

## What's the Difference Between Modernism and Postmodernism in Literature?

It is difficult to give a clear definition of modernism and postmodernism. It can be said that both are cultural currents that encompass a range of artistic expressions in painting, sculpture, literature, and architecture over a certain period (although not clearly demarcated).

### Modernity

A time period which started in the 17th century with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It is characterised by a scientific, secular worldview and discourses of progress and rationalisation.

Modernism emerged around the time of the second industrial revolution (1870-1920), which was marked by the decline of stable social classes, the beginning of professionalism, and a sense of urban alienation.

Postmodernism generally refers to cultural phenomena with certain characteristics that emerged after the Second World War. When exactly postmodernism starts vary according to national contexts and individual critics.

### Postmodernity

The period after modernity. Some critics argue it started after WW2, whereas others situate its beginning in the 1980s or even 1990s.

The boundary between modernism and postmodernism in many cases is fuzzy. There was some programmatic disavowal of modernism on the part of postmodern writers, and yet postmodernism continued with and developed some modern ideas and techniques. Whether postmodernism should be seen as a definite break with modernism or its continuation is a matter of ongoing critical debate.

## Comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism

| Modernism                           | Postmodernism                       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Adheres to Western hegemonic values | Contests Western hegemonic values   |
| Focus on the writer                 | Focus on the reader                 |
| Focus on interiority                | Focus on exteriority                |
| Alienation                          | Collective voices                   |
| Unreliable narrator                 | Ironic narrator                     |
| Rejection of realism                | Ambivalence towards realism         |
| Literature is self-contained        | Literature is open and intertextual |
| High-brow genres                    | Mixing of high- and low-brow genres |
| Rejection of literary conventions   | Parody of literary conventions      |
| Metafictional                       | Metafictional                       |
| Idiosyncratic language              | Simple language                     |

## Modernism and Modernity

Modernism is frequently characterised as a rejection of modernity and all its consequences – urban alienation, capitalism, changing social relations, modern inventions. But individual stances towards modernity vary from author to author and from piece to piece. It's not unusual to encounter contradictory attitudes within one literary piece. This very struggle for meaning or an outright refusal of coherent meaning is very much a staple of modernism.

Attitudes towards modernity can be broadly divided into the following categories:

- Glorification
- Rejection
- Escapism

But mostly, modern attitudes towards modernity weren't straightforward. Some aspects were celebrated; the camera, for instance, was considered an apt metaphor of human perception – always fragmentary and incomplete. Other aspects, such as rampant capitalism or instrumental reason, were condemned (however, writers were, willy-nilly, enmeshed in the emerging market relations).

Some moderns find solace in a glorified past. Others refuse coherent meaning and representation in the face of unacceptable reality. Fiction is for many writers a bulwark against soulless utilitarianism.

## **Formal Characteristics of Modernism in Literature**

Modernism in literature is instantly recognizable. It is characterised by:

- Refusal of coherent meaning
- Rejection of realism
- Subjectivity
- Split temporalities
- Unstable identity
- Idiosyncratic language
- Metafiction
- Experimental forms
- Split identities
- Focus on interiority
- Unreliable narrator

Modern writers give primacy to form. This results in experimentalism, which breaks with 19<sup>th</sup> century realist conventions. Modernism celebrates unreliable or even split narrators. In Cortázar's short story 'Axolotl' the narrator switches mid-sentence from the man who describes the axolotls to one of the axolotls:

I saw a rosy little body, translucent (I thought of those Chinese figurines of milky glass), looking like a small lizard about six inches long, ending in a fish's tail of extraordinary delicacy, the most sensitive part of **our** body.

The modern narrator tends to be the main protagonist of the story. His or her personal involvement in the events usually precludes objectivity. Narrators habitually cheat readers, conceal certain events, or change from person to person. The modern narrator has none of the authority of his or her realist counterparts.

Modern fiction often explores the theme of identity, which is more fluid and unstable than in pre-modern literature.

Modern fiction privileges interiority over exteriority, a good example of which is the hallmark of modern literature – the stream of consciousness.

## **Modern Conception of Time**

The linear conception of time is challenged by moderns. Here are some of the reasons:

- Darwin's theory of evolution
- The creation of time zones
- Bergson's psychological conception of time

Partly a result of Darwin's theory of evolution, moderns didn't see the self as a unitary being anymore. The human form was conceived as the accumulation of earlier evolutionary stages. Some modern writers played with the idea that all of the evolutionary past was contained in the present human form.

In 1884, time zones were proposed at the International Meridian Conference because telegraph and trains connected previously separated corners of the world. Awareness of different time zones further eroded the linear sense of time.

Bergson understood time as an accumulation of all the previous moments in a body with intentions directed towards the future. This psychological concept of time influenced many modern writers, such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, who used the stream of consciousness in an attempt to represent the wanderings of the mind, which jumps randomly between different events in the past, fragments of the present, and expectations towards the future. Subjective time and the relativity of memory are celebrated rather than the linear sense of time that was typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism.

## **Stream of consciousness**

A literary device that purports to reflect the protagonist's chain of thoughts without the mediation of the narrator.

## **Modern Science**

Einstein's theory of relativity demonstrated that measurements of time and space cannot be divorced from the observer and their relative position. Even scientific theories weren't considered objective anymore. Modern scientific theories are seen as fragmented, subjective, and particular – there is no one absolute and correct way of describing the world.

These insights influenced modern fiction which is highly subjective. Modern writers don't believe that the world can be divorced from the accounts of it.

Late modernity witnessed a rapid technological progress. Technology was either celebrated by moderns (futurists) or criticised as degrading to humans. The metaphor of machine was often used to describe the condition of workers under capitalism. To some authors, workers were nothing more than an appendix to machines. The human body was also depicted as a machine by Taylorism, whose aim was to subdue the body and to render it as efficient as possible.

External objects are only relevant inasmuch as they are perceived and invested with meaning by the protagonist.

Another typical trait of modernism is metafiction.

## **Metafiction**

Narrative that draws attention to its fictional status.

Metafiction may draw attention to style. It's not unusual to encounter a modern narrator who wonders "out loud" what register or what person is the most appropriate to tell the story. This may result in an idiosyncratic language, which requires a great deal of interpretative effort on the part of the reader.

## **Postmodernity and Postmodernism**

Postmodernity refers to the historical period after the Second World War, although in many cases not immediately after. It was marked by an array of social and historical phenomena, which shaped our contemporary world, such as advanced capitalism, globalisation, and rapid technological progress.

In a British context, postmodernity has its own historical particularities. After the Second World War, Great Britain lost a significant number of its colonies, which entailed a loss of economic influence (the UK couldn't rely anymore on manpower and resources from nearly one quarter of the globe). After the war, labour shortages prompted Great Britain to invite workers from its former colonies, which resulted in the multicultural society we know today.

## **Formal Characteristics of Postmodernism in Literature**

- Ambivalent stance towards realism
- Split temporalities
- Ironic narrator
- Metafiction
- Fragmentation
- Multiple points of view
- Focus on exteriority
- Pastiche

- Irony
- Black humour
- Intertextuality

Postmodern texts are usually written in clear, everyday language, even though their structure can be quite complex. A good example of this is Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, which contains ten separate beginnings of books, which are connected by the adventures of the Reader whose reading is constantly frustrated. Calvino used the metaphor of a diamond to reflect his writing practice – the language is crystal clear but the structure is multi-faceted and fragmented.

Postmodern texts tend not to engage in innocent, linear story-telling. Similarly to modern works, they draw attention to their status as fiction and the act of writing or reading. Unlike modernism though, postmodern texts refers to both themselves and the external world. Protagonists are often aware that they are in fiction.

Postmodernism works by multiplication – multiple narrators, perspectives, or takes on the same story. This represents postmodern skepticism towards single, unitary, and totalizing narratives (which cannot account for a variety of social experiences).

Whereas modernism focuses on interiority and psychological, postmodernism recovers the preoccupation with the external and the construction of worlds.

Postmodernism uses pastiche, black humour, and parody in order to contest traditional literary conventions. Postmodernism exists in a state of permanent paradox: parody draws strength from conventions and subverts them at the same time.

Postmodern texts are also frequently intertextual.

## **Intertextuality**

The relationship between various texts. It can be achieved by mentioning, quoting, or parodying other texts. Intertextuality is by no means unique to postmodernism, but in this period, this literary device is extensively used.

## **Postmodernism – Challenging Hegemonic Values**

Postmodern writers tend to challenge hegemonic values, such as heteronormativity, imperialism, and traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity.

## **Heteronormativity**

Promoting heterosexuality as the norm to which all members of society should conform.

People that previously didn't have a voice, now started to gain visibility. They were, among others:

- Ethnic minorities
- Women

- LGBT+ community

The questioning of heteronormative values in Britain was made possible by such socio-historical conditions as the trauma of the Second World War, decline of empire, and shifts in economic models.

With the dissolution of empire emerged a number of prominent writers who challenged imperialism and British hegemony. The dominance of the British publishing scene by white male authors was slowly contested by subaltern voices.

Women also gained more visibility. With the shift from product economy to service economy, women could find a job more easily than men, thus gaining economic independence. Postmodernity gave rise to different forms of feminism.

Sexual liberation is also a hallmark of this period both for heterosexual people and, to a certain extent, for the LGBT+ community. A range of prominent homosexual authors, such as Joe Orton, gained prominence.

Postmodernism is skeptical of grand theories and narratives. Many postmodern writers, for instance, deem history, as a narrative constructed for certain purposes, which are not innocent (such as glorification of a nation). Every historical narrative involves a process of selection, editing, and interpretation on the part of the author, and thus cannot be objective. Postmodern writers frequently recover forgotten histories of marginalized people.

## **Critique of 19th Century Realism**

Both modernism and postmodernism are disillusioned with 19<sup>th</sup> century realism.

Realism attempts to sustain the illusion that the narrated world is a plausible version of the one we live in. You can think of realist narration as a transparent window through which the reader looks at the narrated world (in contrast, modern and postmodern windows either distort the narrated world or draw attention to the frames). Realism works as a tacit agreement between writer and reader; the former does everything to sustain the illusion of reality and the latter suspends disbelief.

Underpinning realism is the conviction that the world can be described in an objective manner. Modernism and postmodernism lose this faith in objectivity, and they focus instead on subjective modes of narration.

Modern writers disagree with realist ones the real world can be merely translated, transmitted or reflected – every act of writing is essentially creating a new world. Modernism rejects realist conventions, such as detailed descriptions or the third-person impartial narrator.

Both modernism and postmodernism recognize that the fictional world is mediated through frames (particular narrative choices which are always subjective). Whereas realism tries to conceal these frames by rendering the language as “transparent” and unobtrusive as possible, modern and postmodern writers draw attention to language and narration.

Postmodern writers argue that every reading of a work of fiction creates a different version of the text in the minds of readers, as every interpretation is unique. This multiplicity of texts goes against the impartiality and singularity of vision that realist writers believed in.

According to realism, the fictional world exists in its entirety and is analogous to the real world. Postmodern writers object to these views for the following reasons:

- The world is partly indeterminate
- Objects may have emotional coloration and a privileged space
- Some objects might be ambiguous if the sentences describing them are ambiguous

As a fictional world cannot exist outside of language, only things that are described by the narrator exist in a fictional world. Yet, it is simply impossible to depict the infinite number of objects that should exist in a world that is analogous to ours. The fictional world doesn't exist in its entirety like the real one.

Postmodern writers also point out that narration isn't such an innocent act as realism implies. Every act of telling involves selection, organization, and interpretation on the part of the narrator. This partiality of narration is suppressed by realism, which for postmodern writers is dishonest and potentially dangerous.

The referential function of fiction is also exposed as another promise that realism can't keep. From a referential point of view, what happens in fiction is literally nothing.

## Referential

Relating to the external world rather than to language.

Modernism gradually rejects the referential function. For instance, *Finnegan's Wake* doesn't refer to anything other than language. But this creates a problem, as coherence is lost. Modernism is a cul-de-sac – there is nowhere to go from this radical refusal of meaning. Literature was becoming a jumble of incoherent sentences that no-one could understand.

Postmodernism offers a solution. It preserves the realist referential function ironically by being both self-reflexive and referential. Postmodernism, at its heart, is characterised by paradox.

## Bibliography

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