

Ten Features of Postmodernism

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Insofar as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is widely considered to be a literary example of postmodernism, it may be worth reflecting on some of the salient features of this cultural movement. Reading Fowles's text in conjunction with the following ten points could be enriching. It may be noted that ten is an arbitrary number here, that the sequence of the ten features is also arbitrary, and that a literary text is not required to showcase *all* these ten conditions to qualify as "postmodern."

1. Postmodernism is a cultural movement in its own right. Considering it solely as a successor of modernism, thus putting it as a hyphenated word, i.e., post-modernism, would be reductive and misleading, and would do gross injustice to its unique richness and complexity. Nevertheless, if one is to theorize a major point of difference between the two movements, one could state that postmodern poetics is marked by "playfulness" whereas modernism could be characterized as an "aesthetics of anxiety." (A comparative analysis of the representative modernist and postmodernist literatures might help to understand this point. Note, for instance, how they deal with themes of fragmentation of the self and alienation of the subject.)
2. Postmodern literature is marked by metafictionality, involving self-referentiality. Metafiction is a narrative that does not simply tell a story but punctuates the very act of story-telling by blurring the binary of fact/fiction, by problematizing the relation between author and characters, by questioning the notion of authorship, and overall, by including reflections on the theory of fiction within the so-called fictional space itself. Cf. Chapters 13 & 55 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In Chapter 13, there is a long discourse on the concept of fiction which includes references to Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet. In Chapter 55, Fowles the author, the man with a "massively bearded face," meets Charles, the protagonist of the novel, and eventually declares that the character does not obey the author and has developed a life of his own. Similar issues are theorized by Pinter in a short piece entitled "Writing for the Theatre" where he argues that an author might not know everything about the characters and that the task of the author is to *listen* to them, give them elbow-room and not pretend to have the power to control them.
3. Postmodernism has been defined as an "incredulity towards metanarratives." Metanarratives, otherwise known as grand narratives or master narratives, aim to offer a totalizing schema for interpretation of events and experiences – historical or contemporary. For instance, Marxism could run the risk of being a metanarrative insofar as all the problems of the world are reduced to the question "class"; or, scientism could be defined as metanarrative insofar as the truth/authenticity of every experience or every event is asked to be measured in terms of scientific findings. The postmodernist considers metanarratives to be the product of totalitarian intentions and dismiss them as involving the fallacy of essentialism. As opposed to the grand narratives, the postmodernist foregrounds the small narratives (*petits récits*). Small

narratives subvert the assumption of any discourse being coherent or monolithic and promote the possibility of pluralism. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*)

4. Postmodern experience is constituted by inevitable exposure to “hyperreality.” Broadly speaking, hyperreality refers to the world of simulation and the world of the virtual. In these worlds, images constitute reality – be it the proliferation of images on news channels or on the internet. Images, in the postmodern world, do not necessarily *represent* a given reality. Images *are* reality. A simulacrum is a copy without an original. These images can be doctored and edited, and can even be created on the desktop, for instance. Images and videos on social media, for example, have a tremendous impact on determining our sense of reality. Thus the difference between the virtual and the actual/physical reality collapses. The virtual does not correspond to the actual; the virtual *creates* the actual. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Žižek, *The Reality of the Virtual*)
5. Postmodernism problematizes the notion of truth, at least in two ways. First, the questioning of metanarrative is reflected in how postmodernism, both in theory and in practice, interrogates the idea of an absolute Truth with an upper-case “T,” and demonstrates that truths always exist in plural versions. Truth is not a “*universe*,” but a kind of a “*multiverse*” – having multiple versions and variations. However, in the final analysis, the supremacy of one particular truth over others is determined by the structures of power in a given socio-economic situation. Secondly, the hyperreal and the virtual realities, in the postmodern world, influence the construction of a world of “post-truth” where truth-claims, devoid of objective and traditional idea of “facticity,” can be made, and even discursively substantiated, with control over information and data which can be generated by any and every user. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*)
6. Postmodernism questions the notion of a singular “centre.” For instance, there is no central meaning to a text; a text is always already open to multiple *readings*. Since the notion of an “authorial intention” promotes the idea of central meaning, the institution of the Author, with an upper-case “A,” is declared dead. At best, the biography of an author could be considered as *biographemes* – small narrative units comprising discursive codification of events – which, in the end, are nothing but one set of textual units among hundred others which could be used to intertextually engage with literature. The Author is redefined as “paper author” or a discursive construct. (Barthes “Death of the Author” & “From Work to Text”; Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”)
7. Inconclusiveness is the hallmark of postmodernism. The postmodern narrative not only problematizes the Aristotelian formula of a chronological and tripartite division of a plot (beginning, middle, and end); more fundamentally, it subverts the idea of “narrative closure” by evoking, as in Fowles’s text, the possibility of multiple endings. In general, definitive and conclusive statements are considered reductive and essentialist, and ideally, a postmodernist ought to doubt/avoid such statements. One could think of the enigmatic character of Sarah Woodruff as an example in this regard. (Zaretsky, “Postmodernism and Psychoanalysis”)

8. Postmodernism blurs binaries, particularly the binary of low culture/high culture. Ideally, a postmodern narrative, unlike a Joycean text, would be accessible and readable to anybody and everybody. However, a hermeneutically equipped reader would find more reasons to appreciate a postmodern text, let us say a late Hitchcock movie, than an ordinary viewer. There are more things in a postmodern movie than can be dreamt of by an ordinary viewer, albeit one can still enjoy it without exploring these things. (Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan But were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*)
9. Postmodern narratives employ the technique of rewriting an existing narrative. Such rewriting could be politically subversive, or in some cases, could be “empty parody” or “pastiche.” Examples include *Foe*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* etc.
10. Reader, as opposed to Author, becomes a crucial site for meaning production in postmodernism. The reader is not just a theoretical discourse for a Roland Barthes or a Stanley Fish but, both in personal and impersonal terms, he/she/it remains a constant point of reference in postmodern texts.

Readings

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