

POSTMODERN LITERATURE. NOTES

Postmodern literature is a type of literature that came to prominence after World War II. Learn about how postmodernism in literature rejects many literary conventions and embraces new ones.

Postmodern Literature Defined

Postmodern literature is a form of literature which is marked, both stylistically and ideologically, by a reliance on such literary conventions as **fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference.** **Postmodern writers** tend to reject outright meanings in their novels, stories and poems, and, instead, highlight and celebrate **the possibility of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning,** within a single literary work.

Postmodern literature also often **rejects the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and literature,** as well as the distinctions between different genres and forms of writing and storytelling. Here are some examples of stylistic techniques that are often used in postmodern literature:

- **Pastiche:** The taking of various ideas from previous writings and literary styles and pasting them together to make new styles.
- **Intertextuality:** The acknowledgment of previous literary works within another literary work.
- **Metafiction:** The act of writing about writing or making readers aware of the fictional nature of the very fiction they are reading.
- **Temporal Distortion:** The use of non-linear timelines and narrative techniques in a story.
- **Minimalism:** The use of characters and events, which are decidedly common and non-exceptional characters.
- **Maximalism:** Disorganized, lengthy, highly detailed writing.
- **Magical Realism:** The introduction of impossible or unrealistic events into a narrative that is otherwise realistic.
- **Faction:** The mixing of actual historical events with fictional events without clearly defining what is factual and what is fictional.
- **Reader Involvement:** Often through direct address to the reader and the open acknowledgment of the fictional nature of the events being described.

Many critics and scholars find it best to define postmodern literature against the popular literary style that came before it: **modernism.** In many ways, postmodern literary styles and ideas serve to dispute, reverse, mock and reject the principles of modernist literature.

For example, **instead of following the standard modernist literary quest for meaning in a chaotic world, postmodern literature tends to eschew, often playfully, the very possibility of meaning.** The postmodern novel, story or poem is often presented as a parody of the modernist literary quest for meaning. Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* is a perfect example of this. In this novel, the protagonist's quest for knowledge and understanding results ultimately in confusion and the lack of any sort of clear understanding of the events that transpired.

What is postmodernism? What are the Characteristics of Postmodern Literature?

Post-modernism is the term used to suggest **a reaction or response to modernism in the late twentieth century.** So postmodernism can only be understood in relation to Modernism. At its core, Postmodernism rejects that which Modernism champions. While postmodernism seems very much like modernism in many ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends. Modernism, for example, tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history, but presents that fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Postmodernism, in contrast, doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. In literature, it

used to describe certain characteristics of post–World War II literature, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc. and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature.

Characteristics of Post-modernism:

Because of some similar characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, critics some time become confuse to differentiate one from the other. It would be more helpful if we discuss the characteristics of post-modernism in comparison and contrast to modernism.

Like modernism, postmodernism also believes the view that there is no absolute truth and truth is relative.

Postmodernism asserts that **truth is not mirrored in human understanding of it, but is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own personal reality.** So, facts and falsehood are interchangeable. For example, in classical work such as King Oedipus there is only one truth that is “obey your fate”. In contrast to classical work in postmodern work such as in Waiting for Godot, there is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative here.

Whereas Modernism places faith in the ideas, values, beliefs, culture, and norms of the West, Postmodernism rejects Western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and often rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms.

Whereas Modernism attempts to reveal profound truths of experience and life, Postmodernism is suspicious of being "profound" because such ideas are based on one particular Western value systems.

Whereas Modernism attempts to find depth and interior meaning beneath the surface of objects and events, Postmodernism prefers to dwell on the exterior image and avoids drawing conclusions or suggesting underlying meanings associated with the interior of objects and events.

Whereas Modernism focused on central themes and a united vision in a particular piece of literature, **Postmodernism sees human experience as unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, fragmented, discontinuous, "jagged," with no one specific reality possible.** Therefore, it focuses on a vision of a contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous, indeterminate, unfinished, "jagged" world.

Whereas Modern authors guide and control the reader’s response to their work, **the Postmodern writer creates an "open" work** in which the reader must supply his own connections, work out alternative meanings, and provide his own (unguided) interpretation.

Characteristics of Postmodern Writing:

As in postmodernism, all ideas are new, so sometimes it becomes difficult and confusing to properly understand these terms.

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 writers are very frustrated for World War II, the Cold War, conspiracy theories.** They try to amalgamate it from indirect way so, irony, playfulness, black humor comes. In fact, several novelists later to be labeled postmodern were first collectively labeled black humorists. : John Barth, Joseph Heller, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Bruce Jay Friedman, etc. **It's common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way.**

Some examples of texts that bear the above features--Roland Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text. The central concept of Joseph Heller's Catch-22 is the irony of the now-idiomatic "catch-22", and the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Thomas Pynchon in particular provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly wordplay, within a serious context. The Crying of Lot 49, for example,

contains characters named Mike Fallopiian and Stanley Koteks and a radio station called KCUF, while the novel as a whole has a serious subject and a complex structure.

Pastiche:

Related to postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. In Postmodernist literature, 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. For example, William S. Burroughs uses science fiction, detective fiction, westerns; Margaret Atwood uses science fiction and fairy tales; Thomas Pynchon, uses elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction. In Robert Coover's 1977 novel *The Public Burning*, Coover mixes historically inaccurate accounts of Richard Nixon interacting with historical figures and fictional characters such as Uncle Sam and Betty Crocker. Pastiche can also refer to compositional technique, for example the cut-up technique employed by Burroughs. Another example is B. S. Johnson's 1969 novel *The Unfortunates*; it was released in a box with no binding so that readers could assemble it however they chose.

Intertextuality:

Intertextuality is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It can include an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. **The term "intertextuality" has, itself, been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966.** As critic William Irwin says, the term "has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence."^[1]**An important element of postmodernism is its acknowledgment of previous literary works.** The intertextuality of certain works of postmodern fiction means **the relationship between one text** (a novel for example) **and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history.** Critics point to this as an indication of postmodernism's lack of originality and reliance on clichés. Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style. In postmodern literature this commonly manifests as references to fairy tales – as in works by Margaret Atwood, Donald Barthelme, and many other – or in references to popular genres such as science-fiction and detective fiction. An early 20th century example of intertextuality which influenced later postmodernists is "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" by Jorge Luis Borges, a story with significant references to Don Quixote which is also a good example of intertextuality with its references to Medieval romances. Don Quixote is a common reference with postmodernists, for example Kathy Acker's novel *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*. Another example of intertextuality in postmodernism is John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* which deals with Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same name.[citation needed] Often intertextuality is more complicated than a single reference to another text. Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*, for example, links *Pinocchio* to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Also, **Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* takes on the form of a detective novel and makes references to authors such as Aristotle, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Borges.**

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. Though metafiction is primarily associated with Modernist literature and Postmodernist literature, but is found at least as early as Homer's *Odyssey* and Chaucer's 14th century *Canterbury Tales*. Some examples of metafiction literary texts: *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, Stephen King's *Misery* and *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, *The Counterfeiters* by André Gide, John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, *Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea* by Michael Morpurgo, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *Oracle Night* by Paul Auster, *More Bears!* by Kenn Nesbitt, and Cy Coleman's 1989 Tony Award best musical, *City of Angels*.

Historiographic metafiction:

This term was created by **Linda Hutcheon** to refer to **novels that fictionalize actual historical events and characters**. Notable examples include Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, for example, features a scene in which George Washington smokes Pot. Linda Hutcheon coined the term "**historiographic metafiction**" to refer to **works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures**; notable examples include *The General in His Labyrinth* by Gabriel García Márquez (about Simón Bolívar), *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes (about Gustave Flaubert), *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow (which features such historical figures as Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, Booker T. Washington, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung), and Rabih Alameddine's *Koolhaas: The Art of War* which makes references to the Lebanese Civil War and various real life political figures. Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* also employs this concept; for example, a scene featuring George Washington smoking marijuana is included. **John Fowles deals similarly with the Victorian Period in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In regard to critical theory, this technique can be related to "The Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes.**

Temporal distortion:

This is a common technique in modernist fiction: fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features in both modern and postmodern literature. Temporal distortion in postmodern fiction is used in a variety of ways, often for the sake of irony. In this literary device **the writer may jump forwards or backwards in time**, or there may be cultural and historical references that do not fit. For example, In *Flight to Canada*, Ishmael Reed deals playfully with anachronisms, Abraham Lincoln using a telephone for example. Time may also overlap, repeat, or bifurcate into multiple possibilities. For example, in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" from *Pricksongs & Descants*, the author presents multiple possible events occurring simultaneously—in one section the babysitter is murdered while in another section nothing happens and so on—yet no version of the story is favored as the correct version.

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 writers 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. For example, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents characters who are bombarded with a "white noise" of television, product brand names, and clichés. The cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and many others use science fiction techniques to address this postmodern, hyperreal information bombardment. Steampunk, a subgenre of science fiction popularized in novels and comics by such writers as Alan Moore and James Blaylock, demonstrates postmodern pastiche, temporal distortion, and a focus on technoculture with its mix of futuristic technology and Victorian culture.

Paranoia:

Paranoia is the belief that there's an ordering system behind the chaos of the world is another recurring postmodern theme. For the postmodernist, no ordering system exists, so a search for order is fruitless and absurd. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, long-considered a prototype of postmodern literature, presents a situation which may be "coincidence or conspiracy -- or a cruel joke". This often coincides with the theme of technoculture and hyperreality. For example, in *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut, the character Dwayne Hoover becomes violent when he's convinced that everyone else in the world is a robot and he is the only human.

Magical realism:

Arguably the most important postmodern technique, **magical realism is the introduction of fantastic or impossible elements into a narrative that it seems real or 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. Jorge Luis Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia*, regarded by many as the first work of magic realism. Apart from this, Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth Graver's "The Mourning Door" are some examples of magic realism.

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