Postmodernism Study Guide

Postmodernism

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Introduction

Postmodernism is the name given to the period of literary criticism that is now in full bloom. Just as the name implies, it is the period that comes after the modern period. But these are not easily separated into discrete units limited by dates as centuries or presidential terms are limited. Postmodernism came about as a reaction to the established modernist era, which itself was a reaction to the established tenets of the nineteenth century and before.

What sets Postmodernism apart from its predecessor is the reaction of its practitioners to the rational, scientific, and historical aspects of the modern age. For postmodernists this took the guise of being self-conscious, experimental, and ironic. The postmodernist is concerned with imprecision and unreliability of language and with epistemology, the study of what knowledge is.

An exact date for the establishment of Postmodernism is not easy, but it is said to have begun in the post-World War II era, roughly the 1950s. It took full flight in the 1960s in the social and political unrest in the world. In 1968 it reached its zenith with the intense student protests in the United States and France, the war for independence in Algeria, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The beginning of space exploration with the launch of Sputnik in 1957, culminating in the 1969 landing of men on the moon, marks a significant shift in the area of science and technology.

At the same time, Jacques Derrida presented his first paper, *Of Grammatology* (1967), outlining the principles of deconstruction. The early novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and Alain Robbe-Grillet were published; Ishmael Reed was writing his poetry. The Marxist critics, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, who saw a major shift in the social and economic world as a part of the postmodern paradigm, were beginning their creative careers. As time progressed, more and more individuals added their voices to this list: Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag, and, in popular culture, Madonna. (In her openly sexual music and music videos she broke down the limits of sexuality and femininity. Still, while some believe that her career is a setback for feminist movement; others believe that she opened the doors to a wider acceptance of female and human sexuality.)

In a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994, Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, said the following:

> The distinguishing features of such transitional periods
> are a mixing and blending of cultures and a plurality
> or parallelism of intellectual and spiritual worlds.
> These are periods when all consistent value systems
> collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are
> discovered or rediscovered. They are periods when
> there is a tendency to quote, to imitate, and to amplify,
> rather than to state with authority or integrate.
> New meaning is gradually born from the encounter,

or the intersection, of many different elements.

This state of mind or of the human world is called postmodernism. For me, a symbol of that state is a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel's back.

This speech outlines the essence of Postmodernism in all its forms: the mixing, the disintegration, and the instability of identities.

Themes

Deconstruction

This is the term created by Derrida that defines the basic premise of Postmodernism. It does not mean destruction, but rather it is a critique of the criteria of certainty, identity, and truth.

Derrida says that all communication is characterized by uncertainty because there is no definitive link between the signifier (a word) and the signified (the object to which the word refers). Once a text is written it ceases to have a meaning until a reader reads it. Derrida says that there is nothing but the text and that it is not possible to construe a meaning for a text using a reference to anything outside the text. The text has many internal meanings that are in conflict with themselves (called reflexivity or self-referential) and as a result there is no solid and guaranteed meaning to a text. The text is also controlled by what is not in it (referents outside the text are not a part of its meaning). The consequence of this position is that there can be no final meaning for any text, for as Derrida himself says, "texts are not to be read according to [any method] which would seek out a finished signified beneath a textual surface. Reading is transformational."

He comments on issues of identity in Western civilization that derive from the reliance on binary oppositions. These are sets that establish a hierarchy that privileges the first over the second. He calls them "violent hierarchies," and states that they give precedence (called centering) to the central term (the first) and they marginalize the remaining term. In a set "up/down" the implication is that "up" is more preferable and is better than "down." In more significant ways the "centering" in the man/woman set establishes the first as the most important and marginalizes the second. This result has important ramifications in social constructs.

The last of these three concepts that he addresses is the nature of truth. Because he doubts the ability of language to convey any absolute meaning, there results an impossibility of language to establish a "transcendental universal" or a universal truth. It is this notion that is often misunderstood as a statement of his rejection of a God. Rather it is a statement that simple languages are incapable of identifying God linguistically.

Disintegration

One of the main outgrowths of Postmodernism is the disintegration of concepts that used to be taken for granted and assumed to be stable. These include the nature of language, the idea of knowledge, and the notion of a universal truth. The application of deconstruction to the understanding of language itself results in disintegration of that very language. Even these words are not stable in the sense that they cannot convey

an unalterable message. The consequence of this is that once language is destabilized the resultant knowledge that comes from that language is no longer a stable product. The end result therefore is that there can be no universal truths upon which to base an understanding or a social construct.

In literary works, authors often disrupt expected time lines or change points of view and speakers in ways that disrupt and cause disintegration in the very literature they are writing. *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon is a good example of this.

In contemporary entertainment, television in particular, there has been a disintegration of the line that separates reality from fiction. Recent fictional dramas have included responses to the terrorist attacks from September 11, 2001. In other television shows from the past twenty-five years, contemporaneous events have been included in the story lines. Discussions of the political and social events of the Nixon years were a mainstay of the show *All in the Family* and during the 1992 presidential campaign there was a generous use of material from the *Murphy Brown Show* in real political conversation. In these and other situations the reality/ fiction line was blurred significantly.

Cultural Studies

One major impact of Postmodernism on the structure of college and university courses is the introduction of multiculturalism and cultural studies programs. These are sometimes directly related to specific areas on the planet (Far Eastern studies, South American studies, or conglomerate areas like Pan-African studies) and sometimes to specificfocus groups (Gay/Lesbian studies, Women's studies, Chicano studies). Often these are not limited by political concerns and boundaries but are economically and socially organized, a major concern expressed in the writings of Jameson, Eagleton, and other Marxist critics.

Multiculturalism

Another aspect of multiculturalism is combining specific interest areas into one area of study. This aspect of Postmodernism broadens the experiences of college students through the study of literature and history of peoples from other parts of the world. Classes whose structures combine sometimes disparate elements are found in these new departments. For example, a study of prisons and prison literature might be combined with literature from Third World countries under the broad label of Literature of the Oppressed. Cultural studies may also include topics like: Arab-American Studies, or Women in European Literature.

Style

Schizophrenia

An important aspect of Postmodernism in literature and entertainment media is the relaxation of strict time lines, sometimes called discontinuous time. Often an author will construct a sequence of events that have no time relationships to each other. In literature this requires the reader to create a time line, which the author may upset later in the story. In some TV shows this is particularly important when the time line would have two things happening at the same time. Therefore, the writers show one event, then show another that happened at the same time as the first. This kind of temporal disruption is called "schizophrenia" by Jameson.

Recurring Characters

Some authors introduce a single character into several different works. Vonnegut does this with Kilgore Trout and Tralfamadorians, who appear in several of his novels.

Irony

Irony is a specialized use of language in which the opposite of the literal meaning is intended. Its former use often had the intent to provoke a change in behavior from those who were the object of the irony. But for the postmodernist the writer merely pokes fun at the object of the irony without the intention of making a social (or other kind of) change.

Authorial Intrusion

Occasionally an author will speak directly to the audience or to a character in the text in the course of a work□not as a character in the tale but as the writer. Vonnegut does this in several of his novels, including *Breakfast of Champions*.

Self-Reflexivity

Many literary works make comments about the works themselves, reflecting on the writing or the "meaning" of the work. These works are selfconscious about themselves. In some instances the work will make a comment about itself in a critical way, making a self-reflexive comment on the whole process of writing, reading, or understanding literature.

Collage

This style is characterized by an often random association of dissimilar objects without any intentional connection between them or without a specified purpose for these associations. For example, the rapid presentation of bits and pieces from old news tapes that are often used at the beginning of news programs is a collage. While it intends to introduce the news, it is not the news nor is it any hint of the news to come.

Prose Poetry

This idea seems to be a contradiction in terms but it is an effective style of writing. The passage will look like a paragraph of prose writing, but the content will be poetic in language and construction. Rather than being a literal statement, the language in this paragraph will be more figurative.

Parody and Pastiche

Oftentimes writers will take the work of another and restructure it to make a different impression on the reader than that of the original author. Some writers lift whole passages from others, verbatim, resulting in something quite different from the original writer's material.

Parody is the imitation of other styles with a critical edge. The general effect is to cast ridicule on the mannerisms or eccentricities of the original.

Pastiche is very much like parody but it is neutral, without any sense of humor. It is the imitation or a pasting together of the mannerisms of another's work, but without the satiric impulse or the humor. Jameson says that because there is no longer a "normal" language system, only pastiche is possible.

Simulacra

This is a term that comes from Plato meaning "false copy" or a debased reflection of the original that is inferior to the original. Author Jean Baudrillard claims that a simulacrum is a perfect copy that has no original. The postmodernists use this technique of copying or imitating others without reservation or hesitation. They treat it as just another process in their creative effort.

Many science fiction movies deal with simulacrum characters. In *Alien*, one of the crew members, Ash, is an android, but one of such high quality that it is only revealed when he/it is cut and the blood is a white liquid. The "replicants" from *Blade Runner* are simulacra who desire a longer life. Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is a simulacrum character with many human traits, but one who wants to have human emotions, too.

Historical Context

Postmodernism is an outgrowth of Modernism just as Modernism itself was an outgrowth of the Enlightenment project of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, authors, composers, architects, and other intellectuals rebelled against the strictures of older forms and ways of doing things. Architects began creating more functionally oriented buildings; composers created different methods of organizing musical sounds to create new music; authors felt similarly constricted and reacted against old styles and formats of poetry and fiction. Out of this came the likes of the Bauhaus architects, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton von Webern in music, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in poetry, and Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce in literature.

In the years following World War II, a new impetus in the arts and philosophy emerged that eventually resulted in Postmodernism. Writers were reluctant to fall into similar traps of conventionalization against which the modernists rebelled a generation before. They felt that the modern movement had now, through canonization, become the "old guard" and they wanted something different, more invigorating. Fiction writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. began to experiment in their novels. Poets like Ishmael Reed wrote in new forms and created new poetic styles. Composers like John Cage experimented with new forms of and approaches to music-making, often using new sound-generating techniques. Along with this came a dissatisfaction with the old ways of looking at the issues of reality, language, knowledge, and power.

Derrida is likely the most important and controversial of the postmodern critics. His two 1967 works, *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology*, laid the groundwork for the concept known as deconstruction. Another French philosopher, Michel Foucault, presented his first major paper on the subject, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, in 1966. These men were followed by the Marxist critics Jameson and Eagleton, both of whom saw Postmodernism in terms of its social and economic ramifications.

Also coming out of the 1950s and the 1960s was a new approach to popular cultural arts. Among those artists who made significant impact on their art form were the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and The Rolling Stones. These rock groups experimented with new sounds, combinations of entertaining lyrics, and lyrics with some political or social implications. In the 1960s and early 1970s folk rock performers like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Pete Seeger led the way with their passionate political lyrics. In films, attitudes shifted and the role of the film changed from a more purely entertainment function to a medium with social or political emphases. These genres, including the "art film" and the sexually explicit film, reacted to the old requirement for a continuous narrative and abandoned it in favor of more disjointed and nonlinear presentations.

At the same time, television was emerging from the shadows of being "radio with pictures" to being an important medium on its own. The 1950s saw the introduction of the situation comedy, i.e., *I Love Lucy*, and the variety show *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But

by the end of the 1960s these were giving way to less formal programs and moving into the beginnings of postmodern television with programs like *All in the Family* and *Laugh In*. Also at this time news became more entertaining with the introduction of the news magazine show, *60 Minutes*.

Through all of these innovations and introductions of new approaches to old idioms, there occurred a disintegration of the separation of reality and fiction. Television entertainment began to include deliberate references to current events; rock songs took on the role of political commentary; and fiction became less narrative and more obscure, less realistic and more intellectually fantastic (not to be confused with children's fantasy worlds).

The combination of the forces of suspicion, disintegration, and uncertainty led to the present postmodern world. World social situations are visited with a mouse click; economic pressures by individuals demanding specialized products have reduced the "target consumer" to ever smaller units. As Vaclav Havel has noted, seeing a Bedouin on a camel in typical Arab dress, wearing jeans beneath, listening to a CD through an ear piece and drinking a soft drink is no longer odd or unexpected. The fragmented nature of the postmodern world has created a new culturally diverse and, at the same time, culturally mixed world. Television brings war into viewer's living rooms. It shows the horror of collapsing buildings; on reality shows, it gives the consumer a window to the most intimate and tender moments in a person's life, and it reduces this to a slickly packaged product for the purpose of getting higher ratings and more profits.

Movement Variations

Feminism

Feminist readings in Postmodernism were initiated as a way to consciously view and deconstruct ideas of social norms, language, sexuality, and academic theory in all fields. Feminist theorists and writers (and they were not all women, e.g., Dr. Bruce Appleby, Professor Emeritus of Southern Illinois University, is a long-standing contributor to feminist writings and theory) were concerned with the manner in which society assumed a male bias either by direct action□for example, paying women less for doing the same job; or by inaction□using the term "man" to mean all of humankind. In either case, the female segment of society had been excluded. Even the modernist penchant for binary sets for discussions, good/bad, white/black, established an unspoken hierarchy that made the first of the set more important than the second. In that way the "male/female" set defined the female half as being less important or inferior to the male half of the set. This was not acceptable to the feminist writers and to those in the subsequent feminist movement. Feminist writers and theorists attempted to separate the ideas of sex (which is biological) and gender (which is a social construct), and use those ideas as a lens through which to deconstruct language, social mores and theories, economic policies, and longstanding historical policy.

Marxism

It is not much of a stretch to move the discussion of gender discrimination into a discussion of class discrimination, which is the focus of many of the Marxist critics. While some issues are different, it is easy to see that bias based on gender is just as destructive as the elitism in a society based on class differences.

Political Marxism is a topic that engenders strong emotional opinions, especially among those who see it as a threat to Western political systems. However, the basic issues that drove Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to formulate their theories in the nineteenth century are still valid in a discussion of literature and art and the relationship between class and the arts in a society. Marxist critics assert that the products of artistic endeavors are the results of historical forces that are themselves the results of material and/or economic conditions at the time of the creation of the art.

Art then becomes the product of those who control the economic and the intellectual production of the society. Therefore, the nature of the description of an era in human history is the product of the dominant class at the time the description is given. The present era called postmodern is so labeled by the dominant class. (It is important to note that since the present era has not yet come of age, the eventual naming of it may shift if the dominant class also shifts. What that shift may be is unknown at this time.) This concept has been reduced to the simple statement that the victor writes the story of the battle.

An enlightening example concerning this process is *The Wind Done Gone*. This novel is a retelling of the story of the American Civil War through eyes of the African-American slave in the southern United States. It tells Margaret Mitchell's story *Gone with the Wind* from another perspective. Granted this is a pair of novels, but the factual basis behind each is the history of the Civil War. For Mitchell it is history through the eyes of the white southerner; for Alice Randall it is through the eyes of the slave in that same southern society.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a term often used interchangeably with Postmodernism. While these two terms share a number of philosophic concepts, there are some differences that need to be explained. Structuralism is rooted in a theory of language that was derived from the teachings of Swiss-born linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, which were published as the *Course in General Linguistics* (in 1913 in French; in 1966 in English). These publications are a set of reconstructions of his teachings from the class notes of many of his students. As the label of the philosophy indicates, it is concerned with the underlying structures of language and meaning. The structuralists "confined the play of language within closed structures of oppositions," according to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their book, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. Saussure posited that language functions in a self-referential manner and has no "natural" relation to external reality. This movement also believes, according to Claude Levi-Strauss, that texts are universal (even if the meanings of the texts are indeterminate) and that texts are found in all activities. This is construed to include the personal life histories of individuals, which are called their "texts."

The main technique used by the structuralists in their investigations of language is the study of semiology, or the study of signs and symbols. They say that all language is arbitrary and that the culture determines the relationship between the signifier (a word) and the signified (the object). The word *book* is arbitrary and does not have any direct and irrefutable relationship to the object it is used to signify. That relationship comes from the culture alone. Additionally, the structuralist examines the underlying construct of language and is concerned with determining what is called the meta-structure, a universal structure that could be found in all language systems.

The poststructuralist responds to these investigations with the Derridean concept that there is not a universal structure and that the structures of language are indeterminate, just as the language (text) itself is. They give the signifier primacy over the signified, which opens the door to the indeterminacy of other postmodern considerations.

Representative Authors

Donald Barthelme (1931-1989)

Donald Barthelme, Jr. was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on April 7, 1931. In 1949 he enrolled at the University of Houston as a journalism major and worked on the staff of the *Daily Cougar* as an editor. After spending time in the U.S. Army he returned to Houston where he worked for several newspapers. In 1962 he went to New York where he had articles and stories published in *New Yorker* magazine. He won many honors and awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, National Book Award, National Institute of Arts and Letters Zabel Award, Rea Short Story Award, and the Texas Institute of Arts and Letters Award. Barthelme died of throat cancer July 23, 1989, at the age of fifty-eight.

He has been characterized as an avant-garde or postmodernist who relies more on language than plot or character. He is well known as a short story writer, novelist, editor, journalist, and teacher. Some of his publications include: *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, 1964, *City Life*, 1970; *Sixty Stories*, 1981; and *The King*, 1990.

Jacques Derrida (1930-)

Jacques Derrida was born in El Biar, Algeria, on July 15, 1930. He earned several undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Paris, Sorbonne. He also did graduate study at Harvard University, from 1956 to 1957. He has taught at many of the world's finest colleges and universities: University of Paris, Sorbonne, Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, University of California at Irvine, Cornell University, and City University of New York.

His work beginning in the 1960s effected a profound change in literary criticism. In 1962 he first outlined the basic ideas that became known as deconstruction in a lengthy introduction to his 1962 French translation of German philosopher Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. The full strategy of deconstruction is outlined and explained in his difficult masterwork, *Of Grammatology*, published in English in 1967. It revealed the interplay of multiple meanings in the texts of present day culture and exposed the unspoken assumptions that underlie much of contemporary social thought.

Terry Eagleton (1943-)

Terence Eagleton was born on February 22, 1943, in Salford, England. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge, from which he received a bachelor of arts in 1964. He earned his Ph.D. from Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1968. He has taught at Cambridge and at Oxford. He has been a judge for poetry and literature competitions.

As one of the foremost exponents of Marxist criticism, he is concerned with the ideologies found in literature, examining the role of Marxism in discerning these ideologies. His early publications include: *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Bröntes*, 1975; *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976; *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, 1976, among others. His later publications include: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 1983; *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Poststructuralism*, 1984; and *The Ideology of the Aesthetics*, 1990. His concise *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976, discusses the author as producer, and the relationships between literature and history, form and content, and the writer and commitment. He is the foremost advocate of the inclusion of social and historical issues in literary criticism.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers, France, on October 15, 1926, and received a diploma in 1952 from Ecole Normale Superieure and the Sorbonne, University of Paris. He taught philosophy and French literature at the Universities of Lille, Uppsala, Warsaw, Hamburg, Clermont-Ferrand, Sao Paulo, and the University of Tunis between the years 1960 and 1968. Foucault taught at the University of Paris, Vincennes, France, from 1968 to 1970. From 1970 until his death in 1984, he was chairman of History of Systems of Thought at College de France. The best known of his publications are *The History of Sexuality*, 1976; *The Use of Pleasure*, 1985; and *The Care of the Self*, 1987.

He used what he called the archaeological approach in his work to dig up scholarly minutia from the past and display the "archaeological" form or forms in them, which would be common to all mental activity. Later he shifted this emphasis from the archaeological to a genealogical method that sought to understand how power structures shaped and changed the boundaries of "truth." It is this understanding of the combination of power and knowledge that is his most noteworthy accomplishment.

Foucault died of a neurological disorder on June 25, 1984, in Paris, France.

Fredric Jameson (1934-)

Fredric Jameson was born on April 14, 1934, in Cleveland, Ohio. He attended Haverford College and Yale University and received a master of fine arts degree in 1956 and his Ph.D. in 1959. He taught at Harvard University, the University of California, San Diego, at Yale University, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and at Duke University. He received many awards and fellowships including: Rotary Fellowship, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Fulbright Fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships, Humanities Institute Grant, and the William Riley Parker Prize.

Jameson is the leading exponent of Marxism in the United States. In *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* he raises concerns about the way present-day culture is constructed. His 1983 article, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," provides basic groundwork for much of his version of Marxist criticism.

Julia Kristeva (1941-)

Julia Kristeva was born in Silven, Bulgaria, on June 24, 1941. Her formal education began in French schools in Bulgaria, where she earned her diploma at the Universite de Sofia, and ended in 1973 at the University of Paris VII, where she received her Ph.D. She has since taught at several universities and has established a private psychoanalytic practice in Paris. She has received both the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres and the Chevalier de l'Ordre du Merite.

She is renowned as a writer, educator, linguist, psychoanalyst, and literary theorist and is also considered one of the most influential thinkers of modern France. Kristeva bases her work on two components of the linguistic operation: the semiotic, which expresses objective meaning; and the symbolic, the rhythmic and illogical aspects of meaning. What she calls "poetic language" is the intertwining of these elements. It is these same tenets that form the basis for postmodern criticism. She has been embraced by many as a feminist writer because of her writings on social issues, but Kristeva's relationship to feminism has been one of ambivalence. Two of her most important publications are *Desire in Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (published in 1969, translated in 1980) and *New Maladies of the Soul* (published in 1993, translated in 1995), a collection of essays. She has also written several novels.

Toni Morrison (1931-)

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, to a black working class family. She studied humanities in college, obtaining her bachelor of arts in 1953 from Howard University (a distinguished black college) and her masters degree from Cornell University in 1955. Morrison married Harold Morrison in 1958 and the couple had two sons before divorcing in 1964. Morrison has worked as an academic, an editor, a critic, and continues to give lectures.

After the publication of her first novel in 1970, Morrison's writing quickly came to the attention of critics and readers who praised her richly expressive style and ear for dialogue. She received the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel *Beloved* (1987) and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Morrison has written novels, plays, and nonfiction essays, including: *The Bluest Eye* (1969); *Sula* (1973); *Song of Solomon* (1977); *Tar Baby* (1981); *Dreaming Emmett* (1986, play); *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (1992); and *Book of Mean People* (2002). Morrison has also edited and/or collaborated on several volumes with other authors.

Ishmael Reed (1938-)

Ishmael Reed was born on February 22, 1938, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He attended State University of New York at Buffalo from 1956 to 1960. Reed has written

numerous novels, short stories, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, essays, literary criticism, and history, and has been accorded many honors and awards including the nomination for Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1973 for *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970*. He has taught at many colleges and universities and at prose and poetry workshops across the United States.

His novels include: *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, 1967; *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, 1969; *Mumbo Jumbo*, 1972; *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, 1974; *Flight to Canada*, 1976; *The Terrible Twos*, 1982; *Reckless Eyeballing*, 1986; *The Terrible Threes*, 1989; and *Japanese by Spring*, 1993.

He has written much poetry including: *catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church*, 1970; *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970*, 1972; *Chattanooga: Poems*, 1973; *A Secretary to the Spirits*, 1977; and *New and Collected Poems*, 1988.

His poetry captures the rich texture of the novels in the combinations of language from street language to academic language, from dialects and slang to the clever use of neologisms. He includes many references to mythologies and cultures apart from his own experiences.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-)

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922. He attended Cornell University, Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie-Mellon University), and the University of Chicago where he earned his master of fine arts degree in 1971. From 1942 to 1945 he was in the U.S. Army, Infantry, including some time as a POW (he received the Purple Heart).

He worked as editor for the *Cornell Daily Sun*, 1941 to 1942, as police reporter in 1947 for the *Chicago City News* Bureau; in the public relations department of the General Electric Co., Schenectady, NY, 1947 to 1950; and as a freelance writer beginning in 1950 to the present.

He taught at Hopefield School in Sandwich, MA, the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, Harvard University, and at the City College of the City University of New York, 1965. In 1986 he was a speaker at the hearing of the National Coalition against Censorship briefing for the attorney general's Commission on Pornography.

He has been the recipient of many honors and awards. He is the author of many novels, essays, and other writings, including plays and articles for magazines and journals. His novels include: *The Sirens of Titan*, 1959; *Mother Night*, 1961; *Cat's Cradle*, 1963; *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; or, Pearls before Swine*, 1965; *Slaughterhouse Five; or, The Children's Crusade*, 1969; and a collection of short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, 1968. More recent novels include *Jailbird*, 1979 and *Timequake*, 1997.

His writing is filled with biting satire and irony. Many of his characters find their way into several of the novels. Kilgore Trout appears in *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slaughterhouse*

Five, as well as others; the Tralfamadorians show up in *Sirens of Titan* and in *Slaughterhouse Five*. He freely peppers his texts with quotes from Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*.

Representative Works

Beloved

When Fredric Jameson said, in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," that postmodern society has reached the end of its awareness of history, he stirred up a great controversy. Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987) asks a similar question about the postmodern society's understanding of history.

Beloved is the story of one ex-slave's relationship with her children, herself, and the world around them. There are two considerations about the historical accuracy of the novel. The first is the use of contemporaneous accounts of slavery and the second, Morrison's imaginative recreation of the slave society. The conflict between these two arises from the concern that the version of slavery written by the ruling white class is flawed and that a fictional story is by definition unreal.

Two events in the novel raise this issue: the first is the moment Paul D sees the newspaper clipping of Sethe and remarks, "That ain't her mouth." If the news reports are not accurate, including the pictures, then the novel has relied on flawed data and it is thereby flawed.

The second incident is the scene in which Beloved lures Paul D into the shed to have sex. There is a stack of newspapers in the shed, a symbolic juxtaposition of the real and the imagined. The poststructuralist view that reality is a function of discourse is challenged in these scenes. The sources of discourse are unreliable (newspapers, photos, fictional accounts of events) and that leads to the conclusion that there is no reliable explication of "reality" present in these scenes and, by extrapolation, in the novel itself.

Cat's Cradle

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is one of those authors who defy easy categorization, though it might be appropriate to call him an eclectic postmodernist. But the difficulty of identifying him or his works within a trend or movement remains. If one work were representative of his philosophy, it is his 1974 book *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons (Opinions)*. (These concepts are found in *Cat's Cradle*.) This collection of opinion is not his best or most important, but it locates in its title the three most important aspects of his writing. Wampeters are objects around which the lives of otherwise unrelated people revolve, for example, The Holy Grail or The National Championship (in college football). Foma are harmless comforting truths such as "Prosperity is just around the corner." "There's a light at the end of the tunnel." "Everything's going to be all right!" Granfalloons are a proud and meaningless association of human beings, for example "The Veterans of Future Wars" or the "Class Colors Committee."

In many of his works he pokes fun at the quirkiness of normal life, and the grand institutions of society. He infuses his novels with a sense of humor, with the exception of *Slaughterhouse Five*, which is based on the bombing of Dresden during World War II.

Cat's Cradle is a humorous and sharp-edged novel that takes major institutions of society to task for their vapidity and shallowness: religion, the military, and science. Jonah lives in the Caribbean where the only religion tolerated is Bokononism. It is based on the teachings and songs of Bokonon, most of which are in a Caribbean dialect and sung to a calypso beat.

Jonah finds out about a corrupted production of crystals at a chemical plant that changed the way ice crystals are formed. Instead of forming ice at 32 degrees Fahrenheit (called ice-one), the process was transformed eventually creating ice-nine that freezes (crystallizes) at 130 degrees. The book tackles the problems of science gone awry, a military that saw an opportunity for a doomsday weapon, and the religion that tried to make some philosophic sense of it all.

The chief image in this novel comes from its title, a cat's cradle: a finger game played by two people with a loop of string that becomes twisted and tangled during the game. But if it is done properly, it will return to its original form and "All will be well" (a Foma!).

Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970

Reed's 1972 book of poetry contains prose poems, didactic poems, and short poems offering comments on very specific incidents such as the poem "Report of the Reed Commission" which reads:

i conclude that for
the first time in
history the practical
man is the loon and the
loon the practical man
a man on the radio just
said that air pollution
is caused by jellyfish.

Not all of his poetry is this transparent and humorous. Some, for example "catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church," explore what he sees as the oppressive nature of the American society in which he lives. His reference to "Hoodoo" (which is a variation of Voodoo) is a common theme in most of his writings. It combines aspects of conjuring, magic, and Voodoo, which he claims will help African Americans and people in the Third World rid themselves of the oppressive nature of contemporary western civilization.

The opening paragraph includes a statement confronting established value systems: "i refused to deform d works of ellison and wright." In this refusal he raises concerns about social demands and instructs others in ways to confront similar demands.

Throughout these poems he uses a kind of written language that more completely approximates the language of common people. In "catechism" stanza i, he writes: "we who hv no dreams permit us to say yr name/ all day. we are junk beneath yo feet." The look on the page may seem unusual or even wrong, but if the line is said aloud the normal sounds of everyday speech result. Another technique in the poems in *Conjure* is repeated lines, phrases, or words to emphasize the passage. These repetitions derive from an oral tradition of storytelling, learning scriptures, and hymns.

Of Grammatology

The beginnings of Deconstructionism are found in Derrida's introduction to his 1962 French translation of German philosopher Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, and later expanded in two major works, *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1967). *Of Grammatology* is a difficult book that contains the basis for deconstructive analysis of language. Two of the more important issues raised in the book are: logocentrism of language and the use of binary oppositions (sets) in western culture.

Logocentrism gives precedence to the spoken word over the written word. He says that philosophies that claim that speech is a more natural form of language give speech the position of primacy. By doing so, writing is reduced to a secondary position. His argument is not that writing is not secondary but that speech is not primary, a tricky way of equalizing these two components of language without setting up another binary set.

Some may claim that writing is merely recorded speech but Derrida argues the opposite: speech is a form of unrecorded script. Here again he makes a careful argument to avoid the establishment of new hierarchies. The specific concern that he raises in this discussion is what he calls "centering," the process of giving one term (the first of a set) more importance than another.

He shows that any text, no matter what kind, can be read in ways different from what it seems to be saying, which is the central proposition in his book. Communication is an unending series of textual meanings that arise and are subverted within themselves. Then the process repeats. The result of these repeated subversions of meaning is that no text is ever stable. Any stability in a text is merely illusory.

The basis of his discussion is the signifier/signified relationship that comes from the structuralists. He raises the specter of the difficulties of interpreting the relationships between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the object). This is the problem of writing, where a written word represents a spoken word that in turn represents the object. The movement from the one to the other is the structure of the meaning, but because this movement conceals and erases itself during the very act of movement, it remains unstable. He says, "There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language." Hence, since a text has so many different meanings, it cannot have one single meaning. This is the

basic conundrum of deconstruction: the very act of deconstruction is unstable and the results are indeterminate.

Overnight to Many Distant Cities

Barthelme is a noted minimalist fiction writer. In his collection *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (1983) are several notable short stories. "Cortes and Montezuma" shows the minimalist character of Barthelme's writing style. Minimalist means using a small amount of text to create the tale. Much of this story consists of short rapid-fire sentences, some of which have only three words, giving the reader a sense of urgency. In this manner, Barthelme retells the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, using themes of trust and breaking trust.

Another story from the same collection, "The first thing the baby did wrong . . . ," is a humorous parable about the difficulties of living with immutable rules. A family of three has a rule that the child will be confined to its room for four hours for every page that is torn out of a book. This rule backfires because the child tears pages out at every chance it gets. Eventually, the child owed the parents eighty-eight hours. The narrator says, "If you made a rule you had to stick to it." This points out the absurdity of a society that lives by rules that are not always understood nor well thought out.

"Postmodernism and Consumer Society"

In his 1983 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Frederic Jameson explains his idea of Postmodernism, what caused it to occur, and its basic principles. He discusses what he calls pastiche and schizophrenia as they relate to "the emergent social order of late capitalism." Pastiche is the loss of personal identity, which may be the result of capitalism and bureaucracies that place no importance on the individual. Another aspect of this loss of identity lies in the possibility that there is no way for writers and artists to create new styles because "they've already been invented." The other focus of the essay, schizophrenia, is the clash of narratives resulting from the combination of the past and future into the present. Throughout this essay, and others by Jameson, he takes considerable notice of the impact of capitalism on the course of social progress and artistic expression of the time.

Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art

Julia Kristeva introduces gender politics into the postmodern discussion in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. She proposes that unconscious drives are major players in communication and language. She explains that in creating a text by writing, the author releases unconscious selves and destroys the former notion of a solid, traditional, logical self. She considers the formative possibilities of a feminine voice that can result.

Kristeva looks at this issue of the feminine voice in the context of the dissolution of binary sets discussed by Derrida. She asserts that if customary language usage privileges one sex over another, as in the male/female set, it opens up the possibility of the marginalized sex eventually being eliminated from all discussions, though, at the same time, it provides means for women to raise their concerns if they utilize their status outside the mainstream.

Critical Overview

The exact date Postmodernism began can never be known. It was first mentioned in a text by Federico de Onís in 1934. This use was not widely known and received little attention by the wider community of writers. The word was used by Arnold Toynbee in 1954 in his *Study of History, Volume 8*. But it did not move into mainstream thought and criticism until 1959 with the publication of the article "What is Modernism" by Harry Levin.

Postmodernism then took the form of a theoretical concept as a discussion point in university classrooms. These discussions were directed at the state of the development of various art forms including literature, painting, music□and particularly, how these were changing.

In literature, writers like Vonnegut and Barthelme were experimenting with new ideas of how to create their novels. Poets like Reed, Allen Ginsburg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were also experimenting with new poetic ideas.

In painting, major shifts were occurring as painters were moving from the cubist styles into some of the less formal styles exemplified by the works of Jackson Pollack. For Pollack and others, art shifted from an intellectually driven pursuit of an intended result to a kind of art that just happened. The drip and splash paintings of Pollack show this very well. Other types of art forms to emerge included the collage and the pastiche forms of representation. In both of these the artist used items already made and combined them into a single artistic statement. The works of Andy Warhol are prime examples of these practices, including his *32 Campbell's Soup Cans* and the multiple images of Marilyn Monroe.

In music the introduction of electronically generated sounds created a shift in the course of music development. Vladimir Ussachevsky's first experiments with electronic sound seem very primitive to today's audience, but in 1951 these creations were stunningly different. They were not always welcomed, and the more mainstream composers dismissed these efforts as insignificant and unimportant. The works of John Cage are also important to this new era, including his "composition" for several radios on stage, each tuned to a different station.

Similar events happened in the course of language discussions, especially with the presentation of two works by Derrida, *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*. The combination of these two works established a new philosophic approach to the study of language and knowledge (the search for truth) called deconstruction. Basically this is an approach that reveals the instability of language and says that a stable meaning of a text is indeterminate. The author does not determine the meaning of the text because there are contradictions within the text that alter the meanings of the text in an unending cycle of text/meaning, followed by new text/meaning, and so on.

This concept and the ramifications of it have been the subject of much concern. On one end of the critical spectrum, Derrida and deconstruction have been accused of trying to destroy Western civilization. On the other end of the spectrum, he and deconstruction have been hailed as heroes by showing the difficulties of communication because of the underlying instabilities and uncertainties of language. Despite the attacks, condemnations, and praise, deconstruction has shaken the whole area of epistemology to its core. Whether the critic embraces or denies the concepts of deconstruction, he or she must begin with an acknowledgment of its existence and either build an argument on it or build an argument from a position opposing it.

In recent years the concept of Postmodernism has been widened to include discussions of social, economic, recreational, and other aspects of contemporary life. Just as deconstruction examined the relationship between language and meaning, postmodernist concepts in these areas examine the relationship between the different facets of cultural life.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Mowery holds a Ph.D. in composition and literature from Southern Illinois University. In this essay, Mowery examines narrative techniques in postmodern fiction.

One facet of Postmodernism that sets it apart from Modernism is the attitude that postmodern authors bring to fiction. While the modernist was concerned with precision both in language and presentation, the postmodernist breaks with these established practices. Time lines are often disrupted, leaving it to the reader to determine the order of events. At other times narrative expectations are upset as the author either contradicts the narrative or intrudes deliberately into the story line.

The way an author tells a story is through a narrator. Generally the narrator is not the author but a created persona with a personality, a behavior pattern and special reasons for telling the story in the manner it is being told. For example, the narrator of the Edgar Allan Poe story "The Tell Tale Heart" desperately tries to convince the reader that he is not crazy.

These narrators fall into one of the following categories: first person narrator; third person omniscient narrator; third person limited narrator; dramatic narrator (a phenomenological narration that makes no comment on or judgments about any of the actions or scenes in the tale); and in some circumstances the stream of consciousness narration (a specialized narration in the first person through the mind and thoughts of that person). However, there are notable variations to these types. In "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner used a first person plural ("we") narrator. In this story the townspeople tell the tale.

The only contact a reader has with a tale is through "the act of its being told (or retold)" by the narrator, according to Henry McDonald in "The Narrative Act: Wittgenstein and Narratology." Therefore, the reader must have a sense of the narrator's reliability. If the narrator is lying or telling the story in a slanted fashion, the reader must then come to grips with that fact and make a judgment about the story from that vantage point. This does not mean that a story cannot be understood even if the storyteller is lying; it means that the reader must reconcile knowing about a lying narrator with the information that the narrator presents. Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing." Therein lies the task of the perceptive reader: to locate and to understand the nature of the fictive world and to recognize the "truth" of that fictive world and to separate it from an unreliable presentation of it. The reader must determine the grounds for identifying that "truth."

An important aspect of the narrative presence is the structure it takes. In "The first thing the baby did wrong . . .," by Donald Barthelme, the narrator tells his story in monologue style. In the story the father describes his baby's behavior in a first person continuous narrative that describes how she is punished for tearing pages out of books. The monologue uses a familiar tone, referring to the audience as "you" to create a sense of intimacy ("She got real clever. You'd come up to her where she was playing.") and to

request sympathy for the parents' dilemma with the baby's actions. As the baby seems to enjoy her punishment, the father's narrative reveals frustration and a resolve to maintain rules set by the parents. In this story the narration is a simple one drawing the audience into the family circle and asking for sympathy.

Sometimes the narrative gives the reader a sense of being a part of the story as it unfolds. In the story "Montezuma and Cortez," Barthelme uses the continuous present to tell the story. It opens: "Because Cortez lands on a day specified in the ancient writing, because he is dressed in black, because his armour is silver . . . Montezuma considers Cortez to be Quetzalcoatl." The remainder of the story maintains this use of present tense, which gives the reader a sense of immediacy and an eyewitness- to-history feeling about the tale. The reader is not told the story after the fact, but as it happens□ like a live television show narrated by an announcer.

Other narrative structures include epistolary novels (novels that use a series of exchanged letters to report the story), diaries, or outline forms. The latter two are adopted by Barthelme. "Me and Miss Mandible" uses the diary format, taking the reader through the events of the story day by day. "Daumier" is in an outline form, with occasional topics indicated to tell the reader what the next section of the story will be about.

In these short story examples, the reliability of the narrator is kept at a high level. Also the author remains outside the story. But for many stories, this is not the case. Two novels that contain examples of authorial intrusions and that raise questions about the narrator's truthfulness and thereby the truth of the story itself are *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera and *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* by Marguerite Duras.

Authors often deliberately disturb the comfortable expectations of the reader. In many postmodern works the authors make direct statements to the reader, at times confronting the characters in the novel. Wendy Lesser, in her essay "The Character as Victim," wrote that among contemporary writers "the prevailing idea appears to be that authors and their characters are in direct competition." This notion is at odds with previous approaches to fiction, which keep the author out of the story. But for the postmodern writer these intrusions have become more normal. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes, "Tomas saw her jealousy . . . as a burden . . . he would be saddled with until not long before his death." The foreshadowing shows the author's knowledge of the mortality of his own character. This phrase ends a longer passage during which Tomas has become jealous of Tereza's success as a photographer. Kundera interrupts the passage by telling the reader that Tomas will die soon. This comment seems also a kind of jealous reaction: Kundera is jealous of his own character's successes and deflates that success by telling the reader of Tomas's impending death. Lesser confirms this by stating that "the author knows too clearly and powerfully what he wants to say. Nobody else . . . has a chance to say otherwise." Nobody has the opportunity to be too successful or to be too important. Kundera will not allow it.

Kundera also makes repeated comments that are outside the context of the story line. These authorial intrusions are often comments on various aspects in the novel. For example, in chapter 16 of Part Five, he writes, "Several days later, he was struck by another thought, which I record here as an addendum to the preceding chapter." The "I" in this sentence is Kundera, who has intruded into his story, telling the reader that he will make comments about an occurrence in the previous chapter.

In this self-reflexive way Kundera refers directly to the novel itself. He writes: "And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel." Later he comments, "In Part Three of this novel I told the tale of Sabrina." These interruptions by the author do what E. L. Doctorow claims is "the author deliberately [breaking] the mimetic spell of his text and [insisting] that the reader should not take his story to heart or believe in the existence of his characters." This act of destroying what has just been created occurs often in the works of postmodern authors.

Knowledge of the identity of the narrator assists the reader in making a connection with the story. The narrator in Barthelme's "The first thing the baby did wrong . . ." is the father, identified only as "I." But nothing further is needed. The narrator in *Lol Stein* is Jack Hold, who is reluctantly identified late in the novel. At the end of one section Duras has written: "Arm in arm they ascend the terrace steps. Tatiana introduces Peter Breugner, her husband, to Lol, and Jack Hold, a friend of theirs□the distance is covered□me." In this hesitant, circuitous way, the narrator is identified, in the third person by himself!

In Kundera's novel the narrator is never identified, leaving the reader to wonder if there is one or if the author himself is really telling the tale. But as Maureen Howard says, "Whoever the narrator may be, he's an entertaining fellow, sophisticated, professional, very European." Even though the reader does not know his identity, enough of his personality is present so his name does not matter.

Whoever the narrator is, it is imperative that the reader understands whether or not that narrator is telling the truth. Jack Hold, Duras's narrator, tells the tale of Lol but without a sense of certainty, saying things like, "I seem to remember," or "I doubt it," or "I can't say for sure." This imprecision (or indecision) leaves the reader without a sense of knowing what is really going on. Adding to the reader's uncertainty are additional phrases like: "My opinion," "I invent," and "I no longer know for sure." An additional complication to this is the fact that these imprecise statements have no effect on the narrator's attitude to story telling. He does not apologize for these lapses but ignores them after admitting them.

The most disturbing aspect of Jack Hold's narration is his admission, "I'm lying." Another passage includes the line, "I desperately want to partake of the word which emerges from the lips of Lol Stein, I want to be a part of this lie which she has forged." Further confusing the reader is the contradictory statement: "I didn't lie." In this story the narrator does not evade the issue of lying; he takes notice of it and moves ahead with the story.

In his novel, Kundera taxes the reader with the following statement: "The way he rushed into his decision seems rather odd to me. Could it perhaps conceal something else, something deeper that escaped his reasoning?" This is an admission by Kundera (the one asking the question here) that he does not know what is going on with a character of his own creation. How could a character's behavior seem odd to the author who has created that character? This asks the question: If the author does not know what is going on in the story, how can the reader expect to know? Recalling the earlier notion that Kundera confronts his own characters, in this instance the character seems to have won.

By the end of such statements the reader has no stable basis upon which to establish the verac- ity of the story. No "truth" can happen in the tale in which the narrator does not know what is going on, the author does not know what is going on, or where the narrator of the story admits to lying. The reader does not know what to believe. Here is the uncertainty of Wittgenstein's "groundlessness of believing." The reader does not know where to base an understanding of the fictional world the author has created.

A consequence of the self-reflexive aspects of these novels is that the reader is constantly being reminded that "it is a fiction," according to Terry Eagleton in "Estrangement and Irony." These reminders disturb the reader's ability to make the mental leap called the suspension of disbelief, which allows a reader of fiction to become immersed in the story and to care about the characters and their condition. Without this leap, the reader is more willing to dismiss both the tale and the characters.

These are just some of the manifestations of postmodernist concerns about the nature the truth in fiction. Jacques Derrida has noted that since language is unable to convey an absolute meaning, there results the impossibility for language to establish an absolute "truth." In fiction that "truth" is the creation of the author. Because postmodern authors disrupt their stories, intrude in them, and in some cases confront their own creations, there can be no "truth" in that fictional world.

Source: Carl Mowery, Critical Essay on Postmodernism, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following introduction excerpt, McCaffery discusses Postmodernism's precursors and origins.

Critical Essay #3

As I've already suggested, there is no sharp demarcation line separating modernism and postmodernism, and the alleged differences between the two become especially difficult to pinpoint if one is examining the development of fiction in a global context and not just focusing on what has been occurring in the United States. (The impulses behind the experimentalism of, say, Latin American or Eastern European fiction are clearly different from those that motivated U.S. authors in the 1960s.) In the United States what occurred in the postmodern outburst of the 1960s seemed very radical in part because fiction in the United States during the previous 30 years had seemed, for the most part, conservative aesthetically. This is not to say that experimenting wasn't taking place in the United States at all during this period□some of the great innovators of the previous generation continued to explore new forms (Faulkner, Stein, Fitzgerald), and a few newcomers with an experimental bent appeared (Djuna Barnes, Kenneth Patchen, Nathaniel West, John Hawkes, Jack Kerouac); but for the most part, U.S. authors during this period were content to deal with the key issues of their day□the Depression, World War II, existential angst□in relatively straightforward forms. The reasons behind this formal conservatism are certainly complex, but part of its hold on writers has to do with the way the times affected many writers, especially the sense that with such big issues to be examined authors couldn't afford the luxury of innovative strategies. At any rate, for whatever reasons in the United States from the period of 1930 until 1960 we do not find the emergence of a major innovator□someone equivalent to Beckett or Borges or Alain Robbe- Grillet or Louis Ferdinand Céline□except in the person of perhaps post-modern fiction's most important precursor, Vladimir Nabokov, who labored in obscurity in this country for 25 years until the scandal of *Lolita* made him suddenly very visible indeed (though for all the wrong reasons). As a result, by the late 1950s the United States was just as ripe for an aesthetic revolution as it was for the cultural revolution that was soon to follow. The two are, of course, intimately related.

Much of the groundwork for the so-called postmodern aesthetic revolution had already been established earlier in this century in such areas as the theoretical work being done in philosophy and science; the innovations made in painting (the rejection of mimesis and fixed point perspective, the emphasis on collage, self-exploration, abstract expressionism, and so on); in theater in the works of Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Genet, even Thornton Wilder; the increasing prominence of photography, the cinema, and eventually television, which coopted certain alternatives for writers while opening up other areas of emphasis. And if one looks carefully enough, there were many modernist literary figures who had called for a complete overhaul of the notion of representation in fiction. It is a commonplace to note that *Tristram Shandy* is a thoroughly postmodern work in every respect but the period in which it is written, and there are dozens of other examples of authors who explored many of the same avenues of experimentalism that postmodern writers were to take: for instance, the surreal, mechanically produced constructions of Raymond Roussel; the work of Alfred Jarry, with its black humor, its obscenity, its confounding of fact, fiction, and autobiography, its general sense of play and formal outrageousness; André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, with its self-reflexiveness

and self-commentary; Franz Kafka's matter-of-fact surrealistic presentation of the self and its relationship to society (significantly, Kafka's impact on American writing was not strong until the 1950s); William Faulkner, with his multiple narrators and competing truths, and whose own voice is so insistently foregrounded throughout his fiction as to obliterate any real sense that he is transcribing anything but his own consciousness; and, looming over the entire literary landscape, is the figure of James Joyce, the Dead Father of postmodern fiction, who must be dealt with, slain, the pieces of his genius ritually eaten and digested.

The wider social and political forces that galvanized postmodern writers and provided a sense of urgency and focus to their development were similar, in some ways, to those that provided such a great impetus to artistic innovation during the 1920s. In both Cases, an international tragedy World War I for artists in the 1920s, and Vietnam (along with a host of more diffused insanities, like the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the ongoing destruction of the environment) for postmodern American writers created the sense that fundamental reconsiderations had to be made about the systems that govern our lives. Such systems included the political, social, and other ideological forms that had helped lead us to the position we were in, and also the artistic forms through which we could express a sense of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. Thus, World War I was a global disaster of such unprecedented proportions, and had been produced by the very features of society that were supposed to ennoble and "civilize" us (reason, technology), that artists were forced to rethink the basic rationalistic, humanistic principles that had formed the basis of Western art since the Renaissance. One predictable response to the view that reality had become a fragmented, chaotic "Wasteland" was to turn to art as a kind of last retreat, a last source of reason, stability, and harmony. (One thinks of the magnificently ordered private systems of Joyce, Yeats, Pound, Proust, and Hemingway.) Another tactic was to develop art that turned its back on the barbarism and entropy of reality and explored instead the more abstract, rarified realm of art itself; here was a place where poets could examine language without regard to referents, where painters could explore the implications of lines, shapes, textures, and colors freed from outer correspondences. A third possibility was the development of artistic strategies that affirmed rather than denied or ignored the disorder and irrationalism around it, that joined forces with the primitive, illogical drives that Freud claimed lay within us all the strategy of the dadaists and surrealists in painting and poetry, and of a few fiction writers as well (Anaïs Nin, Céline, Robert Desnos, Michel Leiris). Interestingly enough, all three tendencies would be evident in postmodern fiction 40 years later: the huge, intricately structured work (Pynchon, William Gaddis, Barth, Don DeLillo, Coover, Joseph McElroy, Alexander Theroux); the work that concerns only itself, its own mechanisms, the pure relationship of symbol and word (in William H. Gass, Richard Kostelanetz, Robert Pinget, Coover, Steve Katz, Barthelme); and the fractured, delirious text whose process mirrored the entropy and fragmentation outside (William S. Burroughs, Barthelme, Raymond Federman, Kathy Acker). The difference between the two periods, then, is finally one of degree the degree to which contemporary writers have turned to these strategies, the degree to which they have moved away from realistic norms (even in elaborately ordered works), especially in the degree to which artifice, playfulness, and self-

consciousness—features not so common to the innovative fictions of the 1920s—have been consistently incorporated into the fabric of postmodern fiction.

It probably seems initially peculiar that postmodernism emerged in the 1960s rather than in the years that immediately followed World War II. It may be that the war, with its Hitlers and Mussolinis, its Hiroshimas and Normandy Beaches and Dresdens, its other unthinkable horrors (the concentration camps, collective suicides, and so on), was too dreadful or overwhelming to be directly confronted. In any case, the great innovators of the 1940s and 1950s tended to be, at least at first glance, nonsocially conscious writers. Beckett, Borges, and Nabokov—the three authors from this period who were to have the most direct impact on postmodern writing—all appeared to turn their backs on the world outside in favor of a movement inward, toward the world of language, dream, and memory, to examine the nature of subjective experience, of the way words beguile, mislead, and shape our perception, of the way imagination builds its own realm out of symbols. I emphasize the word "appear" in these three cases because all three of these authors were, in fact, very much political writers in a very basic sense, for each was profoundly aware of the importance that language plays in shaping the world around us, the way power-structures use this world-building capacity of words, the way that reality and commonsense are disguised versions of ideologies that are foisted on individuals by institutions that profit from the popular acceptance of these illusions. From this perspective, the postmodern emphasis on subjectivity, language, and fiction-making is hardly as irrelevant, self-indulgent, and narcissistic as many unsympathetic critics have charged. Indeed, many of the most important postmodern works, for all their experimentalism, metafictional impulses, selfreflexiveness, playfulness, and game-playing, have much more to say about history, social issues, and politics than is generally realized.

Another writer very aware of the need to examine the role of language within larger contexts was George Orwell, whose *1984* remains the most famous fictional treatment of political language manipulation. *1984*, which grew out of science fiction's dystopian tradition and which was specifically influenced by Yevgeny Zamiatin's remarkable experimental novel, *We* (a "postmodern" novel published in 1920), points to another important tendency in postmodern fiction: the increasing attention being paid by serious, highly sophisticated authors to paraliterary forms such as science fiction and detective fiction—forms that proved attractive to the postmodern spirit partly because mimesis was never their guiding concern to begin with. Such genres were thus free to generate forms and conventions that were entirely different from those of traditional fiction, and that proved to be surprisingly rich and suggestive. Developments in these paraliterary forms need to be examined more thoroughly by scholars—there are fertile areas of investigation into, for example, the use of pornographical conventions by Acker, Coover, Samuel Delany, and Clarence Major (not to mention Nabokov); or the appropriation of detective novel forms by many postmodern writers (Nabokov, Stanislaw Lem, Michel Butor, Robbe Grillet, William Hjortsberg, McElroy). But the most significant evolution of a paraliterary form has been that of science fiction. Long respected in Europe and never as clearly separated from literature there as it has been in the United States (cf. the European tradition of H.G. Wells, Zamiatin, Karel Cˇ apek, Olaf Stapledon, Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Arthur C. Clark, J.G. Ballard), SF emerged in the United States from its

self-imposed "ghetto status" into a major field of creative activity during the 1960s. Although many literary critics remain suspicious of and condescending toward SF, it is obvious today that a number of the most significant postmodern innovators have been SF writers. This is certainly the case with Philip K. Dick, a writer misunderstood both inside and outside his field. Because his publishers forced him onto a treadmill of rapid-fire production, Dick's novels are always plagued by a certain amount of sloppiness, lack of verbal grace, and two-dimensional character portrayals. Nevertheless, Dick had a brilliant fictional imagination capable of inventing plots of considerable intricacy and metaphorical suggestiveness. In his best works□*The Man in the High Castle, Martian Time-Slip, Ubik, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*□he devised highly original central plot structures that deal with many of the same issues common to postmodernism: metaphysical ambiguity, the oppressive nature of political systems, entropy, the mechanization of modern life.

Similarly, other major SF figures□including Ursula LeGuin, Delany, Gene Wolfe, John Varley, Lem, Roger Zelazny□have been creating complex, ingenious fictional forms that tell us a great deal about the fantastic world around us but that do so with structures whose conventions and language differ fundamentally from that of "mundane fiction" (as Delany refers to it). Indeed, one indication of the richness and diversity of this field can be seen in the number of "mainstream" authors who have turned to SF□Doris Lessing, Anthony Burgess, Italo Calvino, Marge Piercy, Thomas Berger, Nabokov, Raymond Federman, and dozens of others.

There were, of course, other developments occurring before 1960 that would influence the direction of postmodernism. One of the most important of these has been the rapid emergence of the cinema and television as major artistic forms. It is probably no accident that postmodern experimentalists were the first generation of writers who grew up immersed in television, or that many of these writers were as saturated with the cinema as their forefathers had been with literature. The specific influences of television and the movies on postmodern fiction are diffuse, generalized, difficult to pinpoint, but obviously an awareness of the process through which a movie is presented□its rapid cutting, its use of montage and juxtaposition, its reliance on close-ups, tracking shots, and other technical devices□is likely to create some deeply rooted effects on writers when they sit down at their collective typewriters. (The process is also symbiotic: Eisenstein's theory of montage had a profound effect on an entire generation of writers, but so did Flaubert's use of montage in the famous "countryfair" scene in *Madame Bovary* affect filmmakers.) And as important as movies and television were in suggesting to writers what could be put in to their works was the example they supplied for what could be left out profitably. Not only did writers quickly realize that television and the cinema could deal with certain narrative forms more effectively than fiction (photography had similarly made certain forms of painting instantly obsolete), but a number of cinematic shorthand devices proved useful in fiction as well. Audiences trained in the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel may have required certain connections, certain details and transitions, but cinematic directors quickly discovered that many of these could be eliminated once the audience became acquainted with a different set of conventions. (Consider a typical cinematic juxtaposition of a man walking up a street and a shot of him sitting in the interior of a house□there's no need to supply

the sights he saw on his walk, a view of the house approaching, the pause while knocking on the door or inserting the key, and so on.) Similarly, the pacing of television□and of television commercials, whose significance is also substantial in this regard□is directly apparent in many postmodern works (one thinks of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Ragtime*, of Coover's and Barthelme's short fiction, of Manuel Puig and Jonathan Baumbach). The more specific influences of individual directors cannot be discounted: Jean-Luc Godard probably had as much impact on the imaginations of writers during the 1960s as any literary figure; and in various ways, movies like *8*, *Blow Up*, *Belle de Jour*, *Repulsion*, *2001*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and a host of other innovative films, have deeply imprinted themselves in the body of postmodern fiction.

Critical Essay #4

The early 1960s saw the publication of a number of fictional works that indicated that American fiction was heading in some very different directions than it had been during the preceding 25 years. Signaling this change in aesthetic sensibility was the appearance within a relatively short period of time (1960-1965) of a number of major works that decisively broke with the traditions of conventional realism. These key works included John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), Donald Barthelme's *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964), and Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* (1965). These works were all produced by young, obviously ambitious writers (Nabokov is an exception, in terms of age). This fiction owed its unusual effects to a wide variety of sources, such as the absurdist theater (which had been flourishing in New York's Off-Broadway scene during the late 1950s), jazz and rock and roll, pop art, and other developments in the avant-garde art scene, the growing appreciation of Kafka and other experimenters (many of whom were first being translated during this period: Céline, Robbe-Grillet, and the other French New Novelists, Jean Genet, Borges, Günter Grass), the energy and hot-wired delirium of the Beats. The result was a peculiar blend of dark humor, literary parody, surrealism, byzantine plots full of improbable coincidences and outrageous action, all presented in a dazzling variety of excessive styles that constantly called attention to themselves. Postmodern fiction had arrived.

What was to characterize the direction of postmodern fiction during the rest of the decade□the push to test new forms of expression, to examine conventions and solutions critically and seek new answers, to rethink so-called natural methods of organizing perception, expose their ideological origins, and pose new systems of organization□was hardly born in an ivory-towered, academic vacuum. The art of the 1960s, including the postmodern fiction, reflected the basic ways in which the ideologies on which the U.S. order had traditionally relied, together with the cultural values by which it rules, were in deep turmoil. Fiction reflected the sense, shared by many of our most thoughtful and articulate citizens, that we had been led (and misled) into the age of nuclear nightmare, into Vietnam, into ecological apocalypse, into political oppression, and into an insane and immoral sense of values that devalued human beings by glorifying abstractions and the inanimate□all this in the name of certain labels and covert ideologies that badly needed overhauling. A natural extension of this feeling was the desire to tear down the ruling ideologies (political, sexual, moral, social, aesthetic, all of which proved to be remarkably integrated) and reveal them for what they were: arbitrary structures imposed as a result of various complex, historical, and economic forces, instated into societies as natural and commonsensical, all of which served, in one way or another, to reinforce the status quo and insure the continued world view (and hence the continued power) of those who established these ideologies. Thus, the aggressive, radicalized poetics of postmodernism was an extension of a larger sense of dissatisfaction and frustration. "Don't trust anyone over 30" was an expression commonly heard among young people in the 1960s who were fed up with the content

and structure of their lives. A similar distrust of one's "elders" was equally apparent in postmodern fiction writers.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of writers had firmly established itself. During this period experimental fictions appeared by authors who were eventually characterized by critics as being postmodern in outlook: William Gass' *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps*, Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association* and *Pricksongs and Descants*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Peter Handke's *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Steve Katz's *The Exagggerations of Peter Prince*, Donald Barthelme's *City Life*, *Snow White*, and *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, Tom Robbins' *Another Roadside Attraction*, Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing*, Rudolf Wurlitzer's *Nog*, Nabokov's *Ada*, and Joseph McElroy's *A Smuggler's Bible*. The point is not that these authors approached the issue of fictional innovation in a fundamentally unified fashion. Rather, quite the opposite was true: writers were busy exploring a host of innovative strategies, many of them very different in intent and effect. (One can hardly imagine, for example, two works so opposed in aesthetic orientation as, say, Federman's *Double or Nothing* and Gass' "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country.") What these experimentations did share, however, was a general sense that fiction needed to acknowledge its own artificial, constructed nature, to focus the reader's attention on how the work was being articulated rather than merely on what was happening. Distrustful of all claims to truth and hypersensitive to the view that reality and objectivity were not givens but social or linguistic constructs, postmodern writers tended to lay bare the artifice of their works, to comment on the processes involved, to refuse to create the realist illusion that the work mimics operations outside itself. In the ideology of realism or representation, it was implied that words were linked to thoughts or objects in essentially direct, incontrovertible ways. On the other hand, postmodern authors operating in an aesthetic environment that has grown out of Saussaurian linguistics, Wittgenstein's notion of meaning-as-usage, structuralism, and deconstructive views of language tend to manipulate words as changeable entities determined by the rules of the particular sign-system (the fiction at hand). Hardly a translucent window on to an object (the world, reality) or a mind, the language in many postmodern texts becomes "thickened," played with and shown off, and frequently becomes just another element to be manipulated by a self-conscious author.

Other conventions of the realist narrative were challenged. The notion of the unified subject living in a world of stable essences (one of the cornerstones of traditional fiction) was one such notion that was frequently mocked by postmodern authors, either by so obsessively emphasizing the schizophrenic, subjective nature of experience as to obliterate the distinction between subject and reality (as in Philip Dick or Jonathan Baumbach or Federman) or by creating characters with no definable personality or who changed from scene to scene (as with Ronald Sukenick's figures who change "like a cloud," or Ron Silliman's prose experiments in which narrator and setting disappear into the process of language selection). The commonsensical distinction between fact and fiction, author and text, also became increasingly difficult to make. "Real" authors began making increasingly common excursions into their fictional worlds (as Vonnegut did in

Breakfast of Champions and Fowles did in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, or as Sukenick and Federman and Katz did in nearly all their works); fragments of real events, real reportage, and news often became incorporated into works, collage-fashion, making it impossible to untangle what was being made up from what had really happened. (Here one thinks of Barthelme, Burroughs, Vonnegut, Harold Jaffe, Coover, and William Kennedy.) This tendency to break down the seam between the real and the invented, or to deny the relevance of this distinction altogether, was also evident in the writing of the New Journalists, like Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Hunter Thompson. These authors, along with other writers who blurred the fact/fiction dichotomy (Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Peter Handke in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, V. S. Naipaul in *In a Free State*, and so on), not only employed various conventions borrowed from fiction to heighten a sense of drama and plot development, but they also thrust their own subjective responses into the forefront of their works rather than making claims that their texts were objective. Likewise, the distinction between poetry and prose was also often dissolved, not just by fiction writers who emphasized poetic qualities in their prose (Gass, Barry Hannah, Stanley Elkin, Nabokov, Hawkes), but also by poets who began to explore longer forms of prose. (See Ron Silliman's discussion of this important phenomenon in this volume.) Even the familiar "look" of books□the conventions of typography, pagination, and other visual elements that actually govern the process of reading itself□was freely tampered with, in works of such visual ingenuity as Federman's *Double or Nothing*, Katz's *The Exagggerations of Peter Prince*, Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, Julio Cortázar's *Ultimo Rundo*, Barthelme's *City Life*, or Butor's *Mobile*. In short, virtually all of the elements that make the reading experience what it is were being reexamined by postmodern experimenters during the 1960s. Not surprisingly, many of the experiments proved to be dead ends or were rapidly exhausted and then discarded. This seems to be the case with the New Novel experiments and with a lot of the typographical experimentation, for example. But even these innovations were useful in that they suggested avenues that writers need no longer explore.

Critical Essay #5

As should be evident from the focus of the two critical articles dealing with postmodern criticism and from the critics I selected to be included in the individual author entry section, I have tried to emphasize critical thought that shares features of postmodern thought rather than focusing on criticism that deals with postmodern fiction. Indeed, it seems evident to me that many of the same principles and tendencies that were shaping the direction of postmodern fiction are central to the development of the most important critical schools of the past 25 years: structuralism, deconstruction, and Marxistoriented criticism. (For a good overview of this interaction, see Charles Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self & Postmodern American Fiction*.) For example, the Marxist and structuralist emphasis on the constructedness of human meaning is similar to postmodern fiction's sense that reality is not given and that our way of perceiving it is hardly natural or self-evident. Terry Eagleton's fine summary of the chief tenets of structuralism in his survey of critical thought, *Literary Theory* helps clarify the interrelationship between structuralism and postmodern aesthetics very clearly. Structuralism, he notes, emphasizes that:

> Meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it was the product of certain shared systems of signification. The confident bourgeoise belief that the isolated individual subject was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock: language pre-dated the individual, and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it. Meaning was not "natural," a question of just looking and seeing, or something eternally settled; the way you interpreted your world was a function of the languages you had at your disposal, and there was evidently nothing immutable about these. Meaning was not something which all men and women everywhere intuitively shared, and then articulated in their various tongues and scripts; what meaning you were able to articulate depended on what script or speech you shared in the first place. There were the seeds here of a social and historical theory of meaning, whose implications were to run deep within contemporary thought. It was impossible any longer to see reality simply as something "out there," a fixed order of things which language merely reflected.

For structuralism, then, reality and our experience of reality need not necessarily be continuous a view that is intimately connected with postmodern fiction's refusal to rely on fixed notions of reality, its emphasis on reproducing the human being's imaginative (subjective, fictional) responses to what is "out there" rather than trying to convince the

readers that they are experiencing a transcription of reality unfiltered by a mediating process. Roland Barthes' early ventures into structuralist criticism produced a notion that also bears some striking relevance for what would develop in fiction during the 1960s. For example, Barthes' analysis of the healthy sign is directly applicable to what postmodern authors suggest about healthy fiction: in both cases the artifact is healthiest which draws attention to itself and to its own arbitrariness□ one that makes no effort to pass itself off as natural or inevitable but that, in the very act of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well. Thus, very much like postmodern fiction writers, Barthes rightly perceives that one of the functions of ideologies and power-structures of all sorts is always to convert culture into nature□to make it appear that conventions, signs, and social realities are natural, innocent, commonsensical. The obvious literary analogy to this natural attitude can be found in realist fiction, which implies that it possesses the means (a natural language) to represent something else with little or no interference with what it mediates. Such a realist sign is for Barthes□and for the postmodern authors of the 1960s□essentially unhealthy, for it proceeds by denying its own status as a sign in order to create the illusion that we are perceiving reality without its intervention.

Deconstruction and poststructuralism, as developed by Derrida, Paul de Man, Barthes, and others, was essentially an attempt to topple the logic by which a particular system of thought (and behind that, a whole system of political structures and social institutions) maintains its force. By demonstrating that all meaning and knowledge could be exposed as resting on a naively representational theory of language, poststructuralism provided still another justification for postmodernism's emphasis on the free play of language, of the text-asgenerating- meaning. The later Barthes (as in *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973) suggested that only in writing (or in reading-as-writing) could the individual be freed momentarily from the tyranny of structural meaning, from ideology, from theory. As Eagleton notes, one product of this emphasis on the unnaturalness of signs was admittedly the tendency by some poststructuralists (and some fiction writers) to flee from history, to take refuge in the erotic play of writing/reading, and conveniently to evade reality and all political questions completely:

> If meaning, the signified, was a passing product of words or signifiers, always shifting and unstable, part-present and part-absent, how could there be any determinate truth or meaning at all? If reality was constructed by our discourse rather than reflected by it, how could we ever know reality itself, rather than merely knowing our own discourse? Was all talk just talk about talk? Did it make sense to claim that one interpretation of reality, history or the literary text was "better" than another?

Such questions cut to the heart of the debate that was to rage during the mid- to late 1970s about the moral responsibility of fiction□a debate most famously summarized in the series of public discussions between the late John Gardner, whose study *On Moral Fiction* sparked considerable public interest in this issue, and William Gass, whose

eloquent defense of fiction's irrelevancy to conditions outside the page (in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*) became a seminal aspect of postmodern aesthetics. (The Gass-Gardner "Debate" in *Anything Can Happen*) The outline of this debate centered on Gardner's claim, echoed by a number of other critics (perhaps most effectively in Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself*), that postmodern experimentalism, with its willful artifice and subjectivity, its metafictional impulses and emphasis on the play of language, is fundamentally trivial, vain, self-absorbed, and narcissistic. Gass, on the other hand, took essentially the familiar art-forart's- sake position but developed his views with considerable rigor, supporting them with theories of language and aesthetics formulated by Wittgenstein and Max Black (both of whom Gass had studied under at Cornell), Paul Valéry, and Gertrude Stein. Words, said Gass, are the writer's chief concern, for the writer's final obligation is to build something (a world of language, with its own rules and systems of transformations), not to describe something. One senses in Gass a longing for a safe and human refuge in this world of language, a place controlled and purified, an escape from an ugly, petty reality in which history becomes a destructive monument to human greed, in which discourse has been degraded into instruments of commerce, politics, and bureaucracy. Paradoxically, then, although Gass's emphasis on fiction as an interaction of signifiers had a liberating effect on the formal concerns of postmodern authors, there was also a potentially troubling elitism about his position, with its emphasis on formal complexity and beauty, and its lack of self-irony and play. This tendency is also obvious (and troubling) when one examines the important Yale School of Critics (Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, de Man, and, with some reservations, Harold Bloom). These latter critics have argued, often brilliantly, that literary language□indeed, all forms of discourse constantly undermines its own meaning. But in their tendency to view all elements of reality, including social reality, as merely further texts to be deconstructed as being undecidable, there emerges the sense that one has found a means to demolish all opinions without having to adopt any of one's own. Perhaps the key factor that needs to be emphasized in this regard is that, as Derrida and Barthes, among others, have demonstrated, there is no fundamental opposition between a fiction that emphasizes its unnaturalness, its arbitrariness, that reveals (and revels in) its *différances*, and one that deals with history, politics, and social issues in a significant fashion. Indeed, by opening up a radical awareness of the sign systems by which men and women live, and by offering exemplars of freely created fictions that oppose publicly accepted ones, postmodern fiction contains the potential to rejoin the history which some claim it has abandoned. Thus, although most critics have been largely blind to the political thrust of postmodern experimentalism, it will surely soon be recognized that the fiction of Barthelme, Coover, Sukenick, Federman, Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo, Silliman, and other innovators of postmodernism is very much centered on political questions: questions about how ideologies are formed, the process whereby conventions are developed, the need for individuals to exercise their own imaginative and linguistic powers lest these powers be coopted by others.

Critical Essay #6

If a single work may be said to have provided a model for the direction of postmodern fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, it is probably García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a work that admirably and brilliantly combines experimental impulses with a powerful sense of political and social reality. Indeed, Márquez's masterpiece perfectly embodies a tendency found in much of the best recent fiction—that is, it uses experimental strategies to discover new methods of reconnecting with the world outside the page, outside of language. In many ways, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is clearly a nonrealistic novel, with its magical, surreal landscape, its dense reflexive surface, its metafictional emphasis on the nature of language and how reality is storified from one generation to the next, its labyrinthine literary references, and other features. Yet for all its experimentalism, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also is a highly readable, coherent story, peopled with dozens of memorable characters; and it also urgently speaks to us about political, historical, and psychological realities that are central to our experience. It thus becomes an emblem of what postmodernism can be, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis, developing its own organic form of experimentalism, yet managing to reconnect its readers with the world around them. When one examines some of the major works that have appeared since 1975—Barth's *Letters*, for example, or Gaddis' *JR*, or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, or William Kennedy's *Ironweed* —one can see a similar synthesis at work.

This synthesis between experimentalism and more traditional literary concerns is explainable on many levels. Partly it has to do with the predictable, dialectical process that seems to govern most revolutions (aesthetical and otherwise), with the radicalism of one era being soon questioned, reexamined, and then counterattacked by more conservative attitudes. If the public spirit of rebellion, distrust, and unrest was reflected in the disruptive fictional forms of the 1960s, so, too, has the reactionary, conservative political and social atmosphere of the late 1970s and early 1980s inevitably been manifested in the literature of this period. This is not to say that experimentalism has dried up completely, but certainly it is obvious that authors today are less interested in innovation per se than they were ten or fifteen years ago—especially innovation in the direction of reflexive, nonreferential works. And, of course, the source of this shift in sensibility lies beyond the political climate alone. For one thing, the experimental fervor that seemed to sustain postmodernism for several years has been subjected to repeated counterattacks by authors and critics (one thinks of Gardner, Carver, Gore Vidal, and Graff). More significantly, we find authors simply exploring new grounds, different methods of innovation, redefining notions like realism and artifice in much the same way that, for example, photorealists did in painting. This is a familiar scenario: socalled artistic revolutions have a natural life span, and they are inevitably succeeded by a new artistic situation, with its own demands and needs, its own practitioners who do not share the enthusiasms of the previous group and who are anxious to define themselves as individuals in their own way. Thus, when we examine a number of the highly regarded writers who have emerged since 1975—authors like Ron Hansen, Ian McEwan, Frederick Barthelme, William Kennedy, Toni Morrison, Jayne Anne Phillips,

Stephen Dixon, Raymond Carver, or Ann Beattie—we discover a very different aesthetic sensibility in their work than that which characterized earlier postmodern writers, a sensibility that seems interested in what I would term experimental realism. (Note that Professor Jerome Klinkowitz presents a different notion of this term in his article in this volume.) By experimental realism I mean fiction that is fundamentally realistic in its impulses but that develops innovative strategies in structure (the nonendings of Beattie, Carver, Barthelme, the absence of character and plot in Silliman), language (the poetic prose of Phillips or Maxine Hong Kingston or Marilynne Robinson, the collageassemblage of Silliman), the use of unusual materials (as with the use of "found" materials in Beattie, the manipulations of legend and history in Hansen, Kennedy, Leslie Silko, and Kingston), and so on. Of course, some of the sense of the decline of experimentalism results from our greater familiarity with the innovative strategies that once seemed so peculiar and difficult. Because later fiction which uses these experimental strategies seems more familiar and hence less threatening, its subsequent appearance is less likely to be remarked on—it is, in fact, no longer considered to be experimental at all. To take an obvious example, it might not occur to most readers or critics to discuss John Irving's *The World According to Garp* as an experimental novel, although it obviously employs many of the same metafictional techniques—the book-within-a-book, the interweaving of fiction and reality, playful selfreferences to its author's previous works—that other, more radical texts were using back in the 1960s. This isn't to say that Irving's book isn't experimental or metafiction—it clearly is; it just may seem beside the point to label it as such.

Much the same point can be made about many of the best works of fiction that have appeared in the United States from 1975 to 1984. Books like Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, Alexander Theroux's *Darconville's Cat*, John Barth's *Sabbatical*, Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Jailbird*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, William Kennedy's Albany trilogy, and John Calvin Batchelor's *The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet* (to give just a sampling) incorporated postmodern experimental strategies into their structures so smoothly that they have often been seen as being quite traditional in orientation. Naturally, more radical experimental works continue to be written, but with a few notable exceptions—most of the books published by the Fiction Collective, the remarkable prose experiments of Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, and Charles Bernstein, Joseph McElroy's *Plus*, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, Kathy Acker's "punk novels," Walter Abish's works—most of the important, vital fiction of the last decade were neither exclusively experimental in an obvious, flamboyant manner, nor representational in a traditional, realist sense. Again, this situation recapitulates what we see in the other arts, in which the advances and new directions adopted by artists of one period (say, the break with representation and fixed perspective in painting) are gradually assimilated by artists of succeeding generations until a new period of stagnation arises which subsequently produces a new revolution. Thus, like the operations that are endlessly forming and transforming the nature of reality itself (and the nature of our lives within this flux), the transformations of art will surely continue, heedless of the desires of critics for clear patterns, unassailable definitions, and useful labels.

Source: Larry McCaffery, "Introduction," in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, edited by Larry Mc- Caffery, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. xiv-xxviii.

Adaptations

Conjure: Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed sets the poetry of Ishmael Reed to music. The selections are from Reed's collection of poetry published in 1972. This adaptation has received high acclaim by reviewers from *Absolute Sound* and the *Philadelphia Enquirer*.

Morrison's *Beloved* was adapted as a film by director Jonathan Demme in 1998.

Topics for Further Study

How have the ideas of disintegration, instability, and/or textual uncertainty (in the postmodern use of these terms) had an effect on you? Describe the issues and put into your own context a narrative describing how you perceive things to be different because of these ideas. Speculate on how things might have been different had these ideas not made an impact on you.

Take your favorite piece of literature and deconstruct it. Show, to the best of your understanding, what the author might have meant in the text. Then show how that meaning might be quite a different thing. Use a short text for this exercise.

Take a standard text and do a "special" reading of it. For example, examine a text from a feminist perspective, or from a Marxist perspective, or from a special point of view of your own choosing.

Critique your favorite television program showing the postmodern features of an individual show or of a series of shows. To ensure analytical accuracy, videotape the shows you examine. Be specific in your discussion, explaining in detail how the chosen features are postmodern and how they contribute to the success (or failure) of the show or shows in question.

Postmodernism has had an important role in the development of the MTV phenomenon. Select some music videos and describe them in terms of a postmodern aspect (social/economic influence, feminism, instability of texts regarding meaning, blurred lines between the "real" world and the "fictive" world in the video, etc.). Videos from the very early days of MTV might be compared with those now being broadcast, showing the postmodern trends in the development of videos. In your discussion be specific in the conclusions you derive from your study. Put these conclusions into theoretical terms.

Compare and Contrast

1920s-1930s: The modernist philosophic paradigm can be expressed as the following: search for the truth.

Today: The postmodernist philosophic paradigm is expressed in the following way: there is no identifiable truth.

1920s-1930s: Modernists believe that the artist is not the preserver of the culture; rather the artist is the creator of culture. The art of the modernist is experimental, innovative, and formally complex. Art is a unique object and a finished work authenticated by the artist and validated by agreed-upon standards. "The Photograph never lies."

Today: Art is repetitive and uses familiar or ready-made objects, or mechanical reproductions of objects. The artist does not believe that art or the artist occupies a special place apart from the rest of society. Art is a process, a performance, a production, using combinations of media. There are no agreed-upon standards. In the postmodern world, with digital imaging, photos and video can be altered completely or created completely, leaving the question, "What is reality?"

1920s-1930s: Writers are very conscious of the act of writing and try to leave a permanent result in the reader's mind with their product. The novel is the dominant form of fiction writing. The author determines the meaning of the novel for the reader.

Today: Postmodern writers become aware that language is not as permanent as the modernists believed and that their product is not a stable one. As Derrida claims, speech is more secure than written language because the producer of the text is present to give it immediate meaning. Since meaning is indeterminate, the meaning of a novel is unknown.

1920s-1930s: Art is created to shock the audience. The cubism of Picasso and the risqué novels of Joyce are examples of these shocking creations. Once art is completed, it is a stable work of art.

Today: Art is less shocking and more an incomplete artifact of the artist. "Performance art" is an example of this in which people 'live' in a store window or in a glass walled house revealing their everyday life to a passing public.

1920s-1930s: Work in factories is for the husband; home life is for the wife who tends house and raises the children.

Today: Men and women work at the same tasks including firefighting and construction work; however, pay scales for women are not equalized in all areas.

What Do I Read Next?

Barbara Creed, the author of "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism" connects feminist theory with Postmodernism in her short essay in *Screen*. She compares the writing of two authors, Alice Jardine and Craig Owens, seeking a solution to the problem of the intersection of feminist and postmodern theories. Creed points out that while both authors come at this topic from different points of reference, both they and Creed agree that there is a common ground and a legitimate intersection of these theoretical philosophies. Her conclusions are that these philosophies are important, relevant, and connected but that they should not try to explain everything in a "totalizing theory."

Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society (2000), by Arthur Asa Berger, contains information that will facilitate a study of the advertising world. He examines the cross-pressures between advertisements and various social, economic, and cultural factors. His deconstruction of the now famous 1984 Macintosh TV ad is included in this text.

The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, by David Rabe, startled the theatergoing public in 1971. This postmodern play is a story of a naïve recruit's initiation into war. It won Rabe an Obie and was hailed by the *New York Times* as "rich in humor, irony and insight." It is both brutal and hilarious, making intense critical comments on the Vietnam War and the military establishment in general. It is published along with *Sticks and Bones* by Grove Press in the 1972 volume *The Vietnam Plays*. Rabe won a Tony for his 1995 play *Hurlyburly*.

Gravity's Rainbow (1973), by Thomas Pynchon, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel set in Europe during World War II. This novel forces readers to constantly evaluate the sense of reality constructed from page one.

Further Study

Geyh, Paula, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy, eds., *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Postmodern American Fiction is a collection of some of the major works of literature and criticism from the postmodern era. These works are excerpted but they maintain their postmodern essence and are worthy representatives of the literature.

Grentz, Stanley J., *Primer on Postmodernism*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.

This short text explains in simple terms some of the major aspects of Postmodernism. It is easily accessible to the interested student of postmodern thought.

Hoover, Paul, ed., *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1994.

The selections in *Postmodern American Poetry* are arranged in chronological order by the birth date of the author. There is a section of writings by many of the authors in which they explain their philosophy of writing poetry and their poetics.

Natoli, Joseph, and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *Postmodern Reader*, SUNY Press, 1993.

This is a collection of critical writings, some excerpted, by the major authors and critics in the postmodern movement. These are the original works and they do not have guides or explanations accompanying.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literary Movements for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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