

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a cultural movement in its own right. Considering it solely as a successor of modernism, would be reductive and misleading, and would do gross injustice to its unique richness and complexity. Nevertheless, if one is to theorize a major point of difference between the two movements, one could state that postmodern poetics is marked by “playfulness” whereas modernism could be characterized as an “aesthetics of anxiety.” (A comparative analysis of the representative modernist and postmodernist literatures might help to understand this point. Note, for instance, how they deal with themes of fragmentation of the self and alienation of the subject.) Postmodernist beliefs tend to a multiculturalist pluralism and relativism. In doing so, they can too easily or naively accept what is undoubtedly the case, that the West now believe they live in societies in which traditional perspectives are fractured.

Postmodern literature is often defined as a style or trend which emerged in the post–World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a reaction against Enlightenment thinking and Modernist approaches to literature. It is marked by metafictionality, involving self-referentiality.

Metafiction is a narrative that does not simply tell a story but punctuates the very act of storytelling by blurring the binary of fact/fiction, by problematizing the relation between author and characters, by questioning the notion of authorship, and overall, by including reflections on the theory of fiction within the so-called fictional space itself.

Postmodernism has been defined as an “incredulity towards metanarratives.” Metanarratives, otherwise known as grand narratives or master narratives, aim to offer a totalizing schema for interpretation of events and experiences – historical or contemporary. For instance, Marxism could run the risk of being a metanarrative insofar as all the problems of the world are reduced to the question “class”; or, scientism could be defined as metanarrative insofar as the truth/authenticity of every experience or every event is asked to be measured in terms of scientific findings. The postmodernist considers metanarratives to be the product of totalitarian intentions and dismiss them as involving the fallacy of essentialism. As opposed to the grand narratives, the postmodernist foregrounds the small narratives (*petits récits*). Small narratives subvert the assumption of any discourse being coherent or monolithic and promote the possibility of pluralism. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*)

Postmodern experience is constituted by inevitable exposure to “hyperreality.” Broadly speaking, hyperreality refers to the world of simulation and the world of the virtual. In these worlds, images constitute reality – be it the proliferation of images on news channels or on the internet. Images, in the postmodern world, do not necessarily *represent* a given reality. Images *are* reality. A simulacrum is a copy without an original. These images can be doctored and edited, and can even be created on the desktop, for instance. Images and videos on social media, for example, have a tremendous impact on determining our sense of reality. Thus the difference between the virtual and the actual/physical reality collapses. The virtual does not correspond to the actual; the virtual *creates* the actual. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Žižek, *The Reality of the Virtual*)

Postmodernism problematizes the notion of truth, at least in two ways. First, the questioning of metanarrative is reflected in how postmodernism, both in theory and in practice, interrogates the idea of an absolute Truth with an upper-case “T,” and demonstrates that truths always exist in plural versions. Truth is not a “universe,” but a kind of a “multiverse” – having multiple versions and variations. However, in the final analysis, the supremacy of one particular truth over others is determined by the structures of power in a given socio-economic situation. Secondly, the hyperreal and the virtual realities, in the postmodern world, influence the construction of a world of “post-truth” where truth-claims, devoid of objective and traditional idea of “facticity,” can be made, and even discursively substantiated, with control over information and data which can be generated by any and every user. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*)

Postmodernism questions the notion of a singular “centre.” For instance, there is no central meaning to a text; a text is always already open to multiple readings. Since the notion of an “authorial intention” promotes the idea of central meaning, the institution of the Author, with an upper-case “A,” is declared dead. At best, the biography of an author could be considered as *biographemes* – small narrative units comprising discursive codification of events – which, in the end, are nothing but one set of textual units among hundred others which could be used to intertextually engage with literature. The Author is redefined as “paper author” or a discursive construct. (Barthes “Death of the Author” & “From Work to Text”; Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”)

Inconclusiveness is the hallmark of postmodernism. The postmodern narrative not only problematizes the Aristotelian formula of a chronological and tripartite division of a plot (beginning, middle, and end); more fundamentally, it subverts the idea of “narrative closure” by evoking, as in Fowles’s text, the possibility of multiple endings. In general, definitive and conclusive statements are considered reductive and essentialist, and ideally, a postmodernist ought to doubt/avoid such statements. One could think of the enigmatic character of Sarah Woodruff as an example in this regard. (Zaretsky, “Postmodernism and Psychoanalysis”)

Postmodernism **blurs binaries**, particularly the binary of low culture/high culture. Ideally, a postmodern narrative, unlike a Joycean text, would be accessible and readable to anybody and everybody. However, a hermeneutically equipped reader would find more reasons to appreciate a postmodern text, let us say a late Hitchcock movie, than an ordinary viewer. There are more things in a postmodern movie than can be dreamt of by an ordinary viewer, albeit one can still enjoy it without exploring these things. (Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan But were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*)

Postmodern narratives employ the technique of **rewriting an existing narrative**. Such rewriting could be politically subversive, or in some cases, could be “**empty parody**” or “**pastiche**.” Examples include *Foe*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* etc.

-Reader, as opposed to Author, becomes a crucial site for meaning production in postmodernism. The reader is not just a theoretical discourse for a Roland Barthes or a Stanley Fish but, both in personal and impersonal terms, he/she/it remains a constant **point of reference in postmodern texts**.

Historical background of postmodernism:

The postmodern era started with WWII and began roughly in the 1950’s. This era was a philosophical movement. There were many historical events that happened in this era.

The American society was politically highly conservative and even reactionary in this period. It has led to the intensification of racism and ethnic tension and to the US military intervention

in Korea, Vietnam and partially to some other countries under the pretext of the help of the local government, or governmental opposition against communism and totalitarian practices.

After the World War II, USA has become an economic and political superpower of the world competing for the spheres of influence with the USSR which finally led to the so-called “Cold War” between the former so-called East Block represented East European countries influenced and controlled by the USSR and the so-called “West Block” led by the USA. While most of the European countries including the East Block suffered of the war destruction after the World War II and had to rebuild their industries, economies and infrastructure, the USA could easily convert its military large scale production into civic industrial production and develop its economy continuously. On the other hand, in the USSR and, under its control, also in East European countries a communist totalitarian regime led by the Stalinists was established in the 1950’s. This was in contrast with the US political regime which could easily develop its traditional principles of democracy and democratic government.

The USA thus became a highly economically and technically advanced society and such items as a car, television, and a fridge became the symbols of the American comfort, high standard of living, consumerism and the so-called **American Dream**. The USA became a mass society described by Irving Howe above (Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction) in which advanced technology (cars, airplanes, information and communication technologies) and media (television, radio) have fostered a further development of democracy (control of the government by independent media, access to information) and has enabled a massive dissemination of popular culture such as popular culture including popular music (blues, jazz, rock), literature (comic strips, comic books, pornography, the western, love stories), film, TV serials, soap operas, sitcoms, fashion and others.

Despite all these events, American society of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s was highly conformist as many critics and political commentators suggest (enjoying the economic prosperity and high standard of living, most people were satisfied and mostly did not protest against the growing contradictions in the US. society).

postmodernism arose in the 1950s, in a period of extraordinary capitalist stability and prosperity. quite paradoxically, despite its economic progress and a political tradition of democracy, the American society of the 1950's was politically also reactionary, In the early 1950s, American leaders repeatedly told the public that they should be fearful of subversive Communist influence in their lives. Communists could be lurking anywhere, using their positions as school teachers, college professors, labor organizers, artists, or journalists to aid the program of world Communist domination. This paranoia about the internal Communist threat—what we call the Red Scare—reached a fever pitch between 1950 and 1954, when Senator Joe McCarthy launched a series of highly publicized probes into alleged Communist penetration of the State Department, the White House, the Treasury, and even the US Army.

The people suspicious of the any connection with communism or communist countries were politically persecuted and many of them even lost their jobs only because being suspicious or being reported as suspicious of supporting communist ideas, ideologies or countries.

Characteristics of Postmodern literature:

➤ Irony, playfulness, black humor

Postmodern authors were certainly not the first to use irony and humor in their writing, but for many postmodern authors, these became the hallmarks of their style. Postmodern authors will often treat very serious subjects—World War II, the Cold War, conspiracy theories—from a position of distance and disconnect, and will choose to depict their histories ironically and humorously.

➤ Pastiche

Many postmodern authors combined, or “pasted” elements of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice, or to comment on the writing of their contemporaries. Thomas Pynchon, one of the most important postmodern authors, uses elements from detective

fiction, science fiction, and war fiction, songs, pop culture references, and well-known, obscure, and fictional history.

➤ **Intertextuality**

An important element of postmodernism is its acknowledgment of previous literary works. The intertextuality of certain works of postmodern fiction, the dependence on literature that has been created earlier, attempts to comment on the situation in which both literature and society found themselves in the second half of the 20th century: living, working, and creating on the backs of those that had come before.

➤ **Metafiction**

Many postmodern authors feature metafiction in their writing, which, essentially, is writing about writing, an attempt to make the reader aware of its fictionality, and, sometimes, the presence of the author. Authors sometimes use this technique to allow for flagrant shifts in narrative, impossible jumps in time, or to maintain emotional distance as a narrator.

➤ **Historiographic metafiction**

This term was created by Linda Hutcheon to refer to novels that fictionalize actual historical events and characters: Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, for example, features a scene in which George Washington smokes pot.

➤ **Temporal distortion**

Temporal distortion is a literary technique that uses a nonlinear timeline; the author may jump forwards or backwards in time, or there may be cultural and historical references that do not fit: Abraham Lincoln uses a telephone in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. This technique is frequently used in literature, but it has become even more common in films.

➤ **Technoculture and hyperreality**

In his essay of the same name, Frederic Jameson called postmodernism the "cultural logic of late capitalism." According to his logic, society has moved beyond capitalism into the information age, in which we are constantly bombarded with advertisements, videos, and product placement. Many postmodern authors reflect this in their work by inventing products

that mirror actual advertisements, or by placing their characters in situations in which they cannot escape technology.

➤ **Paranoia**

Many postmodern authors write under the assumption that modern society cannot be explained or understood. From that point of view, any apparent connections or controlling influences on the chaos of society would be very frightening, and this lends a sense of paranoia to many postmodern works.

➤ **Faction**

Faction is very similar to historiographic metafiction, in that its subject material is based on actual events, but writers of faction tend to blur the line between fact and fiction to the degree that it is almost impossible to know the difference between the two, as opposed to metafiction, which often draws attention to the fact that it is not true.

➤ **Magical realism**

Arguably the most important postmodern technique, magical realism is the introduction of fantastic or impossible elements into a narrative that is otherwise normal. Magical realist novels may include dreams taking place during normal life, the return of previously deceased characters, extremely complicated plots, wild shifts in time, and myths and fairy tales becoming part of the narrative. Many critics argue that magical realism has its roots in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, two South American writers, and some have classified it as a Latin American style.