

A Critical Study of Judy Malloy’s ‘its name was Penelope’ as a Hyperfictional Reworking of Homer’s Odyssey

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 20 Apr 2024; Received in revised form: 20 May 2024; Accepted: 02 Jun 2024; Available online: 08 Jun 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>Hypertext, hyperfiction, Odyssey, Penelope, memories, assemblage, photographer, artist, weaving, montage</i></p>	<p><i>The hyperfiction “its name was Penelope” is an assemblage of memories of an artist Anne Mitchell. She is a photographer and the hyperfiction under study provides several glimpses from her life as a medley or an assortment of textual pictures that completely engrosses the mindful readers and actively involves them in contemplating her life right from her childhood. She plays with a boat named Penelope and it becomes a metaphor for her life and her struggle for establishing herself as an accomplished artist. Anne’s setting this tiny boat sailing is a metaphor for life in which an artist’s explorations are akin to those of an explorer. A tripartite montage of Anne Mitchell’s life is offered in random screens of text. The entire hyperfiction is divided into three sections that are loosely based on Homer’s Odyssey. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, is an artist who weaves on a loom and this weaving is central to her life just like Anne Mitchell who is also an artist and considers art central to her life. This paper attempts to trace the similarities between the hyperfiction “its name was Penelope” and Homer’s Odyssey. A traditional text will be juxtaposed with an avant-garde text to foreground the similarities and the differences.</i></p>

The hypertext fiction writer Judy Malloy was born as Judith N. Powers in Boston, MA on January 9, 1942. Her father was a trial lawyer as well as Assistant District Attorney, Suffolk County, MA; and Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts. Her mother had been a chauffeur for composer Nadia Boulanger after she graduated from Radcliffe. Afterwards she became a newspaper editor. She was the author of an award winning series of articles in support of a program that gave African American inner city children an opportunity to attend suburban schools. Later she was the Editor of the

Somerville Journal, and the Managing Editor of the *Somerville Journal*; the *Cambridge Chronicle*; and the *Watertown Press*. Malloy's maternal grandfather told her stories of Vienna, Austria where after World War II, he had served with the United Nations as Chief of the Resettlement Division of the International Refugee Organization. Her father used to read *Odyssey* and *Illiad* to her and her brothers. These stories left a great impression on Malloy's mind. She always had a calling, an inner vision of being an artist, and she began painting and writing when she was in primary school, riding her bicycle to places

where she would paint or sketch or walking in the hills near her home with paper and pen in her book bag. Her childhood memories of making art form the background of her hyperfiction "*its name was Penelope*" (published by Eastgate, 1993) (well.com 18 September 2007).

She graduated from the Middlebury College. In the college she was on the ski team in her first year. She also played tournament tennis, hiked and camped in the mountains, lived in a dormitory where all students including her spoke French at meals, studied literature, classics, painting, drawing and art, and history, painted the Vermont hills, made experimental books, played violin in a quartet, built a raft and floated down the river that ran through town, questioned some principles of Physics and received a D from Physics Professor. She was almost shot by hunters while sketching in a cow field. She chose the path that led to an artist's life and it began on a rocky road- one in which for many years she worked at odd jobs to support herself. They included catalog editor for the Library of Congress, information retrieval for Ball Brothers Research Corporation in Boulder, Colorado (a NASA contractor that made the Orbiting Solar Observatory) as well as information jobs for J. Walter Thompson (on a contract for the Goddard Space Center) and in a phytopathology at the University of California. In the course of this work, she did information retrieval, learned programming languages, and studied system analysis and design. Initially there was no relationship between these jobs and the work that she created in her studio, but gradually the imagery of technology and the idea of information as imagery began to seep in her work (well.com 18 September 2007).

She married Jim Malloy in 1965. Jim Malloy had worked with vacuum technology at Westing House. He had also worked as a microelectronics and laser engineer. She lived with her husband in many places following the chip industry. They included Boulder, Colorado, the mountains of Colorado, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Massachusetts, and Northern California. In Colorado she studied creative writing at Extension, typed stories on an old typewriter and made art. She also learned to program in FORTRAN, organized technical information and read technical literature to identify content relevant to research

projects for NASA contractor Ball Brothers Research Corporation. At BBRC, she worked with Jose Villarreal, one of the pioneers of Chicano literature, who was BBRC's Technical Publications Supervisor. She ran the BBRC Technical Library as a technical information specialist. Judy Malloy and her husband moved to Massachusetts North Shore in 1972 where they lived while Jim Malloy was working in the laser business on Route 128, and Judy Malloy was writing, painting and exhibiting her work locally. In the seventies they moved to Sunnyvale, CA and then to Oakland, where her husband and she were divorced (well.com 18 September 2007).

Judy Malloy is the author of a number of hypertexts fictions of which "*its name was Penelope*" is considered to be the hypertext classic. Her others work are "*Uncle Roger*", "*My name is Scibe*", "*Roar of Destiny Emanated from Refrigerator*", "*Forward Anywhere*" and "*loveOne*" to name a few. "*Uncle Roger*" was her first electronic hyperfiction that originally appeared from 1986-87 on Art Com Electronic Network on the WELL (well.com 18 September 2007).

The narrative of this hyperfiction was set at a series of parties that were observed by the narrator who intertwined the elements of magic realism, Silicon Valley culture and semiconductor industry in her story. The first two files of this fiction had a parallel sequential thread like structure but the third section was created with less sequential approach. For this section Malloy used a random number generator to produce screen sized units of text called lexias at the will of the computer. This section had a very fluid structure. This structure was then used for writing "*its name was Penelope*" (well.com 25 August 2012).

Malloy is presently a writer of great renown and New Media/Information Artist. She is a member of the National Writes Union, Authors Guild, Literary Advisory Board, Electronic Literature Organization. She is one of the most fascinating hypertext stylists. Her experiment with randomization is bold and surprisingly effective (well.com 18 September 2007).

i) "*its name was Penelope*"- A Brief Introduction

This fiction was created as an artist's book in 1989. The original version used yellow text on a black background and that reflected its Greek epic origin.

In the course of installation that Malloy did at the Richmond Art Center in 1989, she extensively rewrote each lexia and in 1990 self published a small *Narrabase Press* version with new cover and the edited text. It was in the year 1993 that Mark Bernstein at the *Eastgate* published it with an introduction by Carolyn Guyer.

In this work the narrator, Anne Mitchell, is an artist, a photographer, who offers us a tripartite montage of her life in random screens of text that glimpse and blink by like the slide show at a party (eastgate.com 18 September 2007). Her narrative appears in three main segments – “Dawn”, “Sea” and “Song”. The middle segment is again divided into four sections titled “a Gathering of Shades”, “That Far-off Island”, “Fine Work and Wide Across” and “Rock and Hard Place.” Each part consists of a series of lexias which can be read in a sequence determined by the pseudo-random number generator. The reader can jump from one section to another or use the default command to read the lexia in each section. This ensures that each reading experience is different since it involves a different sequence of lexias and hence a different system of links that exposes many different types of spatial relations. These spatial relations then create a temporal tissue as they generate an assemblage of memories (Odin 607). One is drawn through a range of emotions, lulled by nostalgia, then titillated and shocked, or saddened and outraged. According to *Carolyn Guyer* Malloy has, with simple randomizing screens of open ended text, recreated the complex way we remember who we are (eastgate.com 18 September 2007).

ii) Summary

The hyperfiction is a collection of memories in which a woman photographer recollects the details of her life. The section named “Dawn” signifies Homeric sunrise, the beginning of life, “Fine Work and Wide Across” refers to the details of the narrator’s photography based art work and “Rock and Hard Place” to the trouble faced by the artists, finally concluding with the “Song” of love and shared life (well.com 25 August 2012).

When Malloy began with the fiction it was her vision to create an entire work that the readers would experience in an unpredictable manner. She thought of this in terms of approximating memory and in

particular early memories which surface in one’s mind when provoked by certain events but are not sequential. She has fictionally retold childhood memories intertwining them with her memories of California alternative art world in the era of classic performance art and conceptual art (well.com 25 August 2012).

When she began this work about an artist’s memories and looking at the life through past memories, she was thinking of Joyce’s “Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man” and “The Dubliners.” But it is Dorothy Richardson’s “Pilgrimage” which she considers more akin to her work. In her opinion Richardson’s work strove to be the writing equivalent of the impressionistic painting and Malloy selected a photographer as a narrator as she created a work equivalent to a pack of small paintings or photographs that the computer continuously shuffles. Also the impact of Homer’s “The Odyssey” is quite evident on the narrative technique of the *Penelope* (well.com 25 August 2012).

She says that it was the childhood memory of her father reading “The Odyssey” that gave her the idea of using it as a way to give *Penelope* some structure. She had been also revisiting Homer’s effective story telling devices while narrating *Uncle Roger* in a Homeric town square fashion on the Internet. Also the significance of “The Odyssey” lies in the fact that a woman artist Penelopeia, whose weaving is central to her life and the story, is a primary character (well.com 25 August 2012).

Malloy envisioned that “The Odyssey’s” sophisticated ordering of poetic narrative in which the reader moves forward and backward in time would work well for the narrative that she wished to create for the *Penelope*. Thus the six files of this fiction are loosely based on the sections of the Homer’s classic (well.com 25 August 2012).

The main character of the hyperfiction is named Anne and not Penelope as the work is only inspired by the Greek classic but has an altogether different story. Malloy wanted to arrange the work in such a way that the readers would make comparisons so she used image of a toy boat that Anne played with as a child as a primary image and gave this boat the name Penelope. She wrote in her Notes that Anne’s setting this tiny boat sailing is a metaphor for life in which

an artist's explorations are akin to those of an explorer (well.com 25 August 2012).

A brief summary of the seven files of the *Penelope* is as follows.

a) *Dawn*- The title is taken from the Homeric epithet "rosy fingers of dawn". Dawn is a metaphor for the beginning of life. In "The *Odyssey*" this epithet is contained in the section where Odysseus and his old nurse separately remember the childhood origin of a scar. Anne in this file in the hyperfiction recollects childhood memories (Malloy 14). This section shows us the formative artist in the young Anne. According to Carolyn Guyer Malloy's depictions in the *Penelope* are almost cinematic and in the "Dawn" section they are so concrete that she expects to see a colour illustration next to the text in the manner of children's book (7).

Guyer informs that, Anne tells in this section something of what it was like to grow up in New England which she calls "a small seaside town on the South shore." In her opinion the language in this section is unpretentious just as if she is reading from a diary that she kept as a girl. In this candid and unpretentious manner she talks of childhood pranks, days at the sea shore, family dinners and most importantly memories of her father reading *Odyssey* to her and her younger brother (Guyer 8).

b) *Sea*- According to Guyer in this section Anne's tone is different. It gives us an understanding of what it's like to be an artist, mature and struggling in a painfully clear tone. We hear a woman's voice filled with sadness or loss and fluent with the harsh realities of an artist's life. Anne is devoted to her art. She refuses marriage, children and lovers who wish to distract her. She is all alone. Malloy projects this image of Anne in the *Penelope* repeatedly. She is shown to be in the clutches of an office job where she is not earning enough. It is difficult for her to make both ends meet. She is facing failures receiving twenty three rejections in a year (Guyer 9).

c) *A Gathering of Shades*- This segment deals with the impact of AIDS on the art community in San Francisco where Anne has lived for twenty years. There are many references to the deaths of

friends and acquaintances. It has dedications, elegies and obituary notices that Malloy has taken from real publications. It also has sexual references and provides a view of the life of artists, their parties and life style (Guyer 9-10). The name of this section is Fitzgerald's title for the section of "The *Odyssey*" where Odysseus enters the "cold homes of Death" (Malloy 15).

Malloy has equated this world with San Francisco alternative art world which she considers darker world because of the friends and enemies dying of AIDS. Prominent and significant in these sections are the rituals enacted at the openings of the shows of the dying men and conversations before AIDS with friends now dead. These are interspersed with descriptions of art made South of Market in San Francisco or across the Bay in Oakland and Berkeley (Malloy 15).

d) *That Far-Off Island*- The title of this file is symbolic of *Calypso's Island*. In this section Anne remembers with mixed feelings, her affair with a man called Edgar (Malloy 16). He is a filmmaker who can only find work as a projectionist at a porno theatre. She breaks up with him because he wants to commit and live with her (Guyer 10). She feels trapped like some married women artist. Many women artists never marry because in the world of art each and every moment of an artist's life is dedicated to art and also because in this world there is a stigma attached to being someone's wife (Malloy 16).

e) *Fine Work and Wide Across*- As the title suggests this section talks about the work that Anne is making at the time that she writes (Malloy 16). It centers on Anne's fervid absorption in her art (Guyer 10). The screens in it describe both the assembly of Anne's work and the photos it contains (Malloy 16-17).

f) *Rock and a Hard Place*- The title of this, according to Guyer is a contemporary way of saying between "Scylla and Charybdis". This section is about the life full of penury, rejection, indignity and the spite of technology that artists are destined to lead. It portrays the grinding vocational adversities faced by unrecognized artists and the humiliation and exclusion which doubles for female artists (Guyer 11). It depicts

how a tiny amount of funding for artists is questioned, how people feel that the artists must not ask for the money for art is done for the love of it. It depicts the misery of their lives spent working at light hauling, painting houses and typing manuscripts etc., and despite the sustenance they are thought failures not only by fellow employees but also by family and friends (Malloy 17).

- g) *Song*- This section begins with a long quote from Telemachus' journey to Sparta. It consists of only fifteen screens (excluding the introductory quote from "The Odyssey"), arranged in a specific sequential order in contrast to the random nature of the rest of the work (Guyer 11-12).

In Guyer's opinion, Malloy intends this to be a counterpoint to the random order of the other parts of the *Penelope* but it is not a linear narrative either but more like a medley of a brief love affair (Guyer 12). It is about a trip perhaps an imagined one taken to the country with a man she is in love with (Malloy 17).

Malloy's *Penelope* and Homer's *Odyssey* share numerous similarities and dissimilarities. In fact it is akin to a modern reworking of *Odyssey*. Homer's text is a traditional masculine text bound by neatly defined boundaries and syntactical rules. *Penelope* on the contrary is a text that defies the patriarchy and the traditional concept of textuality. By reworking the traditional text Malloy has generated an interplay of hypertextual freedom and sequential constraint which has been termed as an artifact of the electronic media which enacts a tussle, dilemma and indecisions that a woman artist like Anne or Penelope struggles with inside the fiction. Anne Mitchell, the protagonist of Malloy's fiction is a weaver of images like her domesticated counterpart *Penelope* of *Odysseus*. But Anne does not stay at home like her. She treads her path huddled with relationships and sexual liaisons. According to Page, by intervening in the structure of the discourse and by interrupting reiterations of what has been written, Malloy has redirected the steam of narrative and cleared the space for the construction of new textual forms which are more congenial to the expression of women's subjectivity. So Malloy is not only articulating a

previously dismissed and repressed story of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* through her fiction but she is also rearticulating the textual forms and codes.

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