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| **Lecture 02: Postmodernist Fiction**  |

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 or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The overall characteristic features of postmodernism could be summarized as follows:

**1. Irony, playfulness, black humor**

 Irony, playfulness, and black humor became trademarks for most postmodern authors. Postmodern authors often choose very serious subjects, like wars and conspiracy theories, and depict their histories ironically and humorously. A good example of postmodern irony and black humor is when the inexplicable repetition of death is treated only as a joke and the narrator remains emotionally distant throughout.

**2. Unreliable Narrator**

As readers, we normally trust the narrator, but in postmodern fiction **the narrator may be fooling himself or outright lying**, which shapes our perception of the story. This forces the readers to take on a more active role and try to work out how things really are. The use of unreliable narrators is linked to the postmodern idea that truth is relative. There is no truth - it all depends on who you ask. The same goes for identity; one person can in fact have multiple identities depending on the situation.

**3. 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, [Margaret Atwood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood) uses science fiction and fairy tales. Pastiche can also refer to compositional technique. For example, [B. S. Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._S._Johnson)'s 1969 novel *The Unfortunates* was released in a box with no binding so that readers could assemble it however they chose.

**4. 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poststructuralism) [Julia Kristeva](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Kristeva) in 1966. As critic [William Irwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wiliam_Irwin_%28critic%29&action=edit&redlink=1) 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allusion) and [influence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_influence).” 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood) – or in references to popular genres such as science-fiction and detective fiction.

**5. 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. Metafiction is found at least as early as [Homer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer)'s [*Odyssey*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odyssey) and [Chaucer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Chaucer)'s 14th century [*Canterbury Tales*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canterbury_Tales). Some examples of metafiction literary texts: Anthony Burgess’ *clockwork orange*, [*At Swim-Two-Birds*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/At_Swim-Two-Birds) by [Flann O'Brien](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_O%27Nolan), and [Ian McEwan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_McEwan)'s [*Atonement*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atonement_%28novel%29).

**6. Historiographic metafiction**

[Linda Hutcheon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linda_Hutcheon) coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to refer to works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures. Historiographic metafictions both install blur the line between fiction and history. These novels show history to be textually constructed and fictions to be historically conditioned. [John Fowles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fowles) deals similarly with the Victorian Period in [*The French Lieutenant's Woman*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_French_Lieutenant%27s_Woman). In regard to critical theory, this technique can be related to "[The Death of the Author](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_of_the_Author)" by [Roland Barthes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes). In Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Historiographic metafiction privileges an overtly narcissist self-conscious narrative mode that undermines the notion of absolute historical truth and reality.

**7. Temporal distortion**

Temporal distortion in postmodern fiction is used in a variety of ways, often for the sake of irony. In this literary the author may jump forwards or backwards in time, or there may be cultural and historical references that do not fit. The author presents multiple possible events occurring simultaneously—in one section the something chaotic is happening while in another section nothing happens and so on—yet no version of the story is favoured as the correct version. In Rushdie’s The *Satanic Verses*, the apocalypse, though often defined as destructive, involves a reaching for or gesture towards the impossible, which the Verses achieves through massive temporal distortion.

**8. 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 authors 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. [Cyberpunk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberpunk) fiction use science fiction techniques to address this postmodern, hyperreal information bombardment. [Steampunk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk), a subgenre of science fiction popularized in novels and comics by [Alan Moore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Moore) demonstrates postmodern pastiche, temporal distortion, and a focus on [technoculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technoculture) with its mix of futuristic technology and Victorian culture.

**9. 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absurdity). Paranoid thinking includes persecutory beliefs because the person believes they are in danger or is threatened by something or someone.

**10. 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. It paints a [realistic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_%28arts%29) view of the world while also adding [magical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_%28supernatural%29) elements, often blurring the lines between [fantasy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy) and [reality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality). In [*The Art of Fiction*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Fiction_%28book%29), British novelist and critic [David Lodge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lodge_%28author%29) defines magic realism: "when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative. Magical realist novels may include dreams taking place during normal life, extremely complicated plots, wild shifts in time, and myths and fairy tales becoming part of the narrative. Magical realism often mixes history and fantasy, as in [Salman Rushdie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salman_Rushdie)'s [*Midnight's Children*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midnight%27s_Children), in which the children born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment of India's independence, are telepathically linked.