

# The Transformation of the ‘Flaneur’ Figure to Bourgeois in Julian Barnes’s *Metroland*: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

Charles Baudelaire employs the notion of flaneur as an idle wanderer and a passionate observer of the city life in the context of nineteenth-century Paris. Walter Benjamin in the twentieth century revisits the same notion in a slightly different manner. For Benjamin, flaneur, on the one hand, can be overwhelmed by the phantasmagoria of the city life and can develop a ‘shock experience’ and on the other hand, can respond to the stimuli of the urban ambience and can exhibit instrumental means of thinking to cope with the altered environment. In this circumstance, the latter, as Benjamin argues, is also evocative of the prospect of the flaneur’s conversion into a commodity. Following the argument of Walter Benjamin, the present paper aims to analyze the mobility and transformation of the central character, Christopher, in Julian Barnes’s novel *Metroland* (1980). This paper also reinforces that the character’s transformation is influenced by the societal structures as propounded by the structural Marxists like Louis Althusser.

## Keywords

Flaneur, Phantasmagoria, Ambience, Transformation, Commodity.

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According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the word transformation means a complete change of someone or something. In general, a flaneur is a person lounging around in a seemingly aimless way. The term 'bourgeois' is characteristic of the social middle class dominated by a concern for commercial interests (Merriam-Webster). During the nineteenth century, in Marxist writings, it became associated with capitalism with a negative connotation. In social and political theory, the concept of the bourgeois is largely a construct of Karl Marx and his followers. The origin of the term is in medieval France denoting an inhabitant of a walled town. In Marxist theory, the bourgeois performs a heroic role by revolutionizing the industry and modernizing society. It seeks to monopolize the benefits of modernization by exploiting the proletariat (have-nots) and the consequence, as stated by Marx, will be a final revolution in which the property of the bourgeois is seized and exploitation and inequality among classes will be abolished. Although Marx has assigned this particular role to the bourgeois, it is never likely to play that role. In modern parlance, it is suggestive of overmuch concern with respectability and wealth. Bourgeois society is the social formation where the commodity relation prevails in every sphere of life.

In Marxism, the economic base determines superstructure ( art, culture, institutions, rituals, etc.). The French theorist Althusser asserts that society has three levels: the economic level, the political level, and the ideological level. To him, although the economic structures dominate Capitalism, the political and ideological structures have indispensable roles in shaping the views of an individual. Among these three, the ideological level, as Althusser argues, involves all the ways that people see themselves and their world. Althusser bounces that the basic infrastructure of society is not rigidly fixed but mainly consists of two kinds of apparatuses such as Ideological State Apparatuses ( schools, families, churches, books, advertising, music, games, fashions, technology, etc) and Repressive State Apparatuses (armies, police, prisons, etc). For Althusser, the bourgeois keeps up control on all three levels of society through the ISA ( Ideological State Apparatuses) and the RSA (Repressive State Apparatuses).

The notion of flaneur as the urban stroller is first defined by the notable French poet Charles Baudelaire in his works. Baudelaire's flaneur wandered through the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris observing the variegated patterns of modern city life. In his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life", Baudelaire terms this

perambulatory figure as a “passionate spectator”.

In the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin in his unfinished “Arcades Project” refers to the concept of the urban flaneur to track an alteration in the nineteenth-century Parisian life. He offers some instances to substantiate the fact that a modern individual has become free to move from one place to another. The profession of journalism is such an example whose essential criterion involves the rapid movement from one subject to another subject depending on the various incidents in politics or society. According to Benjamin, the urban stroller also wanders through the passages of Paris visiting different shops. Jean Rhys’ fictions emerge during a long tradition of flaneur writing. Benjamin in his “Arcades Project” presents two complementary notions to expose the human response to modern city life – a) *Erlebnis* and b) *Erfahrung*. *Erlebnis* is the shock-induced stupor caused by the immense perceptible onslaught of urban ambiance. *Erfahrung* is a positive reaction and indicates the movement of the flaneur.

For my study, I selected Julian Barnes’s novel *Metroland* (1980). The aim is to trace out the typical characteristics of the flaneur in the central character Christopher Lloyd’s movements. The article also examines his transformation from a typical suburban flaneur towards a bourgeois gentleman in the context of the aforementioned novel. Applying the Althusserian notion, it points out the impact of ideology in the alteration of the character’s perspective.

Julian Barnes is a prolific English fiction writer who was born in 1946 in Leicester, although his family shifted their residence to the outer suburbs of London. He received his education at the City of London School from 1957 to 1964. He received his graduation degree from Magdalen College, Oxford, and later, he worked as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary for three years. From 1979 to 1986, Barnes worked as a television critic for the *New Statesman* and *The Observer*. Some of his well-known fictions are *Metroland* (1980), *Before She Met Me* (1982), *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *England, England*, *The Porcupine* (1992), *Arthur and George* (2005), etc. Barnes published his crime novels under the pseudonym, Dan Kavanagh. Apart from writing fiction he also wrote *Cross Channel* (1996), a collection of ten stories tracing Britain’s relationship with France and a collection of essays entitled *Something to Declare*.

The novel *Metroland* is mostly a retrospective narrative consisting of tripartite structure, a recurrent characteristic of Barnes’ fiction. Each part is divided into different sections entitled with noteworthy headings. Part One *Metroland* (1963) recounts the adolescent lives of Christopher and Toni. Part Two *Paris* (1968) depicts Chris’s life and research in Paris and captures some changes noticeable in Chris’s character. Set in 1968, the time of the students’ revolution in Paris, Julian Barnes makes us aware of the fact that his protagonist is least concerned with the outside crisis of France at that time. Part Three *Metroland 2* (1977) depicts Christopher as a married, self-contented gentleman peacefully settled at the heart of *Metroland*. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, the protagonist Stephen Dedalus in his growing years

seeks to grapple with his family, religion, morality and finally decides to reject all socially imposed bonds and instead live freely as an artist. In *Metroland*, we notice Chris ultimately conforms to the societal forms acting as a conscious agent molded through ideology.

The central character Christopher Lloyd and his friend Toni Barbarowski saunter like flaneurs mainly in the first part of the novel. From the very beginning of the fiction, we come to know that Chris as a suburban inhabitant is much fascinated by the orange light of the sodium street lamp, and the orange lighting blending with the red-colored thing is turned into brown. Here orange color provides him enthusiasm and vibrancy in his mind. In part one, the section namely "Two Small Boys" vividly records the loitering of the two teenagers along Oxford Street like "two unidentifiable boys in white shirts, grey trousers, and black jackets ...in search of a new boutique"(17). The realistic picture of Walter Benjamin's urban sprawler is revealed through the images of the two boys Chris and Toni. Although they are the residents of the suburban Eastwick (or *Metroland*), they wandered along Oxford Street like the customers from one departmental store' to another. As Chris states, "I followed him across the road towards a new boutique ( how we disapproved of these linguistic imports); in large yellow capitals it announced MAN SHOP".(*Metroland*, 18). In this section, the two boys reflect a cynical attitude towards the customs of the bourgeoisie.

In another section namely "The Constructive Loaf" in Part One, the two boys imagine the city of London both as a starting point for any excursion and terminal point to return to. In this regard, Chris's comments are significant enough: " Also, we liked loafing around and watching other people ...We went to street markets and law courts, hovered outside pubs..."(*Metroland*, 28). Roaming through the streets of London, to the alleys of Fleet Street, to the roadside markets, pubs, and noticing other people working and tiring themselves, they engage themselves in a kind of constructive loafing. They express their snobbery on the bourgeois lifestyle deeming the prostitutes as an essential part of the bourgeoisie. The city is like an unreadable book for them that is yet to be written.

Michael Kane in his book " *Postmodern Time and Space in Fiction and Theory*" mentions that Walter Benjamin takes the cue from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe called "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) where the man of the crowd is an impenetrable mystery(47). Benjamin links the flaneur's intoxication with crowds in nineteenth-century cities and culture increasingly fascinated with a particular kind of circulation,i.e, the circulation of commodities. Charles Baudelaire in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" compares the painter of modern life with Poe's the man of the crowd in the sense that both are engrossed with the fleeting impressions of the city life where one's field of vision is crammed with so many different things, moving at different directions at a rambling speed( 48).

Althusser in his essay" *Marxism and Humanism*" (1964) denounces the ideas like human choice, creativity as illusions and deem them the products of bourgeois ideology. In his most influential essay " *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*"

(1970) contends that human desires; preferences and judgments are the outcomes of social practices. Like Marx, he claims that our values are implanted within us by ideological practices. In the book, Chris narrates various ideological state apparatuses while describing his family relationships and experiences in school. This is evident in his speech: “Parents were unreliable: double agents who got blown early on when trying to feed you some deliberate misinformation” (22). In the “Scorched Earth” section, Chris and Toni delineate that parents fug up their children. We sense the Althusserian notion of Interpellation in the typical gender roles played by Chris’s parents as quoted by Chris: “On my right, my father had The Times folded back...From time to time he would toss my mother a dutiful question about the garden. She sat on my left, brought the food, answered any questions, and chivvied us gently through the largely silent meal” (40). In this section, Chris mentions two distinct stages of human life –a) scorched earth suggesting the initial rejection or wilful contradiction in adolescence and b) reconstruction of moral decisions and relationships in matured life.

According to Baudelaire, the perfect idler gets immense pleasure to establish his habitation among the mass, in the bustle. In the above-mentioned novel, Chris finds enormous delight while visiting the railway termini, church, Harley Street doorstops, National Gallery, etc. The section called “Tunnels and Bridges” depicts that Chris gradually enjoys his train journey from Baker Street to Metroland station and he learns the amusing tricks of travel. He never feels this journey exhaustive despite “sitting for years with the same chalk-striped men and watching out of the same window the same scenery and then the same tunnel walls, their sides corrugated with dusty black cables” (59). Between Finchley Road and WembleyPark, the train moves through a viaduct system at Kilburn. Chris’ sight catches the cross-hatched streets of tall Victorian terraces laying below the viaduct. He can change the scenarios of the site conforming to his mood. In the late afternoon in Winter, with smog and dim lights, it seems to generate a melancholic and appalling environment. On a luminous summer morning, the site appeared as a “little slum in the Blitz”(60). This is also evident in Chris’s narration: “The territory of Kilburn; the grimy, lost stations between Baker Street and Finchley Road; the steppe-like playing fields at Northwick Park; the depot at Neasden, full of idle, aged rolling- stock; the frozen faces of passengers glimpsed in the windows of fast Marylebone trains. They were all, in some way, relevant, fulfilling, sensibility-sharpening”(Metroland, 61). In this way, he attempts to grasp the phantasmagoria of urban life. Georg Simmel in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” maintains that urban inhabitants generally develop a blasé attitude to protect themselves from the societal overstimulation of the urban ambiance. For Baudelaire, the flaneur moves among the throng by deriving pleasure in the diversity of the urban stimuli. In the “Hard and Low” section, on his way to returning home on a bicycle, he notices that “...the evening thickened enthusiastically; bits of fog began to loiter hopefully by the laurel hedges. Along the Rickmansworth Road, every third street- lamp flickered and flashed into life”(Metroland,69). In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens figures out the country as a place of peace and serenity and the city as a place tinged with all the

difficulties of modern life . Julian Barnes in this novel draws our attention to both the joyful and morbid facets of the city. “There was no ambiguity about ‘they’ ... the unidentified legislators, moralists, social luminaries and parents of outer suburbia” (14).

Another characteristic of the urban idler is his inevitable encounter with strangers or unknown persons. In the section called “J ' habite Metroland”, one afternoon while returning home from Baker Street, Chris comes across an old man in “commuter’s uniform; umbrella with a gold spoke-ring; brief-case; looking-glass shoes”(35). He thinks this man either a ‘dead bourgeois’ or a rapist or as he states, “ Maybe he wasn't so bad. Only four stations to go anyway. Maybe he was quite interesting”(37). In Part Two Paris (1968), in the section “Demandez Nuts”, Chris loafs through the streets of Paris, bars, cafes, the Bibliotheque Nationale, etc carrying with him a sketch-book. Sometimes he loves to draw the things, scenarios viewed from the open window of his rented flat. Chris fancies himself as an autonomous being. By following the old adolescent theory of constructive loaf, he tries to cope with the new situation:

“ So far the first few weeks I loafed,...sat around knowingly in some of the less celebrated squares and gardens... rediscovered that smirk which goes with riding first class on a second-class Metro ticket” (*Metroland* 85).

In one of his visits to the Bibliotheque Nationale, he meets Annick who becomes his girlfriend. Chris also gives us an occasional glimpse of the historical version of the city of Paris: “ Over there in that corner was where Moliere worked; across there Cocteau, then Colette; there Blucher lost six million at roulette and for the rest of his life flew into a rage when the name of Paris was mentioned; there the first café mecanique was opened [...] And bringing it all together, ingesting it...calling the life(93). He recognizes his attitude as being different from Toni. As he confesses, “ Pre-marital sex... suddenly didn’t feel as if it had anything to do with the bourgeoisie” (104). Musee Gustave Moreau becomes one of his favorite haunts in Paris where he also meets the friend circle of Dave, Mickey, and Marion, Chris' s future wife. “ Uncertain of my status, I tagged along with them on rounds of cafes, return visits to the Musee Gustave Moreau, and sudden trips out of Paris to the edge of the Beauce, or the mad, polychrome chocolate factory at Noisiel”(112).

Part Three *Metroland 2* (1977) portrays Christopher as a dutiful husband, 30 years old, employed, owner of a house, and a father who is quite different from the earlier young man snickering at the bourgeois way of living. Now he is comfortably settled at *Metroland* and renews his relations with the previously despised ‘bourgeois’ classmates, who afford him a job as an editor in a publishing house. On the other hand, his amiable relation with Toni dwindles due to his apparent conversion to a self-satisfied bourgeois. On Sunday mornings, he drives quite early through the way across the golf course and deems *Metroland* as an efficient place to reside. As he remarks, “ Five minutes’ drive and you’re in open country where only the pylons remind you of

town life” (*Metroland*, 136). Christopher now contemplates his past jobs as a school teacher, as a copywriter, and alteration of his perspective: “ Toni’s scorn was neutralized by Marion’s approval... It was like being paid for playing sport or doing crosswords; you even became exhilarated and competitive during big campaigns. I remember helping launch a new cooking fat called Lift,...” (139). Chris's materialistic penchant is again evident in his shifting of professions. In this section, he puts forward a lot of justification for marrying Marion. To Chris, Marion is a sensible woman, intelligent and beautiful; She loves Chris unconditionally and the only child of well-off parents. Marion is a person, tells Chris, with whom falling in love has its compensations. Chris's reference to Auden in this context reveals his changing outlook: “Money may not be the fuel of love, Auden said, but it makes excellent kindling” (141).

In his altering perspective, he repudiates his previous snobbery: “The orthodoxy runs that if a marriage is founded on less than perfect truth it will always come to light. I don’t believe that. Marriage moves you further away from the examination of truth, not nearer to it. No cynicism is intended there either” (141). Through this revelation, he plays his part as a newly-fledged bourgeois man making a calculative list of what has he achieved in his life. Benjamin also speaks of the possibility of the flaneur being turned into a commodity just like other men, as labor-power to be bought and sold for profit. In this sense, the flaneur is not just the prospective consumer, but also about to become the consumed. Thus towards the end of the novel, we discern a radical change in Chris’s approach to life.

In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx spells out the crucial role played by money in modern industrial society. Money is properly thought of as capital which provides additional comfort to an individual’s mind. Capitalism tends to generate an apparent lack in people’s minds and they are in search of what they don’t have rather than what they have. Julian Barnes lays out a striking section entitled “ Object Relations” at the end of each part of the novel *Metroland* to point out the shifting attitude of the central character Christopher Lloyd. If we see the object relations section of the first part, we discern that Chris’s bedroom is filled with things suggestive of his feelings, desires, and hopes. At the same time, it reminds him of the clothes he does not have: “ The whole room is full of things I don’t have”(72). In the “ Object Relations” of Part Two, Chris maintains that his two suitcases have been labeled as he wished in Part One. The “Object Relations” of Part Three depicts the materialistic things he has gained such as the glazing carpet on the floor, the cork tiles of the kitchen, the wire letter- cage on the front door, cane bar stools, rubber- capped stool, etc. He feels everything is orderly and oriented in his room. As he declares, “ I’ d call myself a happy man; if preachy, then out of a sense of modest excitement, not pride. I wonder why happiness is despised nowadays: dismissively confused with comfort or complacency, judged an enemy of social – even technological - progress. People often refuse to believe it when they see it; or disregard it as something merely lucky, merely genetic: a few drops of this, a dash of that, a couple of synapses unclogged. Not an achievement” (174). Afterward, he affirms, “ I was about to feel ashamed of my relief, my pleasure in this material

comfort; then I thought, why bother?" (175). Thus Chris is going to be consumed in the capitalist culture.

In conclusion, with the arrival of the commodity culture, the subject is much more attracted towards commodities. Following Marx, we may affirm that the definite social relations between human beings assume the fantastic form of a relation between things which is brought to the fore through Chris's rehearsing of his marriage with his wife and also through his possessions. Drawing similarity with Chris's opinion in Part One, we may state that by wilfully scandalizing the social rules in his adolescence, he now begins to reconstruct his personality by complying with the society in his mature age. For maintaining the social status quo, it is necessary to find a place in society by specifying his newly acquired role.

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### **The Article**

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