

LIQUID MODERNITY IN HYPERTEXT LITERARY FRAME “BREATHING AT THE GALAXY’S EDGES”

(Modernitas Cair dalam Bingkai Sastra Hiperteks “Breathing at the Galaxy’s Edges”)

Marisa Santi Dewi^{1*}, Rina Zuliana², Aprinus Salam

Universitas Gadjah Mada

[1marisasantidewi@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:marisasantidewi@mail.ugm.ac.id), [2rinazuliana@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:rinzuliana@mail.ugm.ac.id), [3aprinus@ugm.ac.id](mailto:aprinus@ugm.ac.id)

Abstract: *This study aims to explore the textual and contextual features of hypertext literature in framing liquid modernity as a social phenomenon. Hypertext poem “Breathing at the Galaxy’s Edges” as the main object of exploration on framing liquid modernity. Zygmunt Bauman’s perspective on liquid modernity is applied to identify how literature frames the phenomenon. Liquid modernity represents the nature of an ever-moving, flowing, flexible, temporary, and uncertain era. This study analyzes the data by comparing the literary text with the context of liquid modernity. The textual approach identifies ambivalence, metaphors, and metonymy. The contextual method was carried out by comparing the text, reading techniques, and the current social context of society. The results show that hypertext literature frames the era of liquid modernity textually, practically, and contextually. The poetry texts reveal the infinite nature of human life, which leads them to void, loneliness, and unconsciousness about who they are and who they are facing. In addition, the non-linear practice of reading poetry offers uncertainty, emancipation, and individuality. Thus, the context shows that social life is no longer determined. Humans are free to define their identity, life, and what they want to do. However, they must bear the consequences themselves.*

Keywords: *Deena Larsen; Digital Literature; Hypertext Literature; Liquid Modernity; Zygmunt Bauman*

A. INTRODUCTION

Changes in the contemporary cultural landscape cannot be separated from the widespread adoption of digital technology, which has profoundly influenced almost all aspects of life, including literature. Literary texts in heavy or solid modernity were synonymous with stable, linear, and established print media. Meanwhile, the digital era texts offer the realm of interactivity, non-linearity, and flexibility of meaning. One of the most significant innovations in this transition is hypertext literature. Hypertext is a medium or an alternative to reading texts on a computer (Aarseth, 1997, p.76). Hypertext literature is text composed of digital links that allow readers to determine their own path to construct a text. This phenomenon challenges the traditional paradigm regarding the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader.

Hypertext literature occupies a unique position in the development of literary theory and practice. As noted by Berkeley Fiction Review (2021), hypertext fiction is “the literary genre that was theorized before it was written.” It means that the postmodern theorists had formulated the concept of non-linear, open, and interactive texts before it was realized in the practice of digital literature. It reveals an “epistemological tension” between the critical discourse that developed in the academic realm and its material realization in the form of literary works. In other words, theory precedes practice, while practice continues to strive to catch up with the conceptual horizon that has been established.

This condition relates to the idea of liquid modernity proposed by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Bauman identifies a shift from solid modernity, characterized by stable social structures, permanent institutions, and established blueprints, to liquid modernity, which is flexible, temporary, and full of uncertainty. Solid modernity is illustrated as an architectural building with a predetermined design, while liquid modernity resembles a temporary, easily movable, and non-binding “caravan park.” Hypertext literature, with its fluid nature, not only represents this social condition but also internalizes it in the form of text. The textual path of hypertext, which electronically connects words and images with links and networks within the web (Landow, 1993, p. 3), makes the text fragmented and non-linear. The non-linear structure, open links, and the freedom in constructing meaning are a direct reflection of the logic of a fluid society.

Postmodern thinkers, such as Derrida (1978), Foucault (1972), Baudrillard (1994), and Bauman (2000), have emphasized that modern social life is characterized by uncertainty, fragmentation, and the failure of a single authority. Derrida's concept of deconstruction, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, and Baudrillard's simulacra highlight the loss of single meaning. In the context of literature, this condition is manifested in a shift from linear texts to open, rhizomatic, and interactive texts. However, even though these theories are well established in postmodern discourse, there is still a gap in connecting these concepts with the practice of digital literature. Studies on electronic literature are indeed developing (Hayles, 2008; Rettberg, 2019), but the connection between the socio-cultural theory of liquid modernity and the practice of hypertext literature has not been specifically explored.

Literature, as a part of human life, is a space where human experiences are written, depicted, and represented through language. Due to its reflective nature, literature is a mirror of the ever-changing socio-cultural dynamics (Eagleton, 2008). It is not merely an aesthetic text that stands alone, but also a cultural archive that contains traces of ideology, value systems, and power relations that prevailed in a particular historical period. Thus, digital literature—including hypertext—not only functions as a technological innovation in the realm of literature, but also as a medium of representation that articulates how society understands itself in the era of liquid modernity.

Theorists and researchers have discussed issues of freedom, uncertainty, irregularity, and decentralization in literature (McHale, 1987; Lyotard, 1984). However, the development of these theories has not coincided with the development of literary forms born from the digital. On the one hand, postmodern theory emphasizes fragmentation and openness of meaning; on the other hand, digital literary practices present a more concrete material form of this idea. Although various creators and professionals have developed innovative digital works, a gap exists between the rich theoretical framework and the in-depth analysis of digital literature. In other words, theory seems to be running faster than practice, and practice is often not fully captured by literary theory.

This study will examine digital literature using theories relevant to the form of the work and its textual model. This study aims to balance the presentation of theory as a formal object with literary works as appropriate material objects. In this context, the digital poem “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges” by Deena Larsen, Miko Matsumura, and Richard Higgason becomes a significant object for study. This micro-hypertext-based poem presents eleven interconnected text nodes through hyperlinks, resulting in a fluid, interactive, and open-ended reading experience. Unlike printed poetry, which imposes

linearity and finality of meaning, this hypertext poem encourages readers to become co-creators who actively determine the course of the text. Therefore, this work offers an ideal field for examining how the social logic of liquid modernity is articulated through the mechanisms of digital literature. Hence, this study aims to explore the textuality and contextuality of hypertext literature in framing liquid modernity as a social development of society.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that literature always stands with society. As Mazzeo (2016) asserts, literature and sociology are “two sisters” that complement each other in understanding human experience. Bauman even considers the two as “Siamese twins” because they both seek to uncover the complexities of modern life. Thus, reading digital works through the perspective of liquid modernity is not only an aesthetic analysis but also an attempt to understand how literature internalizes and negotiates fluid, uncertain, and fragmented social conditions.

This study arises from an academic need to fill the gap between theory and practice. First, this study responds to the fact that the development of postmodern theory and the concept of liquid modernity has not been balanced with a concrete analysis of digital literature. Second, this study attempts to show that hypertext literature is not merely a technological innovation, but also an aesthetic and cultural representation of the transformation of contemporary society. By examining the digital poem “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges” through Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, this study aims to identify how digital literature can bridge social theory and literary practice and reaffirm the position of literature as a medium for reflection on ever-changing social conditions. This study reinforces the role of literature as a critical medium for understanding the complexity of modern life, which is fluid, uncertain, and constantly transforming.

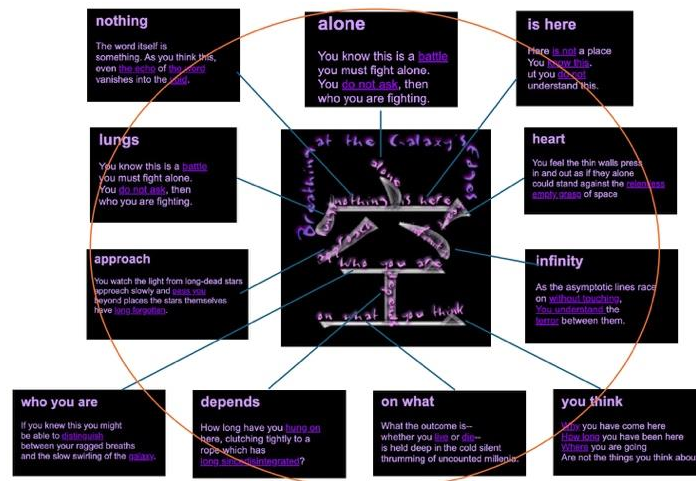
B. METHOD

This research is fundamentally a qualitative descriptive study that identifies liquid modernity in the hypertext literature “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges.” The data was retrieved from the digital platform https://drc-wsuv.org/projects/kanjikus/breathing_at_the_galaxys_edges/index.htm, accessed via the internet. The researcher collected data through close reading and screen captures to compare text and image data. The data consisted of digital literary texts and Zygmunt Bauman's perspective on liquid modernity. Subsequently, the researcher analyzed it in two ways: textually and contextually. The textual method involved identifying ambivalence, metaphors, and metonymy in the poetry texts. At the same time, the contextual method involved comparing the texts with the current social context of society.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges” is a digital micro-hypertext poem with eleven nodes. In hypertext, a node is a text, graphic, moving image, or a combination of them (McAleese, 1990). This poem was written by Deena Larsen, in collaboration with Miko Matsumura and Richard Higgason. The three authors and programmers developed this poem with a special mechanism to be read in digital media accessible via the internet. Therefore, some of the text in the digital poem has links within words or phrases. Words with links are interconnected with other words in different nodes. This mechanism makes a different experience from reading printed poetry in general. In printed poetry, the order

of words, the arrangement of stanzas, and the sound of the verses are fixed. Meanwhile, hypertext poetry breaks down this arrangement into several parts in links that lead to other nodes.



Gambar 1. Hypertext Literature “Breathing at the Galaxy’s Edges”

The image above is a hypertext poem, “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges.” The main page (in the center) is a kanji-ku (haiku symbol placed on an ideogram—a graphic symbol with a meaning). This image represents the content of the poem, showing the initial structure of the author's text. The picture shows the title “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges”, followed by the contents of the poem, which consist of: alone, lungs, nothing, is here, hearth, approach, infinity, who you are, depend, on what, and you think. This sequence follows kanji character 空 (そら), read as “sora,” which means “sky” or horizon.

According to the Mazii Dictionary, “Sora” is also defined as empty, void, vacant, available space/time, emptiness, and everything has no fixed center. The word “sora” is a preliminary construction or a kind of blueprint offered by this poem. However, the sequence is temporal, while the literature studied tends to be changeable. Thus, the researcher conducts textual and contextual analysis. At the textual level, literary texts are identified through their ambivalent, metaphorical, and metonymic properties. Meanwhile, in the contextual aspect, the text is linked to the perspective of liquid modernity.

1. The Textuality of Hypertext Literature: “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges”

Based on the title “Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges,” there are two significant linguistic connections. “Breathing” refers to a life. Something alive is anything that still exists, moves, and functions as it should. Life also means something that is still or currently happening. “Galaxy” means the solar system and is closely related to the concept of infinity. The nature of infinity represents the absence of lines or sides in space, the absence of fixed rules, and the possibility of continuous expansion. Thus, life in infinite space is a life without limits, free, and without fixed rules for living. “Edge” means the outer limit, surface, area, or furthest part of something infinite. In this case, the combination of the

words “Galaxy’s Edges” creates an ambivalence. Thus, the title analogizes life in a boundless world that has defined boundaries at the same time.

The first essence of the title is life in an ever-evolving social world. Contemporary world presents a galaxy within the confines of a screen. Everyone can connect through computer screens, laptops, and mobile devices with an internet connection. Within this world, users can interact and exchange messages with others. Hence, screens offer a new way which human activities can be carried out within this medium. On the one hand, the screens provide infinite access. Everyone can connect freely without boundaries, supported by internet connection and social media. On the other hand, this infinitely connected life—which can reach even the most distant people—only occurs in cyberspace and is carried out virtually. However, these two sides overlap. It means that they communicate and share information infinitely, but the space is limited to computers and devices in cyberspace. The characteristics of the social phenomenon represented by the title are then illustrated in the content of the poem:

infinity

As the asymptotic lines race
on without touching,
You understand the
terror between them.

“Infinity” is the title of the hyperlink in one of the Kanji ideograms. This title defines the infinite nature of a galaxy, which represents the contemporary social world. The content of the poem describes the mechanism of infinity through the illustration of “asymptotic lines” racing without touching. Basically, asymptotic lines are straight lines related to curves, where the lines can be close to each other but cannot touch. As mentioned in the rest of the poem, the lines race but do not touch each other. The nature of the lines, which continue to move but never meet or touch, is oriented towards infinity. There is no meeting point between the two ends because they continue to race without limits, whether vertically, horizontally, or obliquely.

The analogy of this poem represents the nature of a galaxy and the dynamics of social life today. In a galaxy, space is infinite, as is the space of the digital screen with an internet connection. People continue to move around in it and search for various things they can achieve. They interact with each other without physical touch. They may feel close virtually but not in reality. Hence, this is a perfect illustration of an asymptotic line. Everyone is searching for each other and trying to get closer, but if it's still in the virtual world, they are not close. Although freedom and flexibility of connection and interaction are widely and easily offered, the space still has boundaries.

heart

You feel the thin walls press
in and out as if they alone
could stand against the relentless
empty grasp of space

The second stanza is titled “heart” as something that also has infinite qualities. The heart also refers to something that cannot be physically touched, but can always be approached. In addition, the heart is also the deepest part of human nature, character, and feelings. In

the poem, the heart is associated with feeling, thin walls, pressure, endurance, and empty space. First, the heart and the act of feeling are closely related because the heart is the medium through which a person can express emotions such as anger, disappointment, happiness, and others. Second, thin walls can represent a screen. A screen can display the feelings that a person expresses from their heart. Third, although the screen is a medium for expression, it is also a “press.” On the screen, information can flow freely in and out of every individual in the world. People can respond to each other in cyberspace and freely express their opinions. “As if they alone” refers to individuals who are engrossed in their own world in the real world, but are lively in cyberspace. That is why this poem revolves around the emptiness of “empty grasp of space.”

Illustrations of life in a galaxy are closely related to the way people interact with each other. They live together yet separately, feeling close but not touching each other directly, and can express their feelings while feeling pressured in spaces that spew out information. They try to survive because these spaces offer happiness and a quick dopamine, but it is temporary. Therefore, the crowded spaces on the screen are actually empty. Spaces that lack depth despite providing freedom. People who enter these spaces will continue to feel inadequate and be forced to keep filling and pouring themselves out, because they always think that empty spaces must be filled, without limits or without rules.

nothing

The word itself is
something. As you think this,
even the echo of the word
vanishes into the void.

The third title that correlates with the previous characteristics is “nothing.” This hyperlink contains a description of how words are ultimately swallowed up by emptiness. Metaphorically, words are something that a person thinks about. Words and thoughts have interrelated characteristics. Words can be created through a process in which a person imagines something so that it can be expressed. In words, all ideas and perspectives can be written and expressed. Hence, thinking also requires the process of examining or reading words. The process of thinking and expressing words can produce an idea. Thus, “word” and “think” represent each other.

People living in an infinite galaxy can think and express their perspectives in words. Everyone is trying to do this through social media, with some features such as upload, like, comment, and share. Therefore, a piece of information becomes endemic, spreading easily and quickly. This mechanism causes everything that is said to become an echo because one piece of information can give rise to many different perspectives, definitions, and opinions. Therefore, views on a piece of information become relative, depending on the context and the individual. It causes information to float in cyberspace. It cannot be considered right or wrong. Ultimately, the proliferation of definitions causes echoes and words to disappear into emptiness because they cannot be defined.

alone

You know this is a battle
you must fight alone.
You do not ask, then
who you are fighting.

The fourth stanza, titled “alone,” depicts the interaction in the digital age that is ambivalence. A person faces a world full of challenges. Each faces their own battles and struggles. Ironically, the battle does not seem real because they do not ask who they are fighting. Ultimately, each individual only fights with themselves and their own thoughts. Even though interactions and debates are carried out with other people in the virtual world, they do not know for sure who is behind them. It means that there is no certainty about who they are dealing with in virtual spaces. This condition is particularly prevalent on social media among various users.

Everyone can have two, three, or even several accounts on social media. They interact with each other using various usernames that may not necessarily match their real names. It makes identity in the unlimited virtual space fragmented and relative. Identity becomes plural because everyone has the freedom to name, define, and show who they are in different ways. In addition, the unrestricted and infinite exchange of information is an intangible and formless battle. One of the reasons this battle is considered abstract is the difficulty in verifying the information. Identifying the truth of information requires more effort than analyzing additional information in the virtual world. One must be able to study it directly in the real world. Thus, this method will enable them to know who they are dealing with.

who you are

If you knew this you might
be able to distinguish
between your ragged breaths
and the slow swirling of the galaxy.

People living in the galaxy or on screen must first determine themselves. “Who you are” contains poems that encourage everyone to recognize what they are facing. Two essential things must be distinguished in the context of life in the galaxy: “ragged breaths” and “slow swirling.” The ragged nature clings to humans as subjects, while the slow swirling is experienced by the world today, represented by the “galaxy.” These two aspects show a contradiction. Humans are developing rapidly with the information, making it difficult for them to breathe. Meanwhile, civilization is slowly switching because there is no final determination. For example, a piece of knowledge that has not been fully discussed, but the material immediately shifts to something else, because the information continues to flow.

There is a gap between human life in a congested and slow-swirling world. This incompatibility makes it difficult for them to determine who they are, what their identity is, and what they should refer to. However, even though humans live in a constant flow of information, if they can distinguish and adapt to their social circumstances, they will find themselves. Although this is difficult in an indeterminant world, at least humans can hold on to what they believe in most. This step can determine whether humans are aware of their position, both in their individual and social environments. This balance will prevent them from struggling to breathe amid the explosion and overflow of unregulated information.

“Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges” textually indicates life in infinite space that also has boundaries. It relates to social conditions in the digital age, where people experience digital disruption through computer screens, gadgets, and other devices. This poem has

ambivalent, metaphorical, and metonymic characteristics that express human existence in the digital age. Based on the content of the poem, these digital spaces are closely related to infinity, heart, nothing, alone, and who you are. People live in a world of infinite information and interaction, but they cannot engage in real life. It means that interaction is limited to the screen, like asymptotic lines that continue to move but never actually touch each other. This mechanism ultimately leads humans into a world of emptiness.

The society interacts freely through words and thoughts in digital space. However, this slowly causes them to float aimlessly in cyberspace, due to the overwhelming amount of information. Humans compete to voice their opinions, but almost nothing is ever settled. Information constantly shifts, changes, and evolves, leaving only traces behind. In this situation, humans are sometimes overwhelmed and unaware of what and who they are facing. Unfortunately, they are also unable to determine their identity because everything is constantly changing. Therefore, this poem suggests that humans should be more aware of their actual existence. Hence, humans must be able to balance the management of information and their awareness of the state of civilization.

2. Liquid Modernity in Hypertext Literary Frame

This second aspect examines the context of digital literature based on reading techniques. The first page of the screen indicates an opening description, introduction, and how to read the poem. Users or readers need to hover their mouse over the kanji symbols above the words (alone, lungs, nothing, is here, hearth, approach, infinity, who you are, depend, on what, and you think). When the reader hovers their mouse over a particular symbol, the words change to different content, except for “alone” and “lungs,” which have similar content. Readers can also click on the underlined words on the opening page to begin reading the poem. If readers want to pause the reading on a hyperlink without being distracted by changes in content, they can hold the mouse while hovering over the content.

There are also underlined words or phrases in every node. These contain hyperlinks added by the author or creator. With more than one hyperlink, readers can choose to continue reading from one node to another. The nodes are the reason why the text structure is non-linear. In printed poetry, the written text has beginning and ending. However, hypertext poetry disrupts this convention by not specifying which part is the beginning or ending.

This hypertext mechanism has three main tendencies: uncertainty, emancipation, and individuality. First, in terms of uncertainty, hypertext literature can be illustrated as a circle. The text continues to rotate and eliminates the original order of the text, eliminating the beginning, middle, and end. For example, if a reader starts reading at the first to second nodes, the reader is faced with two or three options. The text in the next node may be the same or different. It is also possible that the second texts are different, but the content of the third node is the same. It means that these choices make it impossible for the reader to guess the content, unless they take a screenshot and read it repeatedly. Hence, the technique of reading hypertext literature offers uncertainty.

Second, the hypertext literary model offers emancipation for readers. Emancipation means freedom from the shackles or constraints imposed on a person. Freedom also means that a person “feels free” from constraints and acts according to their desires. In hypertext literature, writers and creators offer emancipation through hyperlink options. Readers can freely compose their own poems without having to follow the initial

construction set by the author. Unlike print literature, which has a fixed sequence of verses, hypertext literature breaks down these stanzas, allowing readers to reconstruct the text. This emancipation also offers readers the opportunity to be co-author.

Third, individuality is one of the tendencies in hypertext poetry. The hypertext literary author not only creates poetry to be read but also makes it available to be rearranged by readers. The reader can compose their own texts and does not have to follow the pattern offered by the author. Each reader may have a different way of reading. Hence, it shows the transformation of the reader's role from "given" to "task." They are no longer given a fixed text but receive the task of composing it. It means that the construction of the text is entrusted to the reader to carry out and take responsibility for their actions and consequences.

The three hypertext literary tendencies in "Breathing at the Galaxy's Edge", prove that both the text and reading experience represent liquid modernity. In liquid modernity, individuals are no longer strictly restricted, regulated, and monitored (panoptic). They are liberated through the granting of emancipation and individuality and consequently face uncertainty. In addition, hypertext digital poetry also reflects a political nature. It can determine how humans think and act in life, through digital media and reading techniques. This model of digital literature also shows the intersection between what is solid and what is liquid. The transformation of literature from print to digital illustrates what Zygmund Bauman calls solid and liquid modernity. Solid modernity emphasizes things that have been predetermined. In contrast, in liquid modernity, everything can be reconstructed and is subject to change. In literature, solid mechanisms are found in printed literature or literary texts whose structure cannot be changed. Meanwhile, liquid literature is present in reconstruction mechanisms through hyperlinks and changing web windows.

D. CONCLUSION

"Breathing at the Galaxy's Edges" frames fluid modernity based on textual, contextual, and practical aspects. The poetic text shows how life in a galaxy or digital spaces is infinite. However, these spaces simultaneously lead humans to emptiness, loneliness, and a lack of awareness of who they are and who they are facing. It occurs in the current era when humans deal within digital screens. Screens connect them with others but also shrink them from the real world. In addition, the practice of reading digital literature offers three tendencies: uncertainty, emancipation, and individuality. These tendencies simultaneously frame an era of fluid modernity where nothing is fixed anymore. Humans continue to move, flow, and shift, making them unbound by fixed rules.

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