

RESEARCH TITLE

THE POSTMODERN NOVEL

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Abstract

The term "postmodern" requires careful investigation. Since 1960s, readers have noticed a difference in some of our fiction; attempting to discuss this new fiction without long circumlocution, critics invented a term: postmodern fiction. Postmodern novel is a form of literature that characterized by the use of metafiction, un reliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and which often the matizes both historical and political issues. Several themes and techniques are indicative of writing in the postmodern era. These techniques are often used together. For example, metafiction and pastiche are often used for irony. These are not used by all postmodernists, nor is this an exclusive list of features.

Key Words: postmodern, postmodern novel, metafiction, intertextuality, irony

Introduction

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 authors 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. (Brian, 1987).

Postmodern literature also often rejects the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and literature, as well as the distinction between different genres and forms of writing and storytelling. 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 modern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* is a perfect example of this. In this novel, the protagonist's quest for knowledge and understanding result ultimately in confusion and lack of any sort of clear understanding of the events that transpired. (Ibid).

Felluga Dino says that postmodern literature is literature characterized by reliance on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the unreliable narrator; and often is (though not exclusively) defined as a style or a trend which emerged in the Post- World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a response against dogmatic following of Enlightenment thinking and modernist approaches to literature. (Dino, 2013).

Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, tends to resist definition or classification as a " movement". Indeed the convergence of postmodern literature with various modes of critical theory, particularly reader-response and deconstructionist approaches, and the subversions of the implicit contract between author, text and reader by which its works are often characterized, have led to pre-modern fictions such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) and Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century satire *Tristram Shandy* being retrospectively considered by some as early examples of postmodern literature. (Clifford, 2007).

It would seem that the ideas of postmodernism fit the historical fiction model well and has helped to reinvigorate it as a genre and as a place where some historians feel comfortable exploring. In a rather interesting experiment at combining the two, the well-known historian Simon Schama wrote in 1991 *Dead Certainties* .This work explored two widely reported deals with a 100 year gap between them. In this work Schama assessed the complex relationship between history and fiction noting that the historian can never entirely reconstruct a dead world in its completeness. Writing a year later(May1992) Cushing Strout noted that the result was 'problematic for both literary and historical reasons'(Strout, 1992). Strout declares that postmodern literature

is a form of literature that is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and which often thematizes both historical and political issues. This style of experimental literature emerged strongly in the United States in the 1960s through the writings of authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Kathy Acker, Philip K. Dick and John Barth.

Elsewhere in the world postmodernism has helped to breath fresh light on historiographical and novelistic practices. In the case of South Africa, Michael Green has argued that a similar correlation between nationalism and the rise of historical fiction occurred there in the early twentieth century as it did in Britain in the nineteenth. Green takes a postmodernist viewpoint of South African historiography and fictional writing. He sees a problem in the predominantly social history writing for South Africa and argues for a fix through viewing the past as historicization. (Green,1999).

Linda Hutcheon argues that the postmodern historical novel marks the return of 'plot and questions of reference' to postmodern fiction. Where both plot and referentiality were either disavowed in radical metafictional experimental writing- as in *Barth's Lost in the Funhouse* and *Coover's Pricksongs and Descants* – or endlessly problematized, because their authors' primary aims were to 'explode realist narrative conventions' (Hutcheon, 1988), by contrast, a work of 'historiographic metafiction' is still committed telling a long and involving story, full of believable characters, which can be enjoyed by the reader in the manner of nineteenth-century realism. The postmodern historical novels is therefore what the readers might think of as 'the acceptable face of postmodernism' in literary fiction, influenced by postmodern ideas about fictionality and its relationship with reality, but also popular with a general readership on a mass scale. Postmodernists often challenge authorities, which has been seen as a symptom of the fact that this style of literature first emerged in the context of political tendencies in the 1960s. This inspiration is, among other things, seen through how postmodern literature is highly self-reflexive about the political issues it speaks to. As Hutcheon's term suggests, historiographic metafiction is a self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history.

The Postmodernist novel embodies history and has been robbed of its meaning, and will therefore gradually be drawn towards elements of gratification: the line, the suspense, the irony. It is the principle of pleasure and has entered a new stage. It is the aesthetic criterion in consumer choices. It is an extension of the principle of pleasure. It is not the passion for limited experiences. It is known that curiosity is one of the foundations of postmodern society. The novel should focus on information about the world of To stop taking the special approach towards the interpretative effect of information, to remove it from its real place and remove it, and there are Fentasia, Akzut, folkloric and popular traditions, revival of ethnic and regional tendencies, and the ethnography of sects and religions.(Umberto,1990). The postmodern novel The purity of the language in its entirety is no longer characterized by poetic writing and great eloquence, replaced by dialectic dialects, foreign words, the fragmentary and detached linguistic reality, jokes, humor, and irony, the idea that displaces the center of heterosexuality and destroys absolute identity. The field to the hybrid identity, the created genetics, and all that Escarpeta referred to as the concept of "non- purity" in

the field of aesthetics. Hence, the postmodernist novel, when opposed to the modern meaning of history, abandons the new saying and the evolutionary argument in favor of rethinking the forms of the past, says Umberto Eco, a real answer to the feeling of mistrust and uncertainty.

Definition and Development of the Postmodern Novel

The postmodern novel is a radical experiment that emerges when a writer feels the customary tropes of fiction have been exhausted. For the postmodernist, the well-worn genre of the novel is insufficient and no longer capable of conveying the imagination of the writer or the magnitude of historical events. (Thomas,1993).

Several critics agree that postmodern fiction is a product of the Post-World War II period. At that time, many of the major modernist writers, such as Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, had died. Other writers, including William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, had ceased publishing innovative and experimental work. Critics also tend to concur that postmodernism is an extension of rather than a decisive break or deviation from modernism, the defining literary movement of the twentieth century. Many different authors have been labeled postmodernist. These writers include Thomas Berger, Richard Brautigan, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco and others. Most critical discussion, however, focuses on American writers publishing since the late 1950's (Ibid).

Like the modern novel, the postmodern novel is subversive; that is, it counters tradition notions of plot, narrative, chronology, and character development. Postmodern novels are often described as self-reflexive—that is, they center on the nature of fiction itself and are written as though fiction is independent of society, reality, and any realm outside itself. The origins of the "autonomous" postmodern novel can be found in the essays of early modernist writer such as Oscar Wilde, who argued against Aristotle's premise that art imitates life. On the contrary, Wilde contended that life imitates art. (Stuart,2006).

Novelists spent most of the twentieth century elaborating on Wilde's thesis of art for art's sake—the idea that for art to be art it had to be independent of society and of political or extra literary considerations because the novel had been so thoroughly grounded in realism. Realist novels originated the eighteenth century and featured, among other literary devices, narratives that imitated the structure and style of biographies and histories so that their characters seemed real.

That this realism, however, was only the kind of pretense, or willing suspension of disbelief, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it, was recognized early on by other eighteenth century writers, such as Laurence Sterne. In his novel *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne commented on his own fiction-making. In other words, he shattered the realistic frame of his own story to call attention to himself as narrator. Sterne's example, in the short term, earned him few followers, and it was not until James Joyce's playful introduction of the artist as narrator and character in the figure of Stephen Dedalus that modern novelists and their postmodernist successors focused on fiction as a self-sustaining universe of its own (Ibid).

As with all stylistic eras, no definite dates exist for the rise and fall of postmodernism's

popularity. 1941, the year in which Irish novelist James Joyce and English novelist Virginia Woolf is used as rough boundary for postmodernism's start. Irish novelist Flann O'Brien completed *The Third Policeman* in 1939. The literary theorist Keith Hopper regards *The Third Policeman* as one of the first that genre they call the postmodern novel. (Keith, 2009).

Researcher Shannon Williams emphasizes in his study "**Characteristics of the novel in postmodernism**" that the decisive distinction between story and novel in modern and postmodern literature is based on the fact that the modernist story allows the writer to create an organized universe that allows the reader to derive expressions of human experience from the complexities of modernist existence. Shannon compares the function of the story of the myth as it establishes and reinforces the system of public beliefs upon which society is installed. While the story in postmodern literature seeks to apply the chaos of contemporary existence to the structure of form and content, and to dismantle the narrative laws and norms accepted to the falsehood of the myth that promotes belief systems based on illusion. Thus the modernist narrative despite its deep critical stance, seeks to support and sustain the regime, while the postmodern narrative poses a complete threat to the regime (Hassan,1987).

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a number of prominent critics emerged who were distinguished by their studies of postmodern literature in general, and the characteristics and technologies of post- modern narrative in particular. The most famous of these names are ' Linda Hutchion, Patricia Wow, Brian McHale, Larry McCaffrey and Winch Omendsen'. This is in addition to the critical effort of postmodern novelists such as William Gans and John Barth (Clavier, 2008).

Some of the earliest examples of modern literature are from the 1950s: William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*(1955), Valdimir Nabokov's *Lolita*(1955), and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*(1959) (Andersen, 2007). It then rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with the publication of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in 1961, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* in 1968, Kurt Vonnegust's *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, and many others. Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is " often considered as the postmodern novel, redefining both postmodernism and the novel in general" (Stefan, 2006).

The 1980s, however, also saw several key works of postmodern literature. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* and this is also the era when literary critics wrote some of classic works of literary history, changing American postmodern literature: Works by Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, and Paul Maltby who argues that it was not until the 1980s that the term "postmodern" caught on as the label for this style of writing(Paul, 1991).

A new generation of writers- such as David Foster Wallace, Willam T. Vollmann, Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, Zadie Smith, Chuck Palahniuk, Jennifer Egan, Neil Gaiman, Carole Maso, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem – and publications such as McSweeney's, *The Believers*, and the fiction pages of *The New York*, herald either a new chapter of postmodernism or possibly post-postmodernism (Barth, 1995). Many of these authors emphasizes a strong urge for sincerity in literature.

Postmodern novel embraces cultural consciousness as well as prevailing literary and

philosophical tendencies. Bakhtin points out in *The Dialogic Imagination* that the world has become polyglot and the novel actively creates polyglot world-something that is quite opposed to the previous tendencies in all genres as they used to present 'eras of closed and deaf monoglossia'. (Bakhtin, 1982). He further suggests, " In contrast to other major genres, the novel emerged and matured precisely when intense activation of external and internal polyglossia was at its peak of its activity; this is its native element. If the postmodern culture is observed, it can be found that the postmodern world is fraught with the horrors of the wars, inundated with technology and products of mass consumption and affected by the manipulative power of mass media.(Ibid).

Postmodern novel on the one hand, asserts the principles whether conventional or unconventional and on the other hand, it deliberately undermines them. In other words, the principles have been operating in our society, but for many these principles are either 'passé' or do not hold their ground in the current scenario. Postmodernism does not deny the existence of truth, but it certainly conditions this truth. It admits its own provisionality and is conscious of it. It contests and negates the idea of universal truths as the possibility of truths within realm of language is termed as untenable by Derrida and Rorty. In this context, Peter Berry rightly suggests:

" It has been said that there are three versions of every story, your version, my version, and the truth, but the case here is more complicated than that, since all the available terms are purely linguistic – there is no truth about these matters which exists securely outside language". (Berry,1995).

The postmodern novel moves away from the center and with this movement, the novel shifts from the centers such as London, New York, and Toronto and narrates the stories of the periphery such as William Kennedy's *Albany* and Robert Kroetsch's *Canadian West* . This move from the center to the periphery leads to liberating spirit, which deconstructs the binaries and privileges the other.(Hutcheon, p.61). Postmodern novels raise a number of specific issues regarding the interaction between historiography and fiction, issues surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity, the question of reference and representation, the intertextual nature of the past, and the ideological implication of writing about history.

Postmodern novel was born and developed under certain historical and culture background. A comparatively general understanding is that it is the direct result of the western turbulent social life after the Second World War. People were so shocked by the fascists' appalling ferocity during WWII that they started to doubt the social moral standard and values they had been holding all along.(Sarup, 1993).

Common Themes and Narrative Techniques in the Postmodern Novel

Several themes and techniques are indicative of writing in the postmodern era. These themes and techniques are often used together. For example, metafiction and pastiche are often used for irony. These are not used by all postmodernists, nor is this an exclusive list for features. Umberto Eco posed an important question: Can there be a novel that does not tend to

escape into fiction, yet it retains its ability to obey? He believes that "the return of the

plot" has been admired by admiring a number of valuable pages in the literature of Dumas. He also believes that the rediscovery of the plot and the ability to be satisfied have been recognized by postmodern American theorists.(Umberto,1990).

Postmodern literature is a literature characterized by reliance on narrative technique such as fragmentation, paradox, and the unreliable narrator; and often is defined as a style or a trend which emerged in the Post-World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a response against dogmatic following of Enlightenment thinking and modernist approaches to literature (Dino ,2013).

Linda Hutcheon claimed postmodern fiction as a whole could be characterized by the ironic quote marks that much of it can be taken as a tongue-in-check. This irony, along with black humor and the general concept of "play" (related to Derrida's concept or the ideas advocated by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*) are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism (Hutcheon,1988). Though the idea of employing these in literature did not start with the postmodernists(the modernists were often playful and ironic) they became central features in many postmodern works.

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 is common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way: for example, the way Heller and Vonnegut address the events of World War II. The central concept of 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's *The Crying of Lot 49* in particular provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly wordplay, within a serious context. For example, it contains characters named Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks and radio station called KCUF, while the novel as a whole has a serious subject and a complex structure. (Barth, 1995).

The stylistic techniques of postmodernism novel include the frequent use of intersexuality, metafiction, temporal distortion, magical realism, faction, reader involvement and minimalist techniques of reduction, omission and suggestion.(Habib, 2011). These techniques can be found most clearly in the works of such writers as Samuel Beckett, Kurt Vonnegut, Jorge Luis, Borges, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Rhys, Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon and many others.

Intertextuality

Since postmodernism represents a decentered concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations, much of the focus in the study of postmodern literature is on intertextuality: the relationship between one text and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history (Allen, 2000). 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 others-or in references to popular genres such as sci-fi and detective fiction(Orr, 2003). 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 as Aristotle, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Borges (Cuddon, 1977). 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 (Acker, 1986). References to *Don Quixote* can also be seen in Paul Auster's post-modern detective story, *City of Glass*. 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 (Rima, ed, 1993).

The Postmodern Novel as Pastiche

Related to postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. In postmodernist literature this can be a homage to or a parody of past styles. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of modern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity: for example, William S. Burroughs uses science fiction, detective fiction, westerns; Margaret Atwood uses science fiction and fairy tales; Umberto Eco uses detective fiction, fairy tales, and science fiction, and so on. (Barry, 2002).

Though *Pastiche* commonly involves the mixing of genres, many other elements are also included (metafiction and temporal distortion are common in the broader pastiche of the postmodern novel). 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 (Hutcheon, 2004). Pastiche can instead involve a composition technique, for example the cut-up technique employed by Burroughs. Another example is B.S. Johnson's 1969 novel *The Unfortunate*; it was released in a box with no binding so that readers could assemble it however they chose. (Brian, 2001).

Metafiction

Metafiction is essentially writing about writing or "foregrounding the apparatus", as it's typical of deconstructionist approaches (Dyer, 2004) making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader and generally disregards the necessity for the "willing suspension of disbelief." For example, postmodern sensibility and metafiction dictate that works of parody should parody the idea of parody itself (Bernabe & Ayala, 2007). Metafiction is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling. For example, Italo Calvino's 1979 *If on a winter's night a traveler* is about a reader attempting to read a novel of the same name. Kurt Vonnegut also commonly used this technique: the first chapter of his 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is about the process of writing the novel and calls attention to his own presence throughout the novel. Though much of the novel has to do with Vonnegut's own experiences during the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut continually points out the artificiality of the center

narrative arc which contains obviously fictional elements such as aliens and time travel (San Juan: *Isla Negra*, 2005). Similarly, Tim O'Brien's 1990 short story cycle *The Things They Carried*, about one Platoon's experiences during the Vietnam War, features a character named Tim O'Brien; though O'Brien was a Vietnam veteran, the book is a work of fiction and O'Brien calls into question the fictionality of the characters and incidents throughout the book. One story in the book, " *How to Tell a True War Story*", questions the nature of telling stories. Factual retellings of war stories, the narrator says, would be unbelievable, and heroic, moral war stories don't capture the truth. David Foster Wallace in *The Pate King* writes that the copyright page claims it is fiction only for legal purposes, and that everything within the novel is non-fiction. He employs the character in the novel named David Foster Wallace (Luttazzi, 2004).

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is another important aspect of postmodern literature. Various elements, concerning plot, characters, themes, imagery and factual references are fragmented and dispersed throughout the entire work (Lehmann, 2005). In general, there is an interrupted sequence of events, character development and action which can at first glance look modern(Roth, 2016). Fragmentation purports, however, to depict a metaphysically unfounded, chaotic universe. It can occur in language, sentence structure or grammar. In *Z213: Exit*, a fictional diary by Greek writer Dimitris Lyacos, one of the major exponents of fragmentation in postmodern literature, an almost telegraphic style is adopted, devoid, in most part of articles and conjunctions. The text is interspersed with lacunae and everyday language combines with poetry and biblical references leading up to syntax disruption and distortion of grammar. A sense of alienation of character and world is created by a language medium invented to form a kind of intermitten syntax structure which complements the illustration of the main character's subconscious fears and paranoia in the course of his exploration of a seemingly chaotic world.

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