



## Postmodernism, Postmodernist Fiction, Apocalypse and Fantasy

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### Abstract

*Terms like 'modern', 'postmodern' and 'contemporary' are subject-centered, and not based on any historical or objective phenomenon or personality. Everyone feels that something called 'Postmodernism' has happened, but, as regards its true nature and causes, opinion is divided; a few people say postmodernism is a fiction. There is also a problem with the nomenclature. What was referred to as 'contemporary', for example, in 1956 by the writers of that year will not be so to the generation of Y2K. All these terms tend to shift about what is known as PP in temporal logic, which itself keeps moving on the time scale. When we rename modern literature as the age of T.S. Eliot, we assign it a slot in the historical perspective. A further complication is created by the use of 'modern' and 'modernist', 'postmodern' and 'postmodernist' as well as 'contemporary.' We may, perhaps, safely assume that its element in each case signifies the avant-garde, a group of authors in the respective period that is distinguished by experimentation and innovation. While attempts to accord the postmodern period a definitive time frame (which includes the postmodernist movement in arts and literature) remain in an inconclusive stage, let us assume that postmodernism encompasses the period from the fifties to the present time, which is open-ended. It should also be noted that some postmodernist writers concentrate on new tones and new reality rather than experimental techniques.*

**Keywords: Postmodernism; Fiction; Story; Apocalyptic; Fantasy**

### Introduction

The term 'Postmodernism' was first used by the historian Arnold Toynbee in 1947 to designate the present fourth and final stage of Western history, which, for him, is defined by anxiety and irrationalism. Around 1980 when Lyotard's well-known book, *The Postmodern Condition* was published, postmodernism widened its scope from the specifically literary critical debate to the larger theoretical and cultural one. The Postmodernist sensibility that came to be reflected in art and literature may be regarded as a product of new socio-historical factors that moved to the Centre after 1945. The Second World War, which turned the whole world into a battlefield with the bombardment of civilian areas and dropping of a Hydrogen bomb on two Japanese cities, proved to be a traumatic experience. Sometime after the conclusion of the War, active fighting gave place to the cold war. The result was a continuing war-consciousness and anxiety that account for a major concern in subsequent literature. The War experience also brought to light the elements of evil, cruelty, crime, and torture. The age under review saw the emergence of the power of giant industrial companies, which produced a new kind of culture extending across national boundaries. This multinational culture enforced the new value of packaging and the logic of commodification. It became a tradition that an article of beauty is neither noticed nor appreciated unless it is covered with attractive packing. The consumption aspect is more important than cognition.



### Postmodernism and Postmodernist Fiction

The new systems of values and social participation produced by the multinational culture have pushed the intellectual to the extreme margin and those associated with language arts have suffered the same fate: the result is that postmodern theories are theories of withdrawal and uncertainty and discourse is regarded as a play of signs. The element of play is quite obvious in postmodern writing. Scientific investigation in social matters takes the form of surveys through the questionnaire, interview and radio, and internet polls; the researchers conducted in this way appear in the form of reports. Two such reports deserve to be mentioned here. The Kinsey Reports on the sexual behavior of men and women disclosed that masturbation is practiced by a substantial member of people, that extramarital and premarital sex are not isolated occurrences and homosexuality is not uncommon. William H. Masters and Virginia Johnson in *Human Sexual Response* gave detailed descriptions of the different stages of the sexual act. These reports lent massive support to the rising permissiveness in the society and cleared the way for the open and vivid treatment of sex in literature. The dividing wall between pornography and decent writing almost disappeared. With this setting in our mind, we shall now proceed to discuss some prominent features of postmodernist writing.

In the fifties, there is a clear rejection of the modernist techniques- mythic method, symbolism, and allusion. In 'Sonnet from Orpheus', Kingsley Amis declares:

*[N]ow I'm tired of being the trade-name  
on boxes of assorted junk; tired of  
conscripted as the mouthpiece of your brash  
theories, of jigging to your symbol-crash.  
Speak for yourselves, or not at all; this game is up-your  
mankind has had enough. (In White, 2015, p. 240)*

White (2015) cites Amis' discourse on the mythoclastic mood in recent fiction in the above lines. He continues that Philip Larkin has no faith in the old system of thought and that he wishes to begin from scratch, "every poem must be its sole freshly created universe" (In Steinberg, 2014, p. 82); he rejects the myth-kitty or allusions to other poems or poets. In fiction, there is a total rejection of the realistic mode as followed in the 19th century. It is arraigned that the realism of the earlier writers is achieved by most artificial means. Postmodernist fiction attempts to destroy the illusion of reality and draws attention to itself as art. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) John Fowles describes the love affair between Charles and Sarah, but at the end of chapter 12, we are asked "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come? I do not know ... The story I am telling is all imagination" (In Gray, 2018, p.538, Fowles,2018, p.94). Fiction, we gradually realize, is about functionality itself. It is a plethora of possibilities in which each possibility leads to another possibility and so on. In Borges's (1962; 2018) story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' we witness the unraveling of a riddle, which reveals that the author is not speaking about a garden to be discovered but about the true nature of art itself. Baroni (2017) says "Nowadays, it has become almost impossible to deal with central issues in narrative sequence, plot, tellability, narrative interest, or even narrativity without investigating how the story is embedded in a complex network of virtual fabulas" (p. 247). John Barth's story 'Lost in the Funhouse' is to be enjoyed in the same spirit. The story ends:

*He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not, therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator-though he would rather be among the lovers for whom fun-houses are designed. (In Rachwal, 2016, p. 99)*

Then he remarks: "Actually, if one imagines a story called 'The funhouse' or "lost in the Funhouse," the details of the drive to Ocean City don't seem especially relevant" (p. 181). And a little later:



*So far there's been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing In the way of a theme. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven't even reached the Ocean City Yet: we will never get out of the funhouse. (p. 181)*

In Donald Barthelme's story, 'The Balloon,' the first-person narrator comments on 'situation' and 'meaning' as elements of a narrative. He speaks about the raising of the balloon and observes, "that was the situation, then." Thereafter he demolishes the idea:

*[I]t is wrong to speak of "situations", implying set of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there-muted heavy grays and browns, for the most part, contrasting with walnut and soft yellows (Barthelme, 2011, pp.67,68).*

As regards meaning he says:

*There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the "meaning" of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena. (p. 68)*

This story invites our attention to another aspect of postmodernist fiction, namely, the use of fantasy and the supernatural. The balloon, in the end, turns out to be a fantasy conceived by the narrator in response to his separation from the beloved: The balloon, I said, is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation, but now that your visit to Bergen has been terminated, it is no longer necessary or appropriate. The use of fantasy in postmodernist fiction receives strength from two directions; first, the contemporary reality itself has assumed the character of a dream or nightmare most of the reality itself is phantasmagoric; secondly, it has been discovered that fantasizing is quite natural; it has a wholesome effect on the mind - especially, for the deprived and marginalized people, such as women - and makes a powerful uncanny appeal. Commenting on the fiction of Borges, Tanner (1979) observes, "We do not know quite what it is we have read. It may be a dream or a game or a fantasy, but then why did it move us so much" (p. 40)?

The fantastic in contemporary fiction offers a meeting ground for the marvelous and the uncanny, but, unlike either of these, it admits of no explanation. A specific technique associated with fantasy is magic realism as illustrated in the fiction of Borges, Garcia Marquez, and Carpenter. It is noticed that the postmodernist fiction presents a compounded discourse made up of fantasy, science fiction, and detective story. In 'The Garden of Forking Paths' the Chinese agent of the German Government, Dr. Yu Tsun, must communicate vital information to Hitler as quickly as possible because he has been detected and is being pursued by Capt. Madlen. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) combines science fiction with fantasy and reportage which enables him to depict vivid pictures of destruction and decay as well as the tralfamadorian view of the Western man who has a metal sphere round his head and can perceive only a tiny part of the whole reality. A mixture of the elements mentioned above can be seen in various degrees of combination in other works also, for example in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), by Thomas Pynchon and *The Fifth Child* (1988) by Doris Lessing.

The modernists had successfully used collage and allusion; James Joyce also wove a pattern of different genres and discourses in his *Ulysses*, juxtaposition of miscellaneous materials, and the apparent lack of meaning. The postmodern writer goes further in preparing an assemblage of different modes of writing, such as reportage, diary entries, letters, songs and so on. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is distinguished by multiple narratives, indeterminacy, and paradox. The method of the genre slicing enables the writer to weave elements of other genres, for instance, William Burroughs who uses a technique described as "cut-up or fold in method" (In Schneiderman, 2004, p. 104). Postmodernist writing is prominently apocalyptic, projecting very frightening sights of human society and



human nature. The views are made all the more gruesome by the tone of writing which is objective and uninvolved, and the spectral voices arise out of a void because the traditional framework is non-existent. As Gramsci noted "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appears" (In Olivier, 2018, p. 89). William Golding makes a more general statement about human nature: "Man produces evil as a bee produces honey". This position, however, implies the traditional system. For the postmodernists what matters is the single-minded pursuit, which is not governed by traditional morality or follows a new kind of value-system. In *The Collector* (1963) by John Fowles, Frederick Clagg translates His hobby of catching butterflies and just watching their beauty into the kidnapping of Miranda and inducing her death. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five* (1969) takes us to fire-bombed Dresden in 1944. We are made to witness the scenes of death, inhuman cruelty and hanging. However, the final message in his book, as Vonnegut himself said, is "that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are" (In Flanagan, 2019, p. 281). In Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958) Humbert pursues the girl with fierce amoral devotion and is prepared to commit any act that is required for the fulfillment of his passion. Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) presents a different kind of apocalyptic vision, the birth of a child who, from the womb, is like a ferocious beast:

*This morning, lying in the dark before the children awake, she had felt tapping in her belly, demanding attention. Disbelieving, she had half sat up, looking down at her still flat, if soft stomach, and felt the imperative beat like a small drum. She had been keeping herself on the move all day, so as not to feel those demands from the new being, unlike anything she had known before. (Lessing, 2010, p. 59)*

The ghastly yet pitiable child, Ban, shatters completely the love and family life of the loxatts and raises a fearful vision replete with unanswered genetic, hereditary atavistic and moral questions. *Wild Boys* (1971, 2008) by William Burroughs raises a similar nightmare about a new generation that feels neither pleasure nor pain. Wild boys are deprived of 'emotion oxygen' and live in a kind of limbo. They do not remember anything because they have no past. Some of them are the product of cloning in which they materialize full-grown from the body of another man, stir into life and begin at once the act of anal intercourse with their creator without desire or loathing. After having ruined the world completely, "wild boys smile" (Burroughs, 2008).

While dealing with the apocalyptic vision of human life, we must make a mention of black humor, which is often employed in conjunction with events of extreme cruelty and torture. This device is quite evident in modern American fiction and can easily be perceived in such novels as Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968,2019) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). The reports on sexual behavior and sexual acts mentioned earlier disclosed the practices and responses based on surveys; this means they brought to light the real facts of the sexual life of western society. The reports in this way must have opened new avenues to the creative writer for treatment of all forms of sex-specially what was earlier regarded as abnormal, deviant or sinful and sex activity. In *Lolita*, the girl-heroine already knows a lot about sex when she gets herself raped by her stepfather. She has been a prey to the agents of a permissive society: the free atmosphere of Co-educational school, the world of juvenile movies and campfire affairs. In defense of what would be treated as porn, Nabokov (2010) remarks, "after all we are not children, not illiterate juvenile delinquents, not English public schoolboys who after a night of homosexual romps have to endure the paradox of reading the ancients in expurgated versions" (p. 316).

Homosexuality and sexual masochism and sadism form the staple of *Myra Breckinridge* whereas Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969; 2016) is a Freudian novel that justifiably includes confession of masturbation and failure in love. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, unconventional sex is included as a supportive myth. We find, perhaps, the most debated description of sexual orgy as cruelty in *The Naked Lunch* (1965; 2007) by William





Burroughs: a short quotation is needed to clinch the issue; “Johnny's cock springs up and Mary guides it to her cunt, writhing against him in a fluid belly dance, groaning and shrieking with delight... (Burroughs, 2007; Bloom et al, 1988). Burroughs, however, explains this portion of his book by remarking that, “Certain passages in the book that have been called pornographic were written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's Modest Proposal” (In Lydenberg, 1987). He says further:

*These sections [in Naked Lunch] are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is. As always the lunch is naked. If civilized countries want to return to Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and feed their gods with the blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they eat and drink. Let them see what is at the end of that long newspaper spoon. (In Schneiderman, 2004, p. 254)*

This remark may explain Burroughs's intention, but the general fascination that the postmodern writer feels towards this theme demands further consideration. It seems man today finds his life hanging in the air, as it were. All life-supporting mythologies, religious beliefs and philosophical systems, which were taken to be valid for all time and which challenged the finality of corporeal death have been destroyed by the spirit of rational inquiry and scientific verification; at least at present time, there is an acute crisis, if not total vacuum. Therefore, in the present scenario, the body seems to be the only palpable site for some values; old age cannot look forward to anything beyond death; so it must recoil on the fleshy pleasures of the past. And this is true of the things that Joseph Heller (2000; 2004) does in his autobiographical novel, *Portrait of an Artist as an old Man*. Eugene Pota plans a great new novel to be called 'A Sexual Biography of my wife' for which a probable epigraph could be a sentence from the diary of the Duchess of Marlborough, Sarah Churchill (1986), “My lord is home from the wars and has pleased me twice before removing his boots.” Pota seeks information from his former girlfriends about the sexual experiences of women from pre-adolescence onwards. And when we come to the lifestyle of the postmodern age for which we can, for instance, choose Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975,2017). The year is 1972 and the local the campus of a university. The couple, Howard and Barbara Kirk, “are true citizens of the present, and they take their messages from the prevailing air and answer them with an honest sense of duty. They are, after all, very busy people, with many causes and issues, many meetings and conspiracies” (p. 7). They have rejected the old systems, ideas, and values that, according to Howard, are not the right kind of things to adhere to. In sexual matters they like to enjoy complete freedom, “From time to time, being passionate, liberated, consciousness-conscious, they live apart, or with someone else, for a spell” (p. 12). Howard takes his girl students to bed from time to time; Miss-Felicity Phee appeals to him for help because she is tired of being a lesbian; she wants a man and he obliges her. When Miss Calendar, the English teacher, declines to support him in his case against George Carmody, he goes to her residence and handles her sexually. His wife, Barbara, goes to London from time to time to sleep with her lover. Their children, Martin and Celia, are allowed the full benefit of a permissive environment. The tone of the novel is not without irony and mock-seriousness, but the lifestyle of the kinks certainly arouses our interest if not admiration. The narrative also indicates the weaknesses and contradictions of postmodern ideas and attitudes.

Donald Bartholomew's short story, 'The School' raises a fundamental issue of the postmodern condition. A series of deaths in the school make the children curious and frightened; they demand answers from the teacher, but he is equally in the dark. Then they think of a human activity that can give meaning and value to life and provide the reason for living. The children ask him to make love to Helen, the teaching assistant. The teacher replied if he did that, he would be dismissed from his job and that it was never done as a demonstration. He narrates:

*They said, please, please make love to Helen, we require an assertion of value, we are frightened. I said they shouldn't be frightened (although I am often frightened). And that there was value everywhere.*



*Helen came and embraced me. I kissed her a few times on the brow. We held each other. The children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, I opened the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly. (Oates, 2013, p. 534)*

The period after the war is marked by the rise of some theories. There is no doubt that the theory of deconstruction as propounded by Jacques Derrida is central and most influential because it reflects the predominant mood of the age. Derrida's analysis of the Western metaphysical tradition shows how speech (logos) is made privileged at the cost of writing and how the latter undermines the consistency of the former. However, in Derrida's conception, the suppressed component does not overpower the other. It simply gives rise to uncertainty and indeterminacy. The nature of language as a system of signs is such that meaning cannot achieve a stable status: it gets indefinitely postponed. The philosophy of Derrida, if it may be so called, tends towards negation and nihilism; it does not construct any positive account of the world, and this is precisely what fits the mood of the postmodern especially in America. There are also other theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Neo-Historicism and Reader-Response theory, which do not limit them to philosophical analysis and allow experience-even political struggle in some cases- to enter and influence their formulations. There is also a corresponding division in the creative writing of this age: the avant-garde are guided by the spirit of rejection and language games, while others William Golding, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Saul Bellow- mostly exercise their individual talent from within the tradition and pursue humanistic aims use satire and irony, and protest against cruelty and deal with the tragedy of innocence and love in the postmodern world.

## Conclusion

Postmodernism as a movement is a symptom rather than cure of the illness of the advanced society under the latest phase of the capitalist system. Like its predecessor, the modernist movement, it is self-alienated and elitist and confuses the main issues in a well welter of fantastic devices and obsessive sexuality. What a critic has observed about *Slaughterhouse Five*, to a certain degree, applicable to most postmodernist fiction, "seems to be doing two things at once: it purports to awaken men to the horrors of life on earth; at the same time, it strives to drug men to the reality of that horror with a heavy dose of fantasies" (Bloom, 2010, p. 158).

In militating against storytelling and realism, the postmodernist author has deprived himself of two time-tested staples of people's literature, Lyric poem, and Story. They are the oldest literary forms universally entrenched in the human psyche: one offers a spontaneous form of expression of joy or sorrow and the other is a natural cognitive mode of comprehending events. Neither storytelling nor realism is the creation of Renaissance culture. Realism is as old as language itself, and no language-art (as can be compared to music, painting or sculpture) can completely get rid of it. Postmodernists themselves, however hard they try, cannot avoid the general laws of realism, although the conventions of nineteenth-century realism may be avoided. It is in the nature of words that occur in the literature to come along with their semantic links with life and situations in which they are customarily used. A total dissociation of sound from meaning can happen only in music because the sounds of music are not words of any language.

Again like modernists, the avant-garde of our age will leave some impact on mainstream writing. Their innovations, to the extent desirable, will be absorbed and assimilated. Hope that postmodernism will ever become, like Renaissance or neo-classicism, the guiding trend of the future growth in literary themes and forms.

## Notes

1. In 1926, Bernard Iddings Bell published *Postmodernism and Other Essays*. This marked the first use of the term describing the historical period following Modernity.

2. Different from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*



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