoo loas or spirits speak through the artist as he improvises. He develops this aesthetic notion through the attention he directs to jazz music whose unpredictable form is expressed in its slang name Jes Grew.

Reed's Neo-HooDooism stresses the improvisation on the part of Black artists. As in "Cab Calloway Stands on the Moon" and Yellow Back Radio Broke/Down, each episode in Mumbo Jumbo is separated from the next by one black dot and one white dot which have a rich symbolic significance in HooDoo. Most of the characters in the novel are HooDoo characters. Reed wrote in an article "I hear You Doc":

"Though my characters are often called stereotypes their forms fall solidly within Vodoun tradition".

As in Haitian art which is based on Vodoun principles, Reed uses certain universal forms to which he brings his own individual aesthetic sense.


La Bas, Reed's astro-detective, a principal character in *Mumbo Jumbo*, is a Hoodoo character. Animal personate, 2 headed man, (p. 45) is a figure of mysterious ancestry. La Bas, the Haitian deity of crossroads and gateways, a loa which mediates between gods and men in Fan mythology is the Fan/Yoruba god Legba. His name is a conflation of two of the several names of Esu, the pan-African trickster called Papa LaBas. La Bas is the sign, reader, a divine linguist. Esu can stand for the critic, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy and the sheer plurality of meaning. He represents charismatic figures such as Father Divine and Daddy Grace. La Bas has the knowledge and power to articulate the essence of Jes Grew and give it the permanance of a text. He is Reed's chief spokesman in the novel. His aim, like that of his creator is to search and reconstruct a black aesthetic form from various remnants of black literary and cultural history. As the head of the Harlem's Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, he feeds the loas. Earline is originally a symbol of and later emanation of Eruzlie the love/romance/sexual fetish in Hoodoo.

Like the Hoodoo defective Papa LaBas, both Black Herman, the occultist and Benoit Battraville, the god of Haiti are "houngans" and symbolic emanations of Legba.
Benoit Batrîville admits that he sometimes serves as the medium for a loa Agwe, the sea god in Vodoun. He, like others, embodies or acts the universal impulses personified by the loas. He says that Agwe God of Sea took over when he found it difficult to explain things. When he was conducting a seminar on the history of Haiti and on VooDoo. Naomi Jacobs remarks that Reed's type-characters historical or fictional lack even the limited psychological depth of Doctrow's type characters in Ragtime. Embodying impulses not strictly personal they have ideas but no personalities. Not even Benoit Batrîville a historical character is presented as an individual. He appears not as a historical individual but as a spokesman for the Osirian view of the Haitian invasion. Most of the historical characters including Irene Castle, Attorney General M. Doughterty and Harding are relegated to walk-on-roles.

W.C. Bamberger remarks that the inclusion of clippings and photographs and Hoodoo symbols and drawings in Mumbo Jumbo stand as decorative and not integrated into the narrative as in his earlier poem "Cab Calloway Stands on

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the Moon". He further argues that Reed's change of technique from "Cab Calloway Stands on the Moon" to Mumbo Jumbo means going from practising HooDoo to parading it.  

Mumbo Jumbo seeks to be the text by breaking an established form to allow the intrusion of vital spiritual truth. Appropriately, it disrupts chronological time through the use of anachronism, historicized myths, photographs, drawings, simultaneous narrations and mixture of historical and fictional events and thereby creates a kind of eroticised narrative in which all time exists in a single moment. E.Raja Rao remarks that the a-logical narrative of Mumbo Jumbo owes itself to Neo-HooDoo as an art-form.32 Because of the multiple voices and various kinds of improvisation within the plot, it cannot follow a straightforward linear narrative. Reed presents multiple events superimposed on each other and stories within stories. He violates the expected linear sense of time by presenting sequences in non-chronological order. For instance, the reader gets the effects of Jes Grew before


he is informed of its origins. Reed breaks with and parodies familiar expectations and conventions of time. He usually stays with his chosen time setting but consistently draws attention toward the present in such a way as to create dual awareness of past and present.

Reginald Martin remarks that *HooDoo time* operates in *Mumbo Jumbo* through the use of present tense verbs at the beginning of narratives of selected consequential chapters. The synchronic effect is achieved by following the ending of a preceding chapter in which actions have been built pyramidally and sequentially with the openings of new actions in a new chapter whose verbs and situations are set in the present tense. This effect introduces the reader to the simultanates of the text and elicits the reader-response ambience which mirrors the HooDoo/oral cultural feeling in the text. That is, the reader feels that all of the catalytic actions in the individual cardinal units are thematically and related because they all seem to have significance to each other carried by the fact that they all seem to be happening in the same narrative time-frame.

For example, the end of chapter twelve, a key chapter, which includes the battle of religious discussion section with Hamid and the discussion of La Bas' Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral and HooDoo practices ends with a denouncement of the religious disagreements between blacks and the Rent party. Chapter Thirteen begins with no transitional or relational segments and picks up the story of Earline and Berbelong as they discuss Berbelong's differing and expanding concept of HooDoo and his relation to La Bas and Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral. This discussion relates the opening of Chapter Thirteen and the closing of Chapter Twelve/similar in theme but uses present tense verbs to anchor Chapter Thirteen simultaneously.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed moves from the nineteenth century popular form of the Yellow Back Western novel to the contemporary mode of the cinema. The text of the novel is framed by devices characteristic of film narration and it has an apparent echo of the fade-out and fade-in frame of Zeele Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Henry Louis Gates remarks thus:

The relative fluidity of the narrative structure of the film compared with that of conventional prose announces here an emphasis upon multiplicity rather than singular referential correspondence, an emphasis that
Reed recapitulates through the text by an imaginative play of doubles."34

*Mumbo Jumbo* ingeniously employs cinematic techniques such as juxtaposition of fact and fiction and ancient history and modern history. In one of the interviews Reed acknowledges his debt to films:

"I think when I wrote *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* and *Mumbo Jumbo* I didn't have so many books in my mind but films I had seen".35

*Mumbo Jumbo* begins like a film. The action starts in 'media res'. The prologue situated in New Orleans functions as a false start of the action. Five pages of narration is followed by a second title page, a second copyright and acknowledgement page and a second set of epigrams. The Prologue functions like the Prologue in a film. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that the first reference to Jes Grew as a creeping thing immediately brings to mind a Hollywood horror film, and people dancing in hospital carts while the doctor is slipping, dippling and gliding is like a Marx Brothers comedy.36 Reed elicits the 'cut'


of black culture with "the cutting" used in cinema. He cuts frequently between various sub-texts, headlines, photographs, handwritten letters, advertisements and the texts of the main narrative.

Mumbo Jumbo is Reed's attempt to write about a spiritual system Jes Grew from the African American historical past. His first task here is to expose the constraints of the traditional novel form and then make the language incorporate categories, experiences, concepts that exist outside its discursive formation or its linguistic structure. Even though Reed calls Mumbo Jumbo "my straight book" he inadvertently breaks and parodies familiar expectations and conventions. For example, he presents chapter one before he gives the title of the novel. He uses one paragraph chapters. Keith E. Byerman remarks thus:

"To read the novel with conventional assumptions about time, plot development, characterization and versimilitude is to miss the point." 38


A literal reading renders a nonsensical text a mumbo jumbo. Only openness to a symbolic level leads to adequate understanding.

As in Thomas Pynchon's *V*, the plot is given in bits of a widely scattered concept to be drawn together at the end of the narrative. In his self-interview Reed states that there are passages of automatic writing in *Mumbo Jumbo* though for the most he had abandoned the fetish techniques adopted in "Cab Calloway Stands on the Moon". *Mumbo Jumbo*’s world unlike that of "Cab Calloway Standing on the Moon" is not one wholly created by Reed but is largely borrowed from veritable history. At times, he depends on historical facts for his narration. For instance, for his narration of the details about Knights Templar he closely follows historical facts. Here one can notice the use of the novel's major stylistic tropes - the use of facts.

*Mumbo Jumbo* is the great black inter-text replete with intra texts referring to one another within the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* and also referring outside of themselves to

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all those named texts as well as to those texts unnamed but invoked through concealed reference, repetition and reversal. It is an implicit parody of Ellison's ideas of craft and technique in the novel. This device, moreover, mimics the fictions of documentation and history. It also recalls Ellison's remarks about the complex relationship between 'the writer's experience and the writing's experience with books'.

Mumbo Jumbo is interlaced with a plethora of pictorial and textual elements borrowed from non-belletristic sources. There are photos, posters and drawings, dictionary definitions, anagrams and epigrams, symbols and graphs. Reed also incorporates newspaper clippings and headlines, signs, invitations to parties, telegrams, situation reports, quotations from other texts, poems, cartoons, handbills, playing cards and a four-page hand-written letter.

Henry Louis Gates remarks that in Mumbo Jumbo Reed parodies and underscores our notions of intertextuality present in all texts. To lend the narrative

authenticity, he adds some favourite scholarly crutches and facts from non-fictional works. Reed's parodic use of intertextuality demonstrates that *Mumbo Jumbo* is a Post-Modern text. Joe Weixlmann remarks that the principal point that the seemingly digressive even decorative elements in the narrative make is that a book need not be limited by a genre or by discipline, that play is an acceptable element in art and that the status of fiction need not be viewed as less than what commonly passes for reality.41

*Mumbo Jumbo* employs a number of narrative strategies. Apart from the conventional verbal medium, Reed uses non-verbal medium which consists of pictures and draw-figures to convey graphic messages and images. It contains illustrations, footnotes, a Prologue and an Epilogue. At the end of the book there appears a 104 item Bibliography drawn from such diverse disciplines as Psychology, History, Dance, Religion, Mythology, Music, Theatre, Economics, Journalism, Literature, Design, Astrology, the Occult, Sociology, Ethnology, Art, Oratory, Political Science and Life Sciences. The bibliography is intended

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as a parody of Ellison’s framing devices in *Invisible Man*. Reed supplements Ellison’s Epilogue with the Bibliography parodying the device both by its repeated presence and by the subsequent asymmetry of *Mumbo Jumbo*. The partial Bibliography parodies both the scholar’s appeal to authority and all studied attempts to conceal literary antecedents and influences. *Mumbo Jumbo* claims that all texts are inter-texts, full of intra-texts. Henry Gates Louis remarks thus:

"This documentary scheme of notes, illustrations and bibliography parodies the documentary conventions of black realism and naturalism".42

Reed fractures his narrative into a series of sub-texts and thereby solves some of the problems that arise in his earlier novel *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, notably, the problem of introducing a great amount of mythological information. Each story generates its own point of view, its own interpretation of Jes Grew and gives Reed the ability to range widely over the dramatic possibilities within the myth. Similarly, the diversity of these interpretations reflects the suble and complex nature

of Harlem Renaissance. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that the heterophony of elements found in Reed's narrative derives not only from modernist collage and Post-Modernist bricollage technique but from Jazz which was the first mode of both black American modernism and Post-Modernism. The heterophony of elements is also a feature of Jes Grew and it is analogous to the syncretization of the worship of African dieties in VooDoo. The polygot quality in Mumbo Jumbo owes much to the African-American slave narratives. It also indicates that Reed's work is not derivated from white models.

The recitative as a narrative form Reed adopted in his earlier novel Yellow Back Radio Broke Down is abandoned for a more sophisticated and complex narrative mode. In Mumbo Jumbo Reed resorts to a composite narrative containing a variety of texts. Not only the verbal medium but also non-verbal medium such as signs, photographs, drawings and figures promote the discourse in Reed's narrative.

In Reed, not only verbal medium but also non-verbal medium is used to promote narrative discourse. On the book's cover which Reed designed with Allen Weinberg, repeated and reversed images of a crouching sensuous Josephine Baker are superimposed upon a rose. Counterposed to this image is a medallion depicting a horse with two riders. These signs, the rose and medallion, "a dumbbrata" represent the two central opposites of the novel's complicated plot. The rose and the double image of Baker together form a cryptic 'veve', a sign in Haitian Vodoun representing the loa. The rose is the sign of Erzulie, goddess of love in VooDoo. It resembles the image of Baker who became the French goddess of love in the late 20s. The doubled image is meant to suggest the divine cross-roads where human beings meet their fate. At its centre presides the loa Legba (Esu) guardian of the divine cross-roads, messenger of gods, the figure representing the interpreter and the interpretation itself.

This complex yet cryptic 'Veve' is meant both to placate Legba himself and summon his attention and integrity in a double act of criticism and interpretation that of Reed in the process of his representation of the tradition, to be found between the covers of the book, and
of the critic's interpretation of Reed's figured interpretation.

Located outside the 'Veve' as counterpoint, placed almost off the cover itself, is the medallion the sign of the Knights Templar representing the heart of the Western tradition. The opposition between the veve and the medallion represents two distinct warring forces, two mutually exclusive modes of reading. Not only two distinct and conflicting metaphysical systems are here represented and invoked but Reed's cover also serves as an overline to the critique of dualism and binary opposition which gives a major thrust to the text of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed parodies this dualism which is exemplified in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Reed in one of the interviews says thus: There is a hidden order in *Mumbo Jumbo* on the cover. 44

The illustrations in *Mumbo Jumbo* heretofore unlabelled and unidentified are more than graphic representations of scenes from the text. Reginald Martin remarks that they are in fact symbolic aggrandisements of motifs stated and hinted at throughout the narrative. 45


45 Reginald Martin, "Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*," *Explicator* 44.2 (1986) 55.
The illustrations explicate the text in two different ways. First, they serve as contemporaneous narrative indices to solidly root the narrative in its three principal time settings—1920's America, pre-dynastic Egypt, and a college class-room in the 1960s. Secondly, these illustrations that have no direct textual referent are used to expand the multiple and layered meanings of the narrative through pyramidal association. The denotative meaning is in type face and both the organic and connotative meaning is in the illustrations and mental leaps which can be made by the reader who reflects upon pictures. For instance, Jes Grew's attempt to infect the world with a better and more amicable attitude is reflected in the photograph of the eyes of King Creole Jazz-band captioned in an early twentieth century photograph. The players look at the reader, their bodies and instruments obviously infected by the Jes Grew Strain, say that they would play than hate. On Page 193 the photograph of the black Pope John speaks for one of the main plot lines which is the use of syncreticism by blacks to further their own ends towards an ecumenical and stress free world. The other illustrations in the text work in similar fashion, always supporting the major texts of the novel.
As in a conventional detective story which Mumbo Jumbo adopts and parodies, Reed's text contains two stories—the story of the crime or the story of the past and the story of the investigation or the story of the present. The story of the present is narrated from the limited but multiple points of view of characters who people its sub-plots and sub-mysteries. The story of the past, however, is narrated in an omniscient voice which reads the story of the present in the manner of a literary critic close-reading a primary text. Louis Gates remarks thus:

"Mumbo Jumbo's double narrative then, its narrative within a narrative is an allegory of the act of reading itself."46

Reeds uses this second mode of ironic omniscient narration to signify upon the nature of the novel in general especially upon African-American naturalism and modernism.

Reed's play of doubles assumes its most subtle form in his rhetorical strategy of using these two narratives—the story of the past and the story of the present. The two stories can be treated as the narrative of

understanding and the narrative of truth. The narrative of understanding is the presented narrative of the investigation of a mystery in which a detective interprets or decodes clues. Once these signs are sufficiently decoded this narrative of understanding reconstitutes the missing story of the crime which we can think of as the narrative of truth. The presented narrative then is implicitly a story of another absent story and hence functions as an internal allegory.

The narrative remains close to the action in the local colour, description and dialogue as its two central aspects. Character as description and extensive catalogues propel the narrative forward. The narrative remains essentially in the present tense and the point of view is both in the third person and limited, as it must be, if the understanding of the nature of mystery is to remain impeded until the novel's detective decodes all the clues and reveals the truth of the mystery.

*Mumbo Jumbo*’s prologue opens in the narrative mode of the story of the present. Near the end of the prologue, however, a second narrative mode intrudes. It is separated from the first narrative by spacing and is further fragmented by italic type. It not only interprets
and comments upon the characters and actions in the first story but does so in a third person omniscient mode. In other words, it reads its counterpart of which it is a negation. Following its italic type are three other sorts of sub texts which comprise crucial aspects of the second antithetical narrator of the past, present and future, a black and white photograph of people dancing, an epigram on the nature of the second line written by Louis Armstrong and etymology of the phrase "mumbo jumbo" taken from the American Heritage Dictionary. That which the characters ponder or misunderstood, this foregrounded antithetical narration reads "correctly" for the reader.

The second anti-narration consists of all of Mumbo Jumbo mostly sub-texts which are not included in the first narration. Whereas the first story adheres to the present, the second story roams remarkably freely through space and time, between myth and history, humorously employing the device of anachronism. It is discontinuous and fragmentary- not linear like its counterpart. It never contains dialogue. It contains all of the text's abstractions; all of the novel's sub-texts, illustrations, excerpts from other texts, situation reports etc., are parts of this narration which we might think of as an extended discourse on the history of Jas
Grew. After Chapter Eight, the foregrounding of italics tend to disappear, for the narration manages to bracket or frame itself functioning almost as the interior monologue of the first narrative mode. While the first story remains firmly in the tradition of the presented defective story, the second turns that convention inside out, function as an ironic double, a reverse mirror-image like the cryptic 'Veve' on the novel’s cover. Henry Louis Gates remarks that the second mode of narration allows for the allegorical double of *Mumbo Jumbo*.47 Its second narration reads its first as does discourse upon a text. It is Reed, reading Reed himself and the tradition.

Local colour has been a standard feature in the social novel. In the African-American narratie realism-as-local colour is the most consistent aspect of black rhetorical strategy from the slave narratives to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. After the riot of 1964, African-American writers of fiction continued to employ black Harlem as a psychologically and socially realistic setting for narratives. James de Jough observes that achieving the illusion of fully developed human experience remained the overriding aesthetic impulse in the majority of Harlem

47Ibid., 716.
narratives in the 1960s and 70s. In such novels Harlem is depicted as a landscape of discrimination, exploitation and despair. The most innovative feature of Harlem narratives by African-American writers of this period is the unprecedented fabulation of the black community as a comic setting of enormous plasticity beyond conventional notions of time history, physical reality and human psychology. The Harlem of the Jazz Age was an escape for young writers looking for alternatives and excitements. For the popular mind, Harlem was associated with spiritual and emotional enthusiasm, indulgence, play, passion and lust. Norman Harris remarks that the Harlem of the twenties is a hotbed for practitioners of the Osirian world view.49

Reed uses and simultaneously parodies the conventions of local colour as plot-impediment by employing unpunctuated lists and categories throughout the text. Mumbo Jumbo is situated in the Harlem of 1920s because, as the text explains, Harlem Renaissance was the first full-

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49 Norman Harris, "Politics as an Innovative Aspect of Literary Folk-lore - A Study of Ishmael Reed," Obsidian 5. i-ii (1979) 44.
scale patronized attempt to capture the essence of Jes Grew in discrete literary text. While there are several layers of time and space operating in Reed’s narrative, the main plot unfolds in Harlem during the 1920s. Reed uses the Harlem Renaissance as a backdrop and at the same time distorts it freely to portray the Black Arts Movement of 1960s. Regarding the selection of the Harlem of 1920s as the backdrop for Mumbo Jumbo, Reed in one of the interviews says thus:

"I wanted to write about a time like the present or see the past to prophecy about the future - a process our ancestors called Necromancy. I choose the twenties because that period was very similar to what’s happening now (1960s) ... ... There are parallels between the two periods. There was a post-war economic crisis you had governmental scandal ... there was an epidemic of negromania sweeping through America. Then the Jazz Age. There was Black writing Renaissance."

Reed further says that he began Mumbo Jumbo by writing about Richard Nixon but later decided to write, instead, of the Harding Era in order to transcend the particular political event and make a statement about American civilization as a whole.


Reed sees many similarities between the two eras, 1920s and 1960s, the Nixon Era and Harding Era – unpopular foreign involvements in Haiti and Vietnam, post-war economic crisis, upsurges in Black Literary Activity, threats to civil liberties and the political scandals of Tea Pot Dome and Watergate. W.C. Bamberger remarks thus:

The parallels between the two decades are real enough, but this means at least part of the effect of Mumbo Jumbo has to be felt through the one-step-removed technique of analogy.

Theodore O'Mason remarks that the connection between the twenties and seventies is not only historical but fictive strategy Reed employs. Reed's necromancy places the Jazz Age squarely within the context of an ancient and epic struggle between the followers of Atonist path and the followers of HooDoo. The cast of characters in parodies of a range are easily identifiable personalities of the 1920s. Buddy Jackson, the banker, Hinckle Van Vampton a caricature of Carl Van Vecten, Nathan Brown. The Harlem poet Countee Cullen. Major Young, another poet, bears resemblance to Langston Hughes. By using the


1920s as background for his literary history about the Jes Grew epidemic, Reed establishes the connection between the past and present that provide the groundwork for a mythic representation of black history and its relation to Judeo Christian culture.

Though *Mumbo Jumbo* is deeply rooted in the black cultural framework, it draws heavily on the avant garde techniques of contemporary literature. In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed adopts a technique known as mythopoesis which attempts to transpose various primordial myths into a symbolic meaning. He brings in contemporary history to interact upon the myths he consciously uses. In the process, to use the words of Harry Slochower, he "deromanticizes the myth" and rescues its living relevance from a romantic conception which views it as an external fixed substance. He causes an interaction between the black American myth of Osiris and the Western myth of Faust and the Holy Grail. The myth or the legend causes confrontation between the mythic substance and contemporary history. *Mumbo Jumbo* reckons with the historical situation of the present and the past in its textual framework. Mythopoesis, by combining historical perspectives and recurrent mythic perspective, lends a structural unity to the novel. As Reed's purpose is to
create a new ethos out of a curious mixture of history and
myth, he never resorts to scathing criticism of society. He evolves a new and flexible form by consciously
manipulating his subject matter.

In order to trace history from a proper perspective and reorient myth in the line of contemporaneity, Reed makes use of the technique of prefiguration which represents a literary device combining different kinds of patterning in the presentation of character and plot. E.Raja Rao remarks that Mumbo Jumbo depends on a cluster of myths for its effect and his main intent lies in the recreation of the Osis-Isis myth. The myth of Osis-Isis in Mumbo Jumbo constitutes what Carl Kerényi calls in his essay on "Science and Mythology" the "historioprism" by which man can experience the archaic or the first principles which are ageless, inexhaustible, invincible in timeless prémordiality. Mumbo Jumbo has enough internal factual substance to be called an expression of "the societal myth". It abounds with the places and personages of the Harlem Renaissance period. But it transcends the narrow vision of societal myth by focusing on larger theme.

concerning the cyclic process of the spirit of Jes Grew. A part of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s mythopoeic conception lies in its hero's quest motif. Jes Grew, the hero of the novel in search of the Text. Reed successfully reconstructs Osiris' Isis myth and fuses with modern characters. Osiris is represented by Ti Bouton, the Haitian godfather, La Bas, the HooDoo defective and Black Herman, an occultist.

As a characteristic of mythopoesis, *Mumbo Jumbo* employs the technique of prefiguration, a technique intended to establish rapport with the reader. Reed prefigures the quest of Jes Grew for the Text by the introduction of the myth of Holy Grail, the Mutafikah's efforts to gather broken art by the introduction of the myth of Valkyrie in the beginning of the novel. The technique of condensation is also adopted in Reed's use of both Osirian myth and Faust legend as prototypes of the battle between the good and the evil. The technique of fragmentation which involves the recurrent use of the same myth for delineating more than one character is exploited in Reed's adoption of Osirian myth for the portrayal of the character of Ti Bouton, La Bas and Black Herman and Faust legend for the portrayal of the characters of Thor Wintergreen and Doctor Peter Pick. Reed employs plot figuration in his introduction of the soliloquy of
Othello, 'it's the cause, it's the cause ...' to suggest the tragic potential in the story. The technique of indeterminate prefiguration operates in its non-closure, indeterminacy and its failure to solve the mystery of Jes Grew and the Text, till the end of the novel. Another device of prefiguration is the use of allusive quotations from various texts which Mumbo Jumbo employs to lend multiple perspectives from which the substance of the narrative can be viewed.

Regarding the use of the Osirian myth Reed in one of his interviews says thus:

"People go back into the past and get some metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future. I call this necromancy because that is what it is ....... The black writer lies in the guts of the old America making readings about the future. That is what I wanted to do in Mumbo Jumbo. So I decided that I did not want to use the king Lear model because that's someone else's experience. I did not want to invoke Antigone as the French did to talk about Hitler. I want to go into the mysteries of the American civilization." 55

Set, the promoter of monotheism, murdered his brother Osiris who promoted polytheism, dismembered him and scattered abroad the fourteen pieces of his body. His wife Isis went about Egypt attempting to gather the limbs of her husband. The action is recreated in the division of the Book Thoth into fourteen sections by Ván Vampton. It is also reduplicated in the efforts of the Mulafikah to send back the stolen artifacts to their place of origin and in Reed's attempt to gather up the scattered fragments of African American tradition and culture to formulate his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic. Robert Elliot Fox remarks thus:

"The scattering of Osiris's limbs is a clear metaphor for the African Diaspora."

Thoth flees from Egypt with the text. Moses appropriates a bad version of Thoth's text and hides it. It is not discussed again until the Templar librarian Hinkle Ván Vampton found it and floated it among fourteen Jes Grew Carriers. Abdul Hamid, a black Muslim reassembled the text and translated it and Abdul destroyed the book and he was murdered by the Wallflower Order. Osiris is the creator of the human seed who represents the possibilities of

regeneration and aesthetic growth. Significantly his polytheism gives rise to joyous creation and self expression and further to a recognition of the interaction of the real and the spiritual, one of the hallmarks of Neo-Hoodooism. The Atonists and the Jes Grew carriers reenact allegorically a primal recurring battle between the descendents of Set and the descendents of Osiris. John G. Parks remarks thus:

The conflict between Papa La Bas and the Wallflower Order and by extension the conflicts among the Black Aestheticians is a replay of an ancient struggle between Set and Osiris.57

Theodore O. Mason remarks that Reed rewrote the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Set in order to establish a mythic trans-historical opposition between two kinds of consciousness - the psychologically liberated and the mechanically inhibited.58 Richard Hardack calls Reed's myth as "fabricated myth of origins" and a self generated fable of antiquity.59


Reed’s version of the Egyptian myth of the conflict between Osiris and Set is very similar to the Dogan myth of Ogo and Nommo. The tale of dispersal of the text resembles the scattering of Nammo’s parts. Thomas Pynchon uses American Osirian myths—myths of fragmented divine bodies and fragmented and restored texts in Gravity’s Rainbow. Richard Hardack remarks that though comic, Reed’s myth of origin’s has tragic implications. In Mumbo Jumbo the myth of Osiris and Set prefigures the action of the fictive present of the novel. In turn, the fictive present of the novel is intended to prefigure the culture history of America in the 1970s. The success of the novel depends upon the charged interrelationship between three levels of the text—the fictive, the mythic background and the historical reality outside the text. The mythic background helps us to interpret the action of the fictive present of the narrative. Together the narrative present and the mythic background in turn offer the reader a way of interpreting a particular decade in American cultural history and the reader’s present as well. The process of interpretation works backward too because the reader is clearly supposed to use an

60Ibid., p.117.
understanding of the present to reflect upon and illuminate the myth that has determined that present. The success of *Mumbo Jumbo* depends upon more than the interaction of levels of text. Its effectiveness also depends upon the reader's capacity to sustain the connection between the world outside the text and the world inside the text.

Theodore O. Mason remarks that the monologue of La Bas at the end of the novel signals a failure on Reed's part. It breaks the fictional illusion and fantasy Reed's design in the novel is to offer an explanation of black culture, a new myth by revealing as false certain accepted fictions about black history and culture. But this intention to represent a myth of black history runs a foil to his ethnic performance and his expressionistic technique. Reed's technique of expressionistic form emphasizing performance, distance from reality, anti-realism, play of language, language as a tool of generating fiction that gives rise to expansiveness finally frustrates his historical and mythic motives. The Wallflower Order, Jes Grew, La Bas, Set and Osiris and

others are given life and depth by the text and not by any pattern and correspondence with anything outside the text.

Mason remarks that the myth Reed creates and the culture he wishes to illuminate end up being exclusively a function of the text itself rather than relatively independent of and illuminated by the text. He maintains that there is no relationship between the work of art and the external world as his emphasis on the fantastic and the surreal, if not the unreal, would seem to serve the relationship between the world of art and the world outside the work. Rather than presenting a myth that illuminates history, he manages to substitute myth for history, emphasizing fictionality of history.

Satire which is a by-product of the mythic process is gentle and compassionate and can be called cosmic satire. It is found in *Mumbo Jumbo* in its criticism of the entire government and society. John W. Tilton remarks that Cosmic satire probes deeply into the origin, the discrepancy between the real and the ideal and between unreality and illusion.

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Reed, like most of the Post-Modernist novelists of the mainstream writing, successfully exploits the mythopoeic mode to encompass his broad vision of history of mankind with the black experience at the centre of it. *Mumbo Jumbo* simultaneously becomes a study of myths as well as a cosmic satire. As a cosmic satire, it makes a compassionate reading of the history of America. Reed's combination of history and primeval myths to develop mythopretis resembles necromancy or Neo-HooDooism in many respects.

Reed often establishes the identity of the past and the present through anachronism, usually introduced by uncaptioned contemporary photographs that the reader must connect with the events of the narrative. For example, one of the photographs shows John Mitchell, Richard Kleindienst, John Dean and a woman who could be Jacqueline Kennedy's twin standing on a balcony looking so disapprovingly and humorously that they are Atonists. They were watching a yappie demonstration, a Jes Grew uprising.

Just as *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is a parody of black self-confessional autobiography and *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* a parody of the Western, *Mumbo Jumbo* is
a parody of the conventional detective story. Here Reed exploits the traditional Euro-American literary sub-genre, the detective story, as a vehicle for his history of the western world in the Neo-HooDoo perspective. It evinces Reed's desire to deconstruct the epistemology of the detective story with its emphasis on realism, linearity and ratiocination. It is an improvisation on the conventional detective narrative in the tradition of Rudolph Fisher's *Conjure Man Dies*. Contemporary writers such as Thomas Berger, Norman Mailer, James Joyce and Contos Fuentes have drawn heavily on detective genre's elements. Allain Robbe Grillet, Thomas Pynchon and Umberto Eco have created the Post-Modern detective story, what Tani calls "anti-detective novel" or what Holquest calls "metaphysical detective story", in which familiar expectations are elicited only to be deliberately frustrated or inverted. To probe the mysteries of the American civilization it is appropriate that Reed uses the detective story, essentially a novel of suspense to structure the novel. The conventions of this genre enable Reed to depict a world of conflicting powers which the detective must investigate and explain. Lizabeth Paravisini remarks that the dialectical structure of the thriller serves as an ideal vehicle for Reed's arguments.
against the oppressive Western culture. Keith E. Byerman also remarks that from Reed's perspective the detective genre fits his purpose. Regarding the use of the detective story genre in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed in one of the interviews says thus:

"When I said that it was going to be a straight book I meant I would follow the classical detective story or mystery form, follow it more closely than I had the western or Gothic form of my two previous novels. Not necessarily straight in style but straight in form".

A conventional detective story essentially a nineteenth century form is a fiction in which an amateur or professional detective tries to discover by rational means the solution of a mysterious occurrence, generally a crime, usually a murder. Invariably, the detective, the process of detection and the solution can be found in traditional detective fiction. Other elements are a mystery or crime to unravel, suspense, delay of the solution. The three elements detective, detecting process

and solution are chronologically sequential in the fiction. The solution is the most important element since it is the final and fulfilling link in the detective novel's sequence. S.E. Sweeney remarks that the structure of the classic detective novel depends upon sequence, causality and the possibility of inductive solution.67

The formulaic nature of the conventional Euro-American literary subgenre, detective story, allows only a limited combination of characters, situations, settings and style. A.E. Murrich remarks that in the detective story the primary interest lies in the methodical discovery of rational means of the exact circumstances of a mysterious event.68 Robin Winks traces four stages in the detective story.69 The first stage defines the problem. The second stage relates the crime. The third stage asserts the evidence and in the fourth stage...


judgement is passed. It is usually preoccupied with establishing linear sequences. Because it emphasizes a chronological linear sequential plot, it has narrative suspense. Usually, the crime takes place before the starting of the story. Its emphasis is on sequence, linearity and closure and it heightens the essential properties of narrative almost to the point of parody.

It has clues, a detective whose logic and reason interprets the clues and there is the inevitable solution that diagrams the crime and explains its motive within the familiar pattern created by the classical detective, which is built on the assumptions of realistic mimetic nature of fiction and operations of reality. The classical detective-writer builds his puzzle or mystery-art of elements that became familiar conventions such as an isolated estate, an ambiguous will, a heavy Venetian vase. The detective sets about dismantling the mystery using the tools of induction and logic until at the end in a final gathering of suspects the mystery is solved.

The twentieth century, with its epistemological skepticism, its principle of Indeterminacy, Uncertainty and Relativity and its more sophisticated understanding of the limits, both deductive and inductive reasoning, has
seen readjustments being made in detective fiction. These readjustments resulted in the emergence of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction—a transmutation of the classical genre characterized by violence, a peculiar blend of cynicism and romanticism and rejection of reason. The new hardboiled detective sought meaning through action and not ratiocination. The contemporary detective writers deny the validity of reason, the very possibility of solutions in an unordered, unfathomable universe. They believe in the absolute unassailable power of mystery. McCaffrey and Gerogory remark that the Post-Modern writers are attracted to the detective fiction for its obvious epistemological orientation. Because the Post-Modernist writers are interested in the way man confronts the elements of his existence and tries to organize them into meaningful patterns, it provides them a convenient framework within which they develop their investigations. Often the fundamental metaphysical skepticism of these Post-Modernists leads them to manipulate and parody the forms and conventions of the detective novel to create what are in effect anti detective novels. They question whether the 'clues' add up to a single reality that explains the crime and solves the mystery.

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The detective novel becomes the ideal medium of Post-Modernism. In its inverted form, the anti detective novel transforms a mass media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character - the decentring and a chaotic admission of mystery and non-solution. The Post-Modern writers transgress and mutilate the detective-fiction genre. The Post-Modern detective story rejects the linear/telelogical structure of the traditional detective story. They call causality, induction and identity into question and so illustrate a breakdown of hermeneutic code. They do not often conform to closure. Jeanne C. Ewert remarks that the detective novel is eminently suited to Post-Modern manipulation because of its tacit dependence on hermeneutic code offers possibility of disabling this code. They move away from classic detection towards anti-detection stance.

William V. Spanos remarks that it is no accident that the paradigmatic archetype of the Post-Modern literary imagination is the antidetective story, the formal purpose

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of which is to evoke the impulse to detect and to psycho-analyse in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime. 72 The detective of the anti-detective story no longer has the detachment of the traditional detective story. He gets emotionally caught in the net of his detecting effort.

Detective fiction is the most self-conscious form of fiction as it refers to its fictionality and its own interpretation. S.E. Sweeney remarks that it represents the narrativity in its purest form. 73 It is naive and self-reflexive. In its formal elements such as sequence, suspense, closure as well as its content, it dramatizes the workings of narrativity itself. The detective fiction draws its attention to its narrative structure and content. It reflects its own narrativity not only on its form but on its content as well. It begins 'expost facto' and the detective reconstructs the past. In fact, every detective story is "uroboric fiction" 74 one which uncovers events leading to its beginning. It reflects reading


It dramatizes the interdependent inter-
relationship between the writer and the reader at both 
diegetic level and metadiegetic level. The relationship 
between the criminal and the detective suggests the 
relationship between the reader and the writer. The 
content of a detective story reflects not only its own 
narrativity but also its interpretation. S.S. Sweeney 
remarks that it represents 'the acts of reading and 
writing.' Brain McHale remarks the detective story is 
the epistemological genre par excellence.

*Mumbo Jumbo* improves upon detective fiction by 
following its structure while undermining its 
rationalistic suppositions. It evokes the expectations of 
the readers for a detective story, only subsequently to be 
frustrated and disappointed, a typical Post-Modernist anti-
detective stance. It differs from conventional detective 
fiction because it is not a tale of methodical discovery 
by rational means of the circumstances of a mystery. 
Structurally, however, it follows the conventions of a 
traditional detective story.
The model of detective fiction chosen by Reed is that of a thriller. Thrillers deemphasize the discovery of identity of the criminal as the chief aim of the plot and focus instead on the unravelling of complex web of conspiracy and murder. Rapid action, colloquial language, emotional impact, violence dominate the thriller undermining the ingenious deductions of the 'who dun it'. Structurally Mumbo Jumbo is a thriller.

The Plot is fairly elaborate. It begins with an outbreak of the Jes Grew epidemic and its search for its text. The text is in the hands of the Templar Librarian Hinckle Van Vampton who was assigned by the Wallflower Order, the military wing of the Atorists, to neutralize the effect of Jes Grew by making a Talking Android. To avoid detection, Hinckle floats the text among the fourteen Jes Grew carriers. The text falls in the hands of Abdul Hamid, a black Muslim, who translates it but later he is murdered and the copy is lost in postal transit. The HooDoo-detective La Bas and Black Herman who wish to preserve the text and keep Jes Grew alive set out to unravel the mystery of the text and the murder of Abdul.

Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 212.
Though Reed structurally follows the basic narrative pattern of a thriller, the use of the elements of the genre undermines the reader's expectations of the thriller by his use of the dialectical pattern of the detective story as the framework for the presentation of his views on Western culture by breaking the internal rational logic as a process of detection and his use of humour.

La Bas and Black Herman's account of Hinckle V'an Vampton's crime provides the historical/frame work in which the Western/Non-Western confrontation has been developed. It traces the origin of the confrontation to the Osirian myth. Historical and pseudo-historical elements are interwoven in the text in the manner usually found in a spy thriller to unravel a confrontation that is essentially cultural rather than criminal.

In Mumbo Jumbo Reed sets out to undermine the role of rationality thematically (by revealing the folly of those characters who act rationally) and structurally by making his search for truth not dependent on logic and reason. Unlike the traditional detective whose identifying feature is his ability to connect bits of information in logical pattern through the powers of deduction, Reed's astro-detective La Bas relies on intuition, 'knockings' and
ritual to arrive at truth. Through these detectives of the metaphysical order Reed systematically undermines the rational search for knowledge that characterizes the conventional detective story and relies more on chance and intuition. This is an important structural break. The process of the discovery of the Jes Grew's Text's whereabouts is an example of the unorthodox process of detection. The clue to the location of the text is found by La Bas on a piece of paper in Abdul's fist. La Bas acts on the clues but when he opens the box, he finds it empty. Black Herman's clue to the whereabouts of the text comes to him in a dream.

The rejection of the prototypes of detective fiction as well as the rejection of the rational process of detection is underscored by the novel through the consistent use of humour. Reed's human characters are modelled on Black comedians such as Dick Gregory, Moms Mabley and Flip Wilson who use their ethnicity as a source of humorous material. In the narration of the Osirian myth, Reed adopts Flip Wilson's technique of parodying famous scenes from history by having one of the characters speak in Southern Negro idiom. Reed also exploits the cultural gap between the Western and African tradition and the anachronistic use of language with comic results.
In *Mumbo Jumbo* the critique of fiction and reality through humour is systematically dialectical and thematically stems from the basic contention between the plot of detection - the critique of Western culture and its insistence on rationality. This critique extends to the concept of time in the narrative. La Bas' concept of time as cyclic process moves the work away from Eurocentric linear concept of time which the detective story shares with the Christian conception of history. La Bas says thus:

"Time is a pendulum. Not a River. More akin to what goes around comes around." 77

The who-dun-it comprises of two stories the story of the crime and the story of investigation and its structure is framed by a prologue and an epilogue. Henry Louis Gates remarks that *Mumbo Jumbo* signifies upon the narrative strategy of the suspense novel. 78 The mystery type of narrative discourse is characterized by plot inversions which function as temporal inversions. Most of the mysteries are interwoven and they impede plot by depicting several simultaneous actions whose relationships are not


apparent. These mysteries run parallel throughout the novel only to be resolved in the scene of recognition.

The detective novel renders the two principles of narrative fable (story) and subject (plot) which Russian Formalists isolate in every narrative simultaneously. The story of the crime which forms the story of the past has occurred before the narrative begins. The story of the investigation is the story of the present. It serves as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime. It depends upon temporal inversions and shifting points of view. These two conventions figure prominently in the narrative structure of *Mumbo Jumbo* but they are not fused together. *Mumbo Jumbo* keeps the mystery of the who-dun-it and that of the story of the past and the story of the present but it refuses to reduce the second story to simple detective of truth. But the main focus is on the second story, the story of the present. The crucial exception is the strategy Reed adopts which enables him to parody even the mode of two stories themselves and transforms the structure into a self reflecting text and allegory. The story of the past reflects upon, analyses and philosophises about the story of the present. Reed draws upon the narrative mode of suspense-novel as his rhetorical structure in *Mumbo Jumbo*. The movement of
narration is from cause to effect. Unlike in the conventional suspense story where the detective acts as a detached individual, Reed's HooDoo detective La Bas is integrated solidly into the action and the universe of the characters.

The climactic scene, in which the HooDoo detectives La Bas and Black Herman arrest Hinckle V'an Vampton and Safecracker Gould unravel the history of the motives behind the crime of Hinckle V'an Vampton, is a parody in exaggerated form of the recognition scene so fundamental to the structure of the detective story. Reed in one of his interviews says thus:

"For example, in the 1960s the detective or mystery movies always had a form or formula where the detective would assemble all the characters involved in the crime give a summary of how it happened and then point to the generally person. Well That's what I did in Mumbo Jumbo only I exaggerated!" 79

Carol Siri Johnson remarks that La Bas' long lecture slows down the action of the narrative. 80

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But, consistent with the detective formula is La Bas's discovery of the hidden past relevant to his quest for the text. The cosmic detective reveals the history of the crime, its complexities and motives. The crime is aboriginal and the motives go back to prehistory and myth. Keith E. Byerman remarks that the revelatory scene moves beyond personal history into human pre-history and even mythology. Both the plotting of the conventional detective novel and the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic view of the story presuppose and require that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning. But the end of *Mumbo Jumbo* negates the final restoring of power and justice of detective fiction and reaffirms the aesthetic breaking away from the Western code. Here, Reed parodies the conventions of detective fiction in terms of narrative closures and hermeneutics.

According to Michael Holquist, the metaphysical detective story is non-teleological. It is not concerned with having a neat ending in which the questions are answered. Instead of successfully solving the mystery,

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the detective finds himself facing insoluble mysteries of his interpretations and his own identity. Neither the mystery of the Jes Grew nor the Text is revealed; nor is it solved till the end of the narrative. The nature of the text and the Jes Grew remain underterminate and indeed indeterminate. Once the signs of the presence have been read, the text disappears in what must be the most humorous anti-climax in the whole range of African-American fiction. The anti-climax of the novel should be read against the notion of indeterminacy. Geoffrey H. Hartman defines the function of indeterminacy as a bar separating understanding and truth.\textsuperscript{83} The bar in \textit{Mumbo Jumbo} is signified by that unbridgeable white space that separates the first narrative mode from the second. Henry Louis Gates remarks that \textit{Mumbo Jumbo} is a novel that figures and glorifies "indeterminacy".\textsuperscript{84} Carol Siri Johnson remarks that \textit{Mumbo Jumbo} subverts our expectations for a typical novel-ending.\textsuperscript{85} Jeanne C. Ewert observes that the refusal of the anti-detective novel to provide

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closure is a part of the Post-Modern reaction, a self-deceptive faith in inductive reasoning and a comflattening linear/teleological universe.  

Louis Gates says that it is indeterminacy, the sheer plurality of meaning, the very sign signified itself that Mumbo Jumbo celebrates.  

It is a play upon the black literary tradition. Just as La Bas, the detective, is the text's figure for indeterminacy, so too is Jes Grew's nature indeterminate. Jes Grew has no end, and no beginning (p.204). Here, Reed echoes Ellison or rather Ellison echoes T.S. Eliot:

In my end is my beginning
In my beginning is my end
'The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead'.

Reed signifies upon Ellison's gestures of closure and that of the entire African-American literary tradition by


posing an open-endedness in interpretation of the play of signifiers as his and Ellison's works both signify upon the idea of the transcendent signified and of the black tradition itself.

Reed parodies the supposedly natural fixed relation between the signifier and the signified. Ever since Plato, the tropes of blackness in Western discourse was signified absence. It is drawn as a metaphor for something bad and evil. Reed repeats and inverts Plato's dialogue on the discourse of the excessiveness of the dance which is the theme of *Mumbo Jumbo*. *Mumbo Jumbo* signifies on Plato's *Phaedrus*. The Black Arts Movement's grand gesture was to make the trope of blackness as a trope of presence.

Reed's most subtle achievement in *Mumbo Jumbo* is to parody, to signify upon the notion of closure implicit in the key texts of the African-American canon. *Mumbo Jumbo* in contrast to that cannon is a novel that figures and glorifies indeterminacy. In this sense *Mumbo Jumbo* stands as a profound critique and elaboration upon the convention of closure and its metaphysical implications in the Black novel. In its stead, Reed posits the notion of aesthetic play, the play of tradition, the play on the tradition,
the sheer play of indeterminacy itself. Frederic R. Karl remarks that in a sense the whole novel is a series of sequences of mysteries based on Neo-Hoodoo. Most of these mysteries are interwoven and they impede the plot in the manner of detective fiction by depicting several simultaneous actions whose relationship is not apparent. These mysteries run parallel throughout the novel only to be resolved in the scene of recognition.

In Reed, parody which is usually restricted to the imitation and distortion of literary text becomes medium for social and literary satire. Parody is directed inward toward the text to examine the extra literary systems that are the province of satire. Nowhere does Reed blend his parodic and satiric intentions better than in *Mumbo Jumbo* where he parodies a narrative form, the detective novel, whose identifying quality, the rational search for knowledge, is identical to the social, religious and philosophical principles he finds objectionable in Judeo-Christian Western culture. Like Reed, Richard Wright in *The Outsider* and *Clearance Major* in *Reflex and Bone* Structure exploited parody of detective fiction as a vehicle for the reinterpretation of African-American

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experience and culture. Lizabeth Paravisini remarks that the parody of detective fiction enabled the African-American artist to move away from the logocentricism of Western models.\textsuperscript{90} The carnivalization of these models, to use the term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, has allowed these writers to concentrate inventive freedom to permit the combination of a variety of different elements. As \textit{Mumbo Jumbo} shows, the transformation of literary texts through parody leads to alternative structures which allow writers to supercede and reorient old traditions.

Mason criticises Louis Gates for elevation of indeterminacy and exaggerating the value of indeterminacy and play. He says that \textit{Mumbo Jumbo} by emphasizing play and decentralizing such concerns as narrative correspondence and closure deconstructs an important part of the African-American literary canon. He further argues that Reed's novel actually breaks down because of the conflict between the interest in history and his emphasis on indeterminacy. He suggests that indeterminacy is a weakness as well as the strength of \textit{Mumbo Jumbo}.\textsuperscript{91} The

\textsuperscript{90}Lizabeth Paravisini, "\textit{Mumbo Jumbo} and the Use of Parody," \textit{Obsidian II} Spring-Summer (1986) 126.

\textsuperscript{91}Theodore O. Mason Jr., "Performance History and Myth: The Problem of Ishmael Reed's \textit{Mumbo Jumbo}," \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 34.1 Spring (1988) 105-106.
explicitly parodic thrust of the title Mumbo Jumbo rejects the need for making a definite statement about the Black situation.

As observed by Harry Slochower, the Epilogue of mythopoesis does not close the novel with a final resolution. There is no paradisian final which one finds in the conventional myth. The sense of indeterminacy which one finds at the end of mythopoeic journey is present in Reed's Mumbo Jumbo. Though both Jes Grew and The Text vanish at the end of the novel, the novel concludes on an optimistic note that in future time Jes Grew will return.

"People in the 60s said they couldn't follow him (La Bas) ... And the 20s were back. Bella, Arna Bontemps was correct in his new introduction to Black Thunder time is a pendulum. Not a River. More akin to what goes around comes again."93.

Neil Schmitz remarks that La Bas' vision of a reformulated and clarified literature is synthetic in Mumbo Jumbo, not yet realized but hopeful of realizing in future.94 The


93 Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 218.

Epilogue in *Mumbo Jumbo*, a mythopoeic novel, instead of resolving the crisis, forges a new kind of awareness suggesting the possibility of a revival of the mythic 'Jes Grew in future.

Thus Reed weaves a story around fact and fiction, prose and poetry, and succeeds in transmitting ordinary reality into the fabulation. Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* can be called "fiction of ideas", one of the categories of fabulation put forth by Robert Scholes. Reed's strength as a writer lies not only in his reconstruction and reinterpretation of the ancient myths but more importantly in his transformation of the ancient myth in terms of contemporary history. By juxtaposing myth with reality Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* envisions a cosmic satire. It presents the contemporary world against the backdrop of the ideas of the Osirian world. Reed, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, like Amiri Baraka in *The Systems of Dante's Hell*, is committed to reexploring Blackness in terms of a journey into the past communal or personal history and a new equation between the Afro-centric and Euro-centric worlds.

Reed dramatizes the cultural Odyssey of the new African American and brings out the full meaning of the quest for freedom, literacy and a wholeness of the Black
race in terms of a collective and intra-textual quest. It transforms sociology and myth and history and politics into a cultural force, a certain perspective, dynamic outlook which constantly redefines and reshapes the Black consciousness against the opposition of certain hardened historical notions and cultural stances. Earl Rovit remarks that in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed achieves a synchronization of the structure to the theme, the artistic form attests to the novel's sense of responsibility. Both in its treatment of numerous historical incidents and in the use of multiple mythic perspectives *Mumbo Jumbo* is superior to Reed's other novels. The peculiar mystification of the past, the hybridization of history as either inevitable fiction or mere pretense to fact even in parody, sharpens his railing against White civilization. Summing up the achievement of *Mumbo Jumbo* Neil Schmitz remarks thus:

"Black consciousness is mythically reconsecrated, the integrity of knowledge restored to Dance, the cultural dualism that plagued the Harlem Renaissance is effectively resolved."

Reed's language in *Mumbo Jumbo* retains its hyperbolic quality but is toned down somewhat to the narrative since

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the novel takes the form of a detective story. Carol Siri Johnson remarks that the style of *Mumbo Jumbo* is hard to follow like James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is a celebration of idiom and an eclectic collection of cultural myths. Reed mixes the styles of detective stories, VooDoo and academic burlesque, providing unexpected visuals, news, stories, history and stream of consciousness. Reed's command of different vernaculars is astounding. He switches mid-sentence from one attitude to another, from popular academic cliches like the sampling in rap music to Black vernacular. He satirizes both the Black English vernacular and White English vernacular as well as academic language.

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