

## **An Invasion of Artificial Intelligence into the Realm of Human Domain (Mind) in “Johnny Mnemonic”**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper aims to present the characteristics of postmodernist fiction, a dystopic future especially, where people have rebuffed the universalization of paradigms such as religion, conventional philosophy etcetera. As postmodernist fiction rejects the distinction between high and low art culture, “Johnny Mnemonic” tries to place questions like which kind of the world humans are living in: is it shaped by the milieu, or, in turn, it shapes the milieu, and do the postmodern individuals live in a state of flux? Do humans tame the technology or do they become slaves on their own to it, does the technology show the window to the world or is it the window to the human mind itself? The delineation of these questions through this story has been highlighted. It seems through this story that nowadays technology has acquired the ‘center’ in the poststructuralist sense.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Technology, Posthuman, Artificial Intelligence, Cyberpunk, Culture, and Memory.

## Introduction

"Johnny Mnemonic" is a short story written by William Gibson. It appears in a book of short stories written by Gibson entitled *Burning Chrome* in 1986. Gibson is a writer of science fiction and one of the first to write in the new genre called cyberpunk. This genre is defined as:

Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science fiction that features advanced science and technology in an urban, dystopian future. On one side you have powerful mega-corporations and private security forces, and on the other, you have the dark and gritty underworld of illegal trade, gangs, drugs, and vice. In between there is politics, corruption, and social upheaval. ("What Is Cyberpunk?")

The very title of the story is self-reflexive of cyber terminology; where mnemonic is an acronym used to represent a binary machine instruction code but out here it has been used ironically because Johnny is unable to recall any piece of information stored in his head. So, memory here becomes a tool to visit the past but with irony. A hyperreal universe feigned through the linkup of machines illustrates a futuristic world of Johnny Mnemonic, narrated in first person, dominated by computer technology, massive cartels, and cyberspace. It also provides the critique of culture by describing how unique subcultures are created just because of lack or the overuse of technology namely Lo Teks (low of technology) and Yazuka (massive use of technology) which throws light on Fredrics Jameson's statement, ". . . in postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right, the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much as a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (11). In an era of mass consumption and globalization, technology is used for many

different things, as in our geological and prosthetic procedures are done quite often mostly every day, and are turning human beings into cyborgs. Technology has brought revolutionary changes in human life by delineating the “irrevocable changes in the representation of things and of the way they change” (Jameson 11). Likewise, this story takes place in the future; Johnny is a special kind of courier, whose head is used to store corporate data (usually stolen) in an “idiot-savant” (“Johnny Mnemonic” 1) mode although he cannot consciously access that information himself and it can be retrieved only by a spoken password which is not known to him. When triggered by this password, the tech embedded in his brain forces him to expunge the information, in a “synthetic language” (“Johnny Mnemonic” 12).

Johnny had his face changed to disguise himself before he went to his meeting at the Drome. Another individual in "Johnny Mnemonic" who used technology to influence the human body is Lewis, the bodyguard of Ralfi. Lewis has undergone surgery to have muscles grafted onto his body to look stronger and fit for the profession of a bodyguard. In Lewis's case, this shows how technology influences the body because without technology there would have been no possible way that he would've become muscular. The next character whose technology influenced her body is Molly Millions ‘Rajorgirl’ who has blades implanted into her fingers. This shows how technology impacts the body as Molly uses these modules to protect herself; if these blades have not been implanted in her fingers, then when Lewis raised his hand to slap her, she wouldn't have been able to stop him and also, she becomes a bodyguard for the protagonist while saving him from Ralfi and Lewis which also hints at the unconventional nature of postmodernist fiction. She is depicted as active, violent, and having a bossy attitude whereas Johnny remains mainly passive and dependent on what goes next according to her. Molly also wears “mirrored glasses,” (“Johnny Mnemonic” 3) surgically

implanted into her face which is also an achievement of technology. According to Brian McHale, science fiction is “...the ontological genre *par excellence*” (*Postmodernist* 16).

Being technical and crude is the necessity of the hour in science fiction as the opening lines by Johnny suggest, “If they think you’re crude, go technical; if they think you’re technical, go crude. . . . These days, though, you have to be pretty technical before you aspire to crudeness” (“Johnny Mnemonic” 3). The interplay of the body with information, computing, and communication technologies in the posthuman virtual world depicts that memory and imagination are closely interrelated which endangers humanity and personal identity. In this story, artificial memories completely override real memories. Catherine Hayles also emphasizes the role of technological advancement while mentioning the shifting of a piece of information from the body to other material objects and posits human consciousness as a separable part of the human body, “the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). Johnny, a mnemonic data courier, has erased all his childhood memories to have enough capacity in his brain to carry large data packages, which is possible only due to cybernetic surgery. Johnny seems unaware of which memories are his own and which belong to one of the data files he has couriered. Owing to this, Johnny’s subjectivity is threatened as he is identified by his profession as a mnemonic courier rather than his actual human nature which depicts the intermingling of the actual human self and virtual self in the posthuman world. It has also a semblance with a contemporary society where a person’s identity is revealed by using a unique identification number attributed to them by the government, which in one sense is an instance of the posthuman world where human beings

are being governed and motorized by technology rather than nature, which shows the shift from conventional order of things to unconventional one. Also due to the advancement of technology, there raises a threat to human life which can be seen in the terrorist activities which deconstruct the technology not for social upliftment but for destruction which is very relatable with the story here as it depicts how Johnny and Jones use sensitive information for blackmailing corporations and underworld crime rings of Johnny's former clients as Johnny remarks, "I was sick of being a bucket" ("Johnny Mnemonic" 14). Johnny here is craving for his authentic human memory which has been replaced by implanted electronic memory that does not have any link with his personal experience. His situation is as pathetic here as that of Roy Betty, the skin job, of Blade Runner, who is hankering after the memories for the longevity of his so-called constructed life. The very quest here for unexplored things also posits "the demise of historical telos" (13) in Jameson's words, having no model to follow in the past, having an unstable present, and having a questionable future. The very feature "uncertainty" of postmodernism is imbibed by Johnny here which also brings forth the bad impact of posthuman chaos as he entered the Drome, a bar populated with drug dealers, pimps, and various criminals, he is holding a shotgun but is not confident about his firing capacity, as he asserts that "I put everything I had into curling the index finger of my right hand, but I no longer seemed to be connected to it . . . I was hoping Lewis was a true meatball" ("Johnny Mnemonic" 2). On the other hand, hankering after money is also a chief feature of the contemporary world which is turning into pandemonium in itself depicted by the character of Molly, who sells drugs to Jones.

This story also portrays the Hobbesean landscape and pessimistic vision where identity theft is a major concern. Technology influences the body in many different ways and artificial intelligence takes the upper hand in every sphere. Owing to this influence of technology,

Johnny Mnemonic had his face altered with the specific goal to mask himself before going to a meeting. Characters like Johnny and Ralfi are concerned about their face and appearances as in Johnny's visit to a surgeon for a new face at the very opening of the story and his new identity is Eddie Bax, an importer, and Ralfi's plastic surgery having the face of a popular singer named Christian White sound weird. Then there is a Yazuka assassin, who can be called a humachine as he is more like a machine than a man; as Molly describes him, "[h]e's factory custom" ("Johnny Mnemonic" 5). The only exception in the story is Jones, a cybernetic, though he is a surgically altered dolphin during the war, he is not interested in high-tech modification. Then comes the dog, the first Lo Teks that Johnny encounters in Nighttown. This dog is a stray, with its surgically implanted Doberman canine teeth and a missing eye which illustrates the post-apocalyptic future world where no distinction can be observed between beast, human, and machine because as per the story Jones is half machine and half dolphin; Johnny is half human and half computer; Dog is half dog and half human. The "uncertainty" principle by Heisenberg, here is applicable apparently.

Then the story also describes the self-reflexivity, a prominent feature of postmodernism, at the end when Molly and Johnny go to Nighttown where Johnny confides to Molly that without using Ralfi's password, they can access the information in his brain merely by using squids which stands for superconducting quantum interference device which is again hinting at reality, not artificiality. At this point appears Jones, who communicates through symbols of Christmas lights and the bulbs there is a flashing of red, white, and blue light which is arranged in "RWBRWBRWB" ("Johnny Mnemonic" 7) repeatedly five times and Jones recreates the code with this method. After this, there is a parody of the Nazi symbolism of the red swastika which stands for the victory of mankind and has a similar appearance to that of the Hinduism symbol of the swastika.

## Conclusion

Through this story, Gibson has revisioned and redefined human beings as social, cultural, political, and technological beings, thus contributing substantially to science fiction. The interface between technology and humans replaces the elements of supernatural fiction. Technological advancements encroach upon the human mind and the human body, and at one level augment human intelligence and on the other hand, endanger human identity.

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