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An Introduction to Postmodernism

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General Definition

Postmodern, as defined by its outstanding critic Jean Fancois Lyotard, is an **"incredulity towards metanarrative"**. This definition indicates a challenge and a skeptical attitude towards narrative system by which human experiences are universally organized and interpreted. In his *The Postmodern Conditions: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Lyotard explains that the term "postmodern" describes the conditions that affected state of cultures and altered "the game rules for science, literature, and arts." This implicitly refers to modern **grand narratives (metanarratives)** that are marked by **absolute truth and** the **certainty of undeferred meaning.** In postmodern era, by contrast, grand narratives are challenged by a **"culture of interruption"** in which the present is postponed and dispersed into other periods, creating a general situation that is originally termed **"counter-time."** The past and future are shown in simulation; time is out of harmony with itself. In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (2004), Steven Conner (ed.) confirms:

> Authority and legitimacy were no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centers they had previously occupied; and the differentiations – for example, those between what had been called "centers" and "margins," but also between classes, regions, and cultural levels (high culture and low culture) – were being eroded or complicated.

Authority, centrality, absolutism, and universal truth, were all replaced by Derridean **difference** and **deferral**; for Derrida, meaning has no definite closure; it is "many-stranded, multicolored, heteroglossic, and encyclopedic." In other words, meaning in Postmodern era is a "data-cloud" and a "fog of discourse" that suggest different and multiple meanings alongside more pluralistic view of society. This finds its echo in the objective truth manifested, for example , in postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and identity politics.

Critical Figures and Key Theoretical Aspects

Postmodernism, a multifaceted intellectual and cultural movement emerged in the mid-20th century, is marked by foundational critical approaches to postmodern literature.

Deconstruction, associated with Jacuas Derrida, challenged the **"arrested or abstract form"** of structural approach and suggested instead that no text can be fully understood in isolation from other texts. Structuralism, in contrast to poststructuralism\ Deconstruction, reduced the world to a series of interlinked system marked by and mapped out in terms of internal dynamic or deep structure. Whereas structuralists emphasized similarity and inter-connectedness, poststructuralists emphasized difference and open-endedness. Structuralism was a universalizing theory, whereas poststructuralists spent their time demonstrating how such theories must always fail. Structuralism takes its cue from the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who revolutionized the study of linguistics in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure's major point about language was that it was above all a system: a system with rules and regulations that governed how the various elements of language interacted.Language was made up of signs, and signs consisted of two parts, a signifier (word) and a signified (concept), which are arbitrarily combined, in an act of mental understanding, to form the sign. Accordingly, the analytical techniques being used by the structuralist allow little scope for chance, creativity or the unexpected and the results are thus determined. According to poststructulists, by contrast, signs (words) always contain echoes and traces of other signs. Meaning is therefore a fleeting phenomenon that evaporates almost as soon as it occurs in spoken or written language (or keeps transforming itself into new meanings), rather than something fixed that holds over time for a series of different audiences.

This leads to **intertextuality**, a concept introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1960s. The text according to Kristeva is a **"mosaic of quotations, references, and influences of previous texts."** In response, quoting Conner (2004):

> Brian McHale's influential suggestion is that where modernist fiction is epistemological – that is, concerned with problems of knowledge and understanding, postmodernist fiction is ontological – that is, concerned with the creation and interrelation of worlds of being…To move from epistemology to ontology, from world witnessing to world-making and world-navigation, is to recognize that the problems of knowing are both intensified and transformed when

the very acts of seeing and understanding are themselves taken to generate new worlds or states of being. (66)

This can be exemplified by many literary works that adopt intertextuality as a narrative technique to either write back, to present new context, to subvert power relations, or any other objective that would challenge or alter meaning in grand narratives. For example, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) writes back Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Rhys' novel is a feminist postcolonial prequel to *Jane Eyre*, describing the background of Mr. Rochester and his marriage to his wife, Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and Antoinette Cosway in Rhys' novel. According to the above context, intertextuality is a network of associations which open the door to completely unanticipated reading experiences, as readers navigate not only within a single hypertextual environment but also across different ones.

Jean Baudrillard's work is another important strand of postmodern philosophy. He too came to be very critical of Marxism and structuralism, eventually rejecting the notion that there were hidden structures behind all phenomena which it was the analyst's task to identify and explain. Baudrillard contended instead that the postmodern world was a world of simulacra, where one could no longer differentiate between reality and simulation. Simulacra represented nothing but themselves: there was no other reality to which they referred. In consequence, Baudrillard could claim that Disneyland and television now constituted America's reality.

To conclude, postmodernism, with its emphasis on fragmentation, intertextuality, and the rejection of metanarratives, has reshaped man's understanding of literature and culture. By challenging traditional notions of truth, meaning, and authorship, postmodernism opens up new possibilities for interpretation and creativity. Its literary theories, such as deconstruction and post-structuralism, provide readers with tools to navigate the complexities of contemporary texts, while its celebration of multiplicity and ambiguity reflects the diverse and often contradictory nature of modern life. As a result, postmodernism remains a powerful and influential force in literature, inviting readers to question, deconstruct, and reconstruct their understanding of the world around them.

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