

Postmodernism

positioning and pushback

Literary timeline:

Renaissance (1500-late 1600s--Shakespeare, Milton)

Enlightenment (1700-1800--Voltaire, Rousseau)

Romanticism (1800-late 1800s--*Jane Eyre [1847]*)

Transcendental movement (1830-1860--Whitman, Thoreau)

Victorian period (1837-1900--George Eliot)

Existentialism (1850-today--Sartre, Camus)

Realism and Naturalism (mid 1800s-early 1900s--Chekhov's "Misery")

Modernism (early 1900s-1965--*To the Lighthouse*)

The Beat Movement (1945-1965--Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs)

Postmodernism (mid 1965-today--Burroughs, DeLillo)

Contemporary works (Annie Proulx, Donna Tartt)

'Postmodern': literature of the last half of the 20th century.

Postmodern philosophy emphasises the elusiveness of meaning and knowledge, often expressed in postmodern art as a concern with representation and an ironic self-awareness.

Epistemology: How do we know what (we think) we know?

Postmodernism is characterized by the belief that society is no longer governed by history or progress. Postmodern society is highly diverse, with no "grand narrative" guiding its development.

Grand narrative: One story that connects and explains all of humanity.

Postmodernism

--Characterized by irony, self-reflexivity, and knowing allusions galore. (Think *The Simpsons*)

--Often has absurd, playful, or comic aspects, and sometimes makes special use of parody, pastiche, and of references to other texts and artifacts.



Uses of the term 'post'- Modernism

***after* modernism**

extends the tendencies already present in modernism, or works out questions and problems implicit in modernism without a break from core assumptions

***contra* modernism**

subverting, resisting, opposing, or countering features of modernism

the historical era following the modern

a historical time-period marker, recognizing cultural, ideological, and economic shifts without a new trajectory or privileging of values

artistic and stylistic eclecticism (aesthetic postmodernism)

hybridization of forms and genres, combining "high" and "low" cultural forms and sources, mixing styles of different cultures or time periods, dehistoricizing and re-contextualizing styles in architecture, visual arts, literature, film, photography

"global village" phenomena: globalization of cultures, races, images, capital, products"information age"

redefinition of nation-state identities, which were the foundation of the modern era; dissemination of images and information across national boundaries, a sense of erosion or breakdown of national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities; a sense of a global mixing of cultures on a scale unknown to pre-information era societies.

Beat movement as pre-cursor to Postmodernism

Consensus was becoming a **negative** label to independent thinkers; it seemed dangerously close to its partial synonyms: **conformity, compliance, and acquiescence**.

For the beat generation, the main values of democracy, such as diversity and difference, were endangered by social and cultural phenomena like obedience to authority, with uniformity and conventionality impeding on the freedom of expression.

Consequently, several intellectuals took a **dissenting, more critical stance** interested in exploring the impact of **mass consumption, material success, and the distribution of power in society**.

Modernism

vs

Postmodernism:

- Attempts to reveal profound truths of experience and life.
- Tries to find depth and interior meaning beneath the surface of objects and events.

- Suspicious of being "profound".
- Prefers to dwell on the exterior image and avoids drawing conclusions or suggesting underlying meanings associated with the interior of objects and events.

Modernism

vs

Postmodernism:

- Focuses on central themes and a united vision in a particular piece of literature.
- Modern authors guide and control the reader's response to their work.
- Modernist novels mourn the loss of a coherent world.

- Sees human experience as unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, fragmented, "jagged," with no one specific reality possible.
- Postmodern writers create an "open" work in which readers must supply their own connections, work out alternative meanings, and provide their own (unguided) interpretation.
- Postmodern novels celebrate and revel in the chaos of an incoherent world.



"You all passed the exam, except for Gerard, who failed to meet the required minimum usage of the word 'multiplicities' "

Elements of postmodernism:

- **Irony, absurdity, playfulness & black humour** : treating serious subjects as a joke, sometimes with emotionally distant authors. Playfulness is central to postmodernism; it reinforces the idea that there is no organizing principle in a chaotic world.
- **Distrust:**
 - of theories and ideologies;
 - of the author/narrator, undermining his control of one voice
 - of modern assumptions about culture, identity, & history
- **Pastiche** (mixing genres) as an homage to or a parody of past literary styles
- **Metafiction:** making the artificiality of writing apparent to the reader, i.e. deliberate strategies to prevent the usual suspension of disbelief, drawing attention to the conventions of literature

- **Technoculture and hyper-reality:** worlds and characters inundated with information, focused on technology in everyday life, swamped by products and bombarded by advertising, ambiguity about what's real and what's simulated.
- **Maximalism:** sprawling canvas and fragmented narrative i.e. looking disorganised and filled with playful language for its own sake.
- **Minimalism:** short, 'slice-of-life' stories where readers have to use their own imaginations to create the story. Unexceptional characters, economy with words. Spare style, lacking adjectives, adverbs and meaningless details.

- **Historiographic metafiction:** fictionalising actual events and figures from history
- **Faction:** blending fact and fiction, especially historical novels or those using real living personalities e.g. world politicians or celebrities.
- **Temporal distortion:** events can overlap, repeat, or multiple events can occur simultaneously, often to achieve irony.
- **Magic realism:** imaginary themes and subjects, with a dream-like quality, mixing the real with the fantastic, surreal and bizarre. Timeshifts, dreams, myths and fairy stories as part of the narrative, arcane erudition, inexplicable events, elements of surprise or abrupt shock.
- **Intertextuality:** quotations, references and allusions, designed to make apparent that every text absorbs and transforms some other text somewhere.

Test:

1. What important event took place on December 16, 1773?



I do NOT BELIEVE IN LINEAR TIME. THERE IS NO PAST AND FUTURE: ALL IS ONE, AND EXISTENCE IN THE TEMPORAL SENSE IS ILLUSORY. THIS QUESTION, THEREFORE, IS MEANINGLESS AND IMPOSSIBLE TO ANSWER.



WHEN IN DOUBT,
DENY ALL TERMS
AND DEFINITIONS.



Potential Problems with Postmodernism

- A crushing sense that there is nothing new to create.
- A focus on dystopian narratives without suggested avenues for avoiding the dystopia.
- Stylistic masks without content: the meaning is in the mimicry.

Where are we today?

The **post-postmodern** viewpoint, or **metamodernism**, seems to be taking the "postmodern condition" (postmodernity) as a given, not a question or *problem*.

The metaphors of "network" and "convergence" in creative subcultures (e.g., musicians, artists, designers, writers) are seen to be live operations or conditions received and re-performed, not just abstractions. From this more recent perspective, living in remixed hybridity is thus *obligatory*, not a choice, since it is the foundation for participating in a living, networked, globally connected culture.

Two videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAT9V2wHx3M> David Foster Wallace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKylw9fs8T4> Taylor Mali “Speak with Conviction”

What does Mali’s poem have to do with postmodernism?

Sources

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