

The Advent of Postmodernism

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 December 2018

Keywords

Postmodern literature, contrast, advent

ABSTRACT

Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is seen to resist definition or classification as a "movement". Postmodern literature converges with various modes of critical theory, particularly reader response and deconstructionist approaches, and subverts the implicit contrast between author, text and reader by which its works are often characterized.

While there is little consensus on the precise characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature, as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to a precursor. For example, a postmodern literary work tends not to have a precise conclusion and is most usually open ended, there is recalcitrance and it seems to parody a conclusion. It gives more weight to chance, uses metafiction, paradox, pastiche, intertextuality and thus questions distinctions between high and low cultures. Postmodern fiction is multigeneric and heteroglossic.

Both modern and postmodern literatures represent a break from 19th century realism. In character development, both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness, in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the "stream of consciousness" styles of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot. In addition, both modern and postmodern literatures explore fragmentariness in narrative and character construction. The Waste Land is often cited as a means of distinguishing modern and postmodern literature.

Modernist literature sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis, or Freudian internal conflict, a problem that must be solved, and the artist is often expected to solve it. Postmodernists, however, often demonstrate that this chaos is insurmountable; the artist is impotent and the only recourse against "ruin" is to play within the chaos. Playfulness is present as an important aspect of many modernist works for example Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and they may seem very similar to postmodern works, but with postmodernism playfulness is central to the narrative discourse of the text.

Once again, like in most stylistic eras, we cannot precisely point the advent of postmodernism. 1941, the year in which James Joyce and Virginia Woolf both died, is sometimes used as a rough boundary for postmodernism start. The prefix "post" however does not necessarily imply a new era. Rather it could also indicate a reaction against modernism in the wake of the Second World War. It could also imply a reaction to significant post-war events: the beginning of the Cold War, the civil rights movement in the United States, post colonialism and the rise of personal computer.

Some critics further argue that the beginning of postmodern literature could be marked by significant publications or literary events. For example, some say that the beginning of postmodernism coincides with the publication of John Hawkes' *The Cannibal* in 1949, the first performance of *En attendant Godot* in 1953 (*Waiting for Godot*, 1955). For others the beginning is marked by moments in critical theory: Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign And Play" lecture in 1966 or as late as Ahab Hassan's usage in "The Dismemberment of Orpheus" in 1971. Though postmodernist literature does not include everything written in the postmodernist period, several post-war developments in literature such as The Theatre of Absurd, The Beat Generation, and Magic Realism have significant similarities.

The work of the Surrealists, and the Theatre of the Absurd, broke down the barriers between drama, fiction, and poetry and under mind the idea of logical coherence in narration, formal plot, regular time and sequence, and psychologically explained characters. "The Beat Generation" and its ideology also contributed to the rise of postmodernism. So, did Magic Realism in which supernatural elements are treated as mundane.

From the texts referred to as canonical in postmodernism, it can be inferred that postmodernism in literature is not an organized movement with leaders or central figures; therefore it is more difficult to say if it has ended or when it will end. However it can be said that that postmodernism has its high watermark in the 60s and 70s with the publication of *Catch-22* in 1961, *Lost in the Funhouse* in 1968, *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. Some declared the death of postmodernism in the 80s with a new surge of realism represented and inspired by Raymond Carver. Tom Wolfe in his 1989 article "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" called for a new emphasis on realism in fiction to replace postmodernism. With this new emphasis on realism in mind, some declared *White Noise* in 1985 or the *Satanic Verses* in 1988 to be the last great novels of the postmodern era.

As mentioned earlier, postmodernism uses a variety of techniques together especially meta-fiction and pastiche are

often used instead of fragmentariness, playfulness, heteroglossia and polyphony related to Derrida's concept or the ideas advocated by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* and Mikhail Bakhtin's essay on dialogic imagination are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism. Though the idea of employing these in literature did not start with the postmodernists, they became central features in many postmodern works.

Postmodernism represents a decentered concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations and 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. 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 reference to fairy tales- as in works by Margaret Atwood, Donald Barthelme, and many others- or in references to popular genres such as sci fiction and detective fiction.

Related to postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine, or paste together multiple elements. In postmodernist literature this can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information filled aspects of postmodern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity.

Metafiction is another device common to postmodernism essentially writing about writing as it's typical of deconstructionist, approaches, making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader and generally disregard the necessity for "willing suspension of disbelief." For example, postmodern sensibility and meta-fiction dictate that works of parody should parody the idea of parody itself. Meta-fiction 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.

Along with meta-fiction fabulation is also used by postmodernists and can be related to pastiche and magic realism. This is a rejection of realism, which endorses the notion that literature is a work of creation, and not merely based on imitation of reality that imagination and fancy play a pivotal role in the process. Thus, fabulation challenges some

traditional notions of literature- the traditional structure of a novel or role of the narrator and integrates other notions of storytelling, including fantastical elements, such as magic and myth, or elements from popular genres such as science fiction. Robert Scholes coined the term in his book *The Fabulators*. Linda Hutchison also coined the term "historiography meta-fiction" which refers to works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures.

Postmodernism thrives on chronological displacements. The linearity of time or sequencing of events is often distorted. Spatiotemporally is given predominance. This again leads to playfulness and fragmentariness. With the emphasis on Magic realism, which is marked by the use of still, sharply defined, smoothly painted images of figures and objects depicted in a surrealistic manner, temporal distortions become more prominent. The themes and subjects are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic and with a certain dream like quality. Some of the characteristic features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and inexplicable. For the postmodernists, no ordering is extremely dependent upon the subject, so paranoia often diminishes the line between delusion and insight. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is considered a prototype of postmodern literature, presents a situation that may be coincidence or conspiracy or a cruel joke.

Often maximalism and minimalism are techniques used in postmodernism. Whereas maximalist depicts an unending canvas, minimalism, the opposite is a representation of only the most basic and necessary pieces and economy with words. Minimalist authors hesitate to use adjectives, adverbs, or meaningless details. Instead of providing every minute detail, the author provides a general context and then allows the reader's imagination to shape the story.

Thus, to wind up the discussion in postmodernism there is self reflexivity and playfulness, irony and parody, breakdown between high and low cultural forms, a questioning of grand narratives, emphasis on impressionism, blurring of distinction between genres, emphasis on fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives and random collages, and very importantly a general reaction against the idea of formalism and structure based narrativism.

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