

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
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Course: American Literature

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Level: Master II

Introduction to Postmodernism

Historical Background:

The theory of art or *Aesthetic* in western discourse goes back to Greek era as philosophers proposed that Art is *mimesis*, imitation of reality. Plato considers art useless and relatively untrue: a painting of a bed, for instance, he claims, cannot help someone to sleep, nor it is the real thing –a real bed. Taking a defensive stance, Aristotle disagrees with Plato and claims that art, while evidently a lie, it “arouses and purges dangerous emotion” –in other words, the theory of *Catharsis*. The debate between the two views created a need of justification for art. Being a form of imitation itself, art had to defend its existence in relation to the reality it is supposed to imitate. This view to art has dominated western thought since the Greeks and it continues to shape the theory of aesthetic even today. It clearly suggests that art by definition has something to say about reality: “*What the author/artist says here is ...*” or “*What the author/artist tries to say is...*” And thus, the first *binary categorization* emerged; that is the distinction between Form and Content.

Since then, art has been viewed from the lens of what it *says* and almost nobody really inquires what it *does*. A work of art has to justify its existence accordingly to the “message” it transmits and whether or not it succeeds in transmitting it. This growing focus on Content at the expense of Form entails another threat to works of art –Interpretation. A work of art became a subject of inquiry for deeper and subtle meaning underneath its apparent Form; eventually, theories and methods of interpretation dominated the theory of art, where critics and analysts seek not to appreciate art but to find out what it really *says* beyond

the work itself. Literature, probably, suffers the most from this process of interpretation due to its textual nature.

As western thought evolved through history, this problematic grew fiercer mainly during the Enlightenment, where scientific thinking prevailed in western reasoning. Eventually, those mythical epics and fictional narratives needed to be interpreted in relation to the real world, as long as art is a mere imitation to reality. Similarly, men of religion strived to interpret scriptures and sought to find deeper meanings in biblical narratives just to make them morally meaningful in an ever-changing world. This wave of interpretation became more aggressive during the turn of the twentieth century as critics and theorists adopted Freudian and Marxist systems of hermeneutics. While Freud suggests the existence of *Latent* content to all literary texts and we need to eliminate the *Manifest* content in order to reach their true meaning beneath, Marx claims that cultural productions, including works of literature, are mere manifest superstructure to a deeper and subtle structure –*the base*. For both, literary texts have no meaning without interpretation: “to understand *is* to interpret.”

The project of interpretation in western thought prevailed for more than two millennia; since the Greeks, it has grown more elaborate and fiercer until the first half of twentieth century. This merely represents the dominance of reasoning over the sensual world; the ever-growing attempt of human consciousness to grasp the world through its intellectual activity, not through sensual faculty, hence the dominance of the *intellect* over the *sensual*.

Postmodernism Rationale:

By the end of World War II, western thought witnessed a drastic change a propos intellectual authority over human perception of the world. With the social and political unrest of the late 1960s, this form authority came under severe scrutiny. Borrowing from German Idealism philosophy, mainly Hegel’s *Myth of the Given* and Kant’s *Synthesis of the Manifold*, Postmodern philosophers argue that consciousness has basically no *immediate* contact nor *clear* perception of the real world. They founded this view on three main rationales: (1) language remains always an untrustworthy medium between consciousness and the world, (2) the tyranny of vision and focus over intellectual faculty, and (3) the confusion caused by human inability to decipher the mixture of sensations received by consciousness. It is important to indicate that the influence of Hegel and Kant on

the rationale of Postmodernism was not arbitrary, but due to firm principles that will be discussed later in this article.

Hegel's idea of anti-immediacy stems from the simple fact that there is always a medium between consciousness and reality. Language, due to its arbitrary nature, functions as a deceiving medium for the simple argument that the signifier is merely a conventional representation of the signified; a group of people agreed to give a name to a thing, but the name is never the thing itself. Additionally, if we remove the problematic medium of language, we are again struck by the sensual medium of the five senses. The second part of Hegel's argument is well elaborated by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he argues that consciousness, alienated from reality, perceives the world through a complex mixture of sensations. *The Synthesis of the Manifold*, Kant argues, is how our cognitive faculty produces a transcendent representation by connecting (*synthesis*) multiple representations (*Manifold*) from human different sensations.

In 1980, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari published their collaborative book: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which they introduced the concept of *Plateau* and *Rhizome* –two of the philosophical concepts of Postmodernism. Influenced by German Idealism, the French philosophers debate the Structuralism view of language presented by De Saussure and backed by outstanding linguists throughout most of the twentieth century. Their argument stems from the nature of human consciousness, which does not simply process thought through language, but also uses other levels of signs they labeled as *sign clusters*. Language, hence, which functions as a medium between thought and the real world, is not even close to a structure, but founded on a multiple levels of signs. Just like the unconscious they claim, language is chaotic and does not have nor provide (as a medium) any structured image to consciousness. It is interesting how this view debunked the dichotomy of De Saussure's *Langue et Parole* and Chomsky's distinction between language *Competence and Performance*. The concept of *Rhizome* on the other hand, is similar to Kant's *Synthesis*; human conceptualization of reality is formed and transmitted like a virus –its spread is chaotic and arbitrary; and like a disease, pre-conditioning plays a major role in “contracting” those concepts.

Modernism and Postmodernism Literature:

In addition to the socio-historical factors that helps in its emergence as a philosophical and artistic movement, Postmodernism is also a reaction to

categorical principles and artistic styles of Modernism. While the earlier movement of the twentieth century was founded on solid faith in scientific discovery, mainly during the Progressive Era (1886-1916), Postmodernism is highly skeptical about academic knowledge and institutions in general. This skepticism falls under the general postmodern rationale of rejecting any form of authority, including scientific authority. Whereas Modernism has an *epistemological* focus (what one can know about the world), Postmodernism questions the very status of reality and the world. Postmodernism is more about *ontology*, for it questions the very existence of art in relation to the real world.

As far as literature is concerned, postmodern theory is built on the fact that literary styles are exhausted and can no longer transmit the imagination of the author. Although it attacked Modernism, it still adopts its experimental techniques to create alternative ways of writing. Postmodernism in this sense is an eclectic return to the past; it is an attempt to open up to textual possibilities from historical moments of expressions that Modernism neglected and set aside and considered them dead: the traditions that have been thrown by history of art and literature. Postmodern critics believe that in today's world stylistic innovation is no longer possible; there is only the possibility of imitating dead styles. Cultural production merely recreates historical forms and in doing so, it destroys them. Critics often refer to examples from cinema, as the most recent form of artistic expression, such as history movies and the distortion of historical events. Probably the best example is Quentin Tarantino's movies like *Inglorious Bastards* and *Once Upon a Time in ... Hollywood*.

Postmodernism literature does not only mock historical reality, it often criticizes and satirize the whole notion of the *real*. In novels, distinction between facts and fiction is blurry, for news updates, just like novels, are mere narratives; meaning again is lost in narratives due to their reliance on language. Susan Sontag's subverting writings provide an example of postmodern experimentation with reality. In *The Benefactor* (1963), for instance, she introduces us to this author narrating from his memory, but he does not seem to distinguish between imagination and the real world. In the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the reader is struck by fantasies the author brings to the real world in a surprisingly natural and familiar manner. His landmark novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tells the story of a single family but across many generations –a story that defies laws of nature. Another famous Postmodern author who also uses magical realism technique in writing is the Indian Salman Rushdie.

In rejecting of Modernism faith in science and exhaustion of its literary styles, Postmodern fiction becomes *self-reflexive*: the center of writing now is writing itself (metafiction); writing is independent of society and reality or any other sphere outside itself. The question here is how far can the written word really imitates or reflects on reality, while language significance itself is highly questioned and meaning is lost the moment it is written in words. The novel is highly elevated to merely justify itself and the writing process. It is unconnected to any other realism outside of it. Additionally, Postmodernism reaction to Modernism Eurocentric mindset brings about formerly marginalized point of views: authors who write from a different position about ethnicity, gender, class and even sexual orientation. They are a new generation of intellectuals often: black, female, and working class. It brings about African, Caribbean, and Asian voices to the surface, presenting newly found *truths* and new ways of understanding the world around us.