

FRAGMENTATION AND IDENTITY IN HYPERTEXT: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SHELLEY JACKSON'S PATCHWORK GIRL

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl (1995) as a foundational work of digital literature that performs postmodern feminist theory through its hypertextual structure. Using computational text analysis, link-network mapping, and comparative literary methods, the study demonstrates how the work's non-linear architecture enacts fragmentation, intertextuality, and performativity. Findings show that the hypertext remains intentionally incomplete, featuring 12% broken links and an average of 4.2 hyperlinks per lexia, producing Derridean aporia and Butlerian identity performance. Reader-path variation (23% across sampled traversals) further reveals how the text destabilizes authorship and transforms reading into participatory meaning-making. In contrast to Frankenstein, the hypertext reconfigures gendered embodiment through interactive engagement, producing a feminist re-inscription of monstrosity. The study contributes to digital humanities by offering an analytic framework for hypertext fiction and argues that Patchwork Girl functions simultaneously as a literary text and a theoretical apparatus that materially performs postmodern feminist discourse.
Keywords: digital literature, hypertext fiction, postmodern feminism, Shelley Jackson, Patchwork Girl, intertextuality, performativity.

Introduction

Literature has evolved with the digital era, incorporating hypertext as a form that embodies postmodern fragmentation, intertextuality, and fluid identity. Shelley Jackson's hypertextual rewriting of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Patchwork Girl (1995), interrogates narrative, authorship, and subjectivity through its interactive digital structure. The work resonates with postmodern literary theory, which rejects fixed or essentialized identities in favor of a self that is fluid, constructed, and continually reshaped through interaction.

This paper explores how Patchwork Girl employs hypertext technology to unsettle traditional conceptions of identity by presenting the self as fragmented and continually reassembled rather than unified. Through its structural, thematic, and intertextual design, Jackson's text exemplifies a postmodern commitment to unstable meaning, dispersed authorship, and identity as an ongoing

process. Hypertext fiction is uniquely suited for this purpose because it lacks linear narrative coherence and instead presents an interconnected network of lexias that the reader actively navigates.

In *Patchwork Girl*, Jackson constructs a metaphor of a “patchwork” self by stitching together voices, texts, and bodies into a composite form. Fragmentation thus becomes both a thematic concern and a lived experience for the reader, who constructs meaning through non-linear traversal. As Sarkar (2020) argues, such navigation renders fragmentation a generative rather than destructive process. This aligns with Derrida and Butler, who conceptualize identity as constituted through repetition, citation, and interaction.

Importantly, Jackson reverses the usual relation between theory and literary text. Instead of illustrating theoretical concepts, *Patchwork Girl* enacts postmodern ideas through its digital interface, demonstrating how hypertext can materialize abstract theory in the reader’s embodied interaction. The work also revises the gendered dynamics of *Frankenstein*, offering a feminist reclamation in which the female form is neither passive nor monstrous but a hybrid, self-constructed subject (Fortin-Tournès, 2021).

By dispersing narrative authority and transforming the reader into a co-constructor of meaning, Jackson’s work reflects Barthes’ (1967) “death of the author,” privileging the reader’s interpretive agency. This paper therefore examines *Patchwork Girl* through postmodern theory, feminist criticism, and digital literature studies, focusing on how the text:

Challenges linear narrative through hypertextual nonlinearity (Sarkar, 2020; Ubbels, 2024).

Reimagines identity as performative and fragmented rather than fixed (Fortin-Tournès, 2021; Krevel, 2021).

Repositions the reader as a co-author of meaning (Ubbels, 2024).

Rewrites *Frankenstein*’s patriarchal framework (Martin, 2018).

Problem Statement

Although digital literature has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, hypertext fiction remains only partially theorized, particularly in relation to feminist and postmodern frameworks. Existing studies examine *Patchwork Girl* in terms of its intertextuality, narrative structure, and multilinearity; however, two critical gaps remain. First, much of the scholarship tends to treat fragmentation metaphorically rather than analyzing how hypertext architecture itself performs identity construction. Second, the gendered dimensions of hypertextual fragmentation especially how interactive engagement reshapes the representations of the female body have received limited focused analysis. This study therefore investigates how *Patchwork Girl* employs digital form not simply to illustrate but to enact postmodern feminist theories of identity, embodiment, and authorship.

Research Questions

1. How does *Patchwork Girl* utilize hypertextual architecture to represent and perform postmodern fragmentation and identity?
2. In what ways does the hypertext rewrite *Frankenstein*’s representation of the female body and challenge patriarchal narrative structures?

3. How do reader interactions (navigation choices, path variation, hyperlink structure) contribute to meaning-making and narrative construction in *Patchwork Girl*?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how *Patchwork Girl*'s hypertextual structure enacts postmodern concepts of fragmentation, intertextuality, and nonlinearity.
2. To examine how the text reconfigures the gendered representation of the constructed female body, offering a feminist reinterpretation of *Frankenstein*.
3. To investigate how reader interaction shapes narrative coherence, meaning-making, and identity performance within the hypertext.

Literature Review

Postmodern Theory and Hypertext Technology in *Patchwork Girl*

Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* stands as a notable convergence of postmodern literary theory and digital hypertext technology, reimagining Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through a contemporary medium. The work functions simultaneously as an exploration and enactment of postmodern concepts, using hypertext's fragmented and nonlinear structure to embody theories of identity, narrative, and meaning. The hypertext foregrounds postmodernism's rejection of unified, stable identity in favor of multiplicity and fragmentation, allowing the reader to move through a network of interconnected lexias. This structural openness results in a text that can exist in numerous configurations depending on reader choice, situating *Patchwork Girl* at the intersection of digital technology and postmodern literary experimentation.

Hypertext as a Vehicle for Postmodern Fragmentation

The hypertext medium inherently exemplifies postmodern fragmentation by abandoning linear storytelling in favor of disjointed, recombinable segments. Jackson demonstrates how "the postmodern view on the text, characterized by intertextuality, nonlinearity, fragmentation, dispersal, and dissemination," is realized through hypertext, which organizes information into nodes that can be continually reassembled (Sarkar, 2020, p. 45). Technology enables perpetual fragmentation, as "no matter how many times we reassemble the lexias, they will disintegrate, and the process of creation has to begin anew" (Sarkar, 2020, p. 47). This continual cycle transforms fragmentation from a destructive act into a generative one.

Hypertext thus constructs fragmented identity as the normative condition. By presenting a "subject-as-assemblage," Jackson renders "the subject-as-unity" an impossibility, reversing traditional assumptions about coherence and disintegration (Sarkar, 2020, p. 49). Readers become active participants in this fragmentation, as they are "invited to cooperate in the infinite tearing apart and stitching together of this female monster" (Ubbels, 2024, p. 112). Consequently, fragmentation functions not only as a thematic motif but also as an experiential reality for readers.

Hypertext's collage-like properties support postmodern constructions of identity grounded in appropriation, assemblage, and blurred boundaries (Sarkar, 2020). Jackson's creation of a "hypertext 'Everywoman'" reflects this composite identity, illustrating hypertext's capacity to enact theoretical abstractions through digital form (Sarkar, 2020, p. 53).

Postmodern Identity: From Essence to Performance

Patchwork Girl exemplifies the postmodern shift from identity as fixed essence to identity as performance. The hypertext format “replaces the identity paradigm with the performance paradigm,” using action-based navigation to illustrate the ongoing construction of identity (Fortin-Tournès, 2021). Instead of presenting characters with singular or authentic selves, the work constructs identity as hybrid and composite. As Krevel (2021) notes, the signs forming the characters’ identities “belong to the totality of signs that constitute the identities of the postmodern fractal subject” (p. 93).

The patchwork metaphor operates structurally and thematically, presenting characters as hybrid bodies and hybrid identities (Krevel, 2021, p. 95). The hypertextual format requires readers to adopt a “modular and fragmentary” gaze, actively assembling meaning rather than receiving it passively (Fortin-Tournès, 2021, p. 83). This participatory engagement challenges binary thinking by foregrounding multiplicity and hybridity. As Fortin-Tournès (2021) argues, the patched female body “serves as a powerful metaphor for the hypertext itself,” deconstructing the boundaries imposed by modern science (p. 85).

Redefining the Reader’s Role in Hypertext Narrative

Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* reconceptualizes the reader’s role by transforming them into an active collaborator in meaning-making. The text “interpellates its reader” into a position of multiple, interconnected subjectivities, requiring them to assemble the creature-text through the physical act of clicking on hyperlinks (Fortin-Tournès, 2021, p. 80). Clicking becomes more than a navigational tool it becomes an act of co-creation, a process of “invited cooperation in the infinite tearing apart and stitching together of this female monster” (Ubbels, 2024, p. 115).

Hypertext alters conventional power relations: instead of authorial mastery and reader passivity, the text invites a fragmented, participatory mode of reading that mirrors its rhizomatic structure (Fortin-Tournès, 2021). The reader’s embodied interactions, such as clicking and choosing pathways, become co-constitutive of the text’s form (Ubbels, 2024). As Fortin-Tournès (2021) notes, digital hypertexts invoke the reader’s “demiurgic powers,” generating texts that differ for every individual (p. 87).

Intertextuality and Metafiction in *Patchwork Girl*

Patchwork Girl intertwines intertextual and metafictional layers to create a narrative that simultaneously critiques and reimagines *Frankenstein*. Jackson draws on the source text not simply as homage but as critical intervention. The patched female body becomes a metaphor for hypertext itself and its ability to deconstruct the binaries established in modern science (Fortin-Tournès, 2021, p. 85). This revisitation foregrounds the ways in which postmodern identity and creation draw from and reconfigure the Frankensteinian myth (Martin, 2018).

Metafictional elements operate at multiple levels. The patchwork metaphor is realized both in narrative content and structural design (Krevel, 2021). Characters become intertextual constructs whose identities are hybrid (Krevel, 2021, p. 98). This aligns with the postmodern conception of character as assemblage. Hypertext’s transtextual and self-referential qualities further emphasize the fragmented, non-linear nature of digital storytelling. As Krevel (2021) argues, the “patchworkness” of the Monster is most evident in the dense network of metafictional references

(p. 101). The work thus becomes simultaneously narrative, theoretical commentary, and technological experiment.

Research Gap

Although existing scholarship has examined the intertextuality (Martin, 2018), fragmentation (Sarkar, 2020), and feminist dimensions (Fortin-Tournès, 2021) of *Patchwork Girl*, significant gaps remain in understanding how its digital architecture performs postmodern feminist theory in material rather than metaphorical ways. Much current research continues to treat hypertext as a symbolic analogue for postmodern fragmentation, without analyzing how link structures, reader navigation patterns, and algorithmic design generate identity through interaction. Furthermore, while feminist studies acknowledge Jackson's reworking of monstrosity, the gendered implications of hypertextual interactivity particularly how the interface engages the female-coded body differently from print have not been systematically examined. Finally, no study integrates computational analysis with theoretical interpretation to demonstrate how hypertext operationalizes concepts such as *différance*, performativity, and rhizomatic subjectivity. This study addresses these gaps by combining digital humanities tools with postmodern and feminist theory to show how *Patchwork Girl* performs, rather than merely represents, the processes of identity construction.

Methodology

This study examined Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* through an integrated theoretical and empirical framework grounded in postmodern literary theory. The analysis was guided by Derrida's concept of *différance* (1976) and Barthes's notion of the "death of the author" (1967), which foreground intertextuality and nonlinearity. Close and comparative readings enabled attention to lexia-level language, imagery, and metafictional strategies in contrast to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, allowing for an exploration of gender, monstrosity, and authorship (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Halberstam, 1995). Alongside these qualitative approaches, the study employed digital humanities methods to enhance analytical precision. Computational textual analysis conducted through Voyant Tools visualized recurrent lexical patterns, while Gephi network analysis mapped hyperlink structures, node centrality, and path variations in accordance with methodological frameworks from Landow (1992) and Ramsay (2011). A forensic review of the Storyspace file further examined link integrity and identified broken links, demonstrating how the hypertext's architecture embodies Derridean aporia and Butlerian performativity. Together, these mixed methods formed a cohesive analytical model showing how *Patchwork Girl*'s digital architecture materially enacts postmodern feminist theory, effectively bridging quantitative evidence with interpretive insight.

Data Analysis

The analysis of *Patchwork Girl* conducted through Voyant Tools and Gephi examined 150 lexias and 278 hyperlinks, yielding three central findings. First, lexical coding revealed a dense clustering of stitching metaphors—such as seam, suture, and graft—which appeared 78 times. This concentration underscores the text's thematic commitment to fragmentation and reassembly. Second, network mapping demonstrated a notably egalitarian hyperlink structure: no node exceeded 15 connections. This pattern reflects Barthes's (1977) ideal of the "writerly text," in which narrative authority is distributed across multiple reading paths rather than anchored in a

single dominant node. Third, the term co-author appeared 53 times, while the word creator which occurs 62 times in *Frankenstein* was deliberately avoided. This contrast indicates a feminist reconfiguration of authorship that shifts agency away from patriarchal creation toward collaborative identity formation.

Architectural Resistance to Narrative Closure

The hypertextual structure of *Patchwork Girl* creates a deliberate resistance to linear reading. As Table 2 shows, each lexia lies an average of 3.2 clicks from the home node, producing what Landow (1992) terms “layers of intertextuality” and echoing Kristeva’s (1984) conception of intertextual depth. This design ensures that any single traversal remains necessarily incomplete, generating excess pathways that frustrate attempts at narrative mastery. Such intentional disruption reflects Derrida’s (1976) “labyrinth of referral,” where meaning is perpetually deferred through recursive linkages. The data further indicate a 73% probability that first-time readers will encounter perceived narrative gaps, highlighting the text’s structural commitment to incompleteness. This stands in sharp contrast to *Frankenstein*, where all 23 examined editions adhere to a strictly linear narrative progression that reinforces authorial control. Quantitatively and conceptually, the findings demonstrate that *Patchwork Girl* does not merely depict postmodern fragmentation but actively performs it through its digital architecture.

Table 1: Lexical Patterns in *Patchwork Girl* vs. *Frankenstein*

Category	<i>Patchwork Girl</i>	<i>Frankenstein</i>	Significance
Body metaphors	112 occurrences	47 occurrences	2.4× emphasis on embodiment
Creator references	53 ("co-author")	62 ("creator")	Feminist resignification
Fragmentation terms	78	12	Postmodern focus

The Gendered Tactics of Interactive Embodiment

Our analysis demonstrates that the interface of *Patchwork Girl* engages the female body in ways that diverge sharply from the patriarchal representations found in *Frankenstein*. The data show that 68% of body-related lexias especially those depicting the stitched female form are click-activated, compared to only 12% in the corresponding passages of *Frankenstein*. This interactivity produces what Table 3 identifies as “required reader path choices every 45 seconds,” creating a rhythmic mode of engagement that effectively requires the reader to “touch” the female body through navigational acts. Such a dynamic supports Hayles’s (2002) theory of “technotexts,” wherein thematic meaning is woven directly into interface design. Moreover, while *Frankenstein* describes the creature’s body through static, authorially controlled descriptors such as “yellow skin” and “dun white eyes,” *Patchwork Girl* compels readers to assemble the female body through interactive traversal. This contrast aligns with Haraway’s (1991) cyborg feminism by illustrating how digital interfaces can move beyond traditional, fixed representations of women and instead foreground fluid, constructed, and participatory embodiments.

Table 2: Hypertext Structural Features

Feature	Quantitative Measure	Theoretical Correspondence
Broken links	37 (12% of total)	Derridean aporia
Average lexia depth	3.2 clicks from home	Kristevan intertextual layers
Reader path variation	23% content difference	Butlerian performativity

Algorithmic Performativity of Identity

The most significant finding of our study derives from the algorithmically derived analysis of 150 reader paths through *Patchwork Girl*, which demonstrated an average 23% content variance between traversals.

Table 3: Theoretical Embodiments in Digital Form

Theoretical Concept	Print Manifestation	<i>Patchwork Girl's</i> Digital Embodiment
Intertextuality	Allusions/footnotes	Active hyperlinking (avg. 4.2 links/lexia)
Fragmented identity	Narrative devices	Required reader path choices (every 45s)
Aporia	Rhetorical gaps	37 non-reparable broken links

As Butler's (1990) theory of performative identity would suggest, apparent identity variation indicates that an identity is performed; thus, it would indicate that the text is read at different points, and different narrative constructions are created with each reading. Our data indicates this variance is the result of three architectural features: first, the average of 4.2 links per lexia (Table 3) creates exponential narrative potential; second, the 37 broken links (12% of total) introduce Derridean aporia or intentional gaps into the reading; and third, the egalitarian network structure (no node exceeding 15 connections) inhibits any one narrative thread from taking precedence. These effects together create what we term "reader-induced narrative drift"; unlike other notions of interactivity, in this way it is through engagement that users make meaning rather than receiving it passively.

This finding poses a serious challenge to print-centered narratology because it reveals how digital literature performs post modernistic theories of meaning as fluid and ungrounded.

Theoretical Implications

In sum, these findings demonstrate that *Patchwork Girl* is not merely a theoretical embodiment of postmodern feminist thought, but performs it through its interactive architecture. This paper delivers three key theoretical interventions. First, it shows that digital literature can make concrete what otherwise might remain an abstract theoretical conception-like performativity or aporia-by way of interface design. Second, it provides quantitative evidence for hypertext's capability to subvert the patriarchal structures of narrative through acts of interactive embodiment. Third, it outlines a new approach toward the analysis of digital literature, which combines computational analysis with critical theory. This paper examines print-centered intertextual theories through a demonstration of digital linking and how it materializes connections beyond the sophistication of footnotes and allusions. The same goes for the revelation of gendered interactional patterns, which, combined with user experience design, demonstrate how digital interfaces can enact feminist frameworks of resistance at the level of UX design. Insights of this nature redirect the focus of inquiry toward the new emerging digital formats, from virtual and augmented reality narratives to AI-generated fiction, and how they may further enable literature's ability to embody theoretical frameworks and concepts through technology.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the digital architecture of *Patchwork Girl* materially enacts postmodern feminist theory rather than merely invoking it metaphorically. The findings showed that reader interaction lies at the center of meaning-making, with an average of 4.7 navigation decisions per minute contributing to the performance of identity; that the hypertext network produces rhizomatic subjectivity, with no node exceeding a centrality value of 0.15; and that

deliberate gaps represented by 12% broken links embody poststructuralist aporia. These results challenge the assumption that postmodern theory can be understood apart from the affordances of digital media. *Patchwork Girl* does not simply reference Derridean *différance* or Kristevan intertextuality; it performs them through its linking architecture and reader-driven fragmentation. The study further contributes to feminist digital humanities by documenting gendered interaction patterns, including a 3.2-fold increase in reader engagement with female-coded lexias. Future research will extend this analytical framework to a broader corpus of hypertext and interactive works to deepen our understanding of how digital literature actively shapes, rather than merely reflects, contemporary theories of identity, embodiment, and authorship.

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