

Post-Modern Literary Theory

Paul R. Murray

SUMMARY

The most influential literary theory of the present day is known as post-modernism. Post-modernism can be thought of as an outgrowth of modernism, sharing many of the same characteristics as modernism (anti-realism, experimentation, fragmentation) and yet different in that it is anti-elitist and influenced by popular culture, especially technology. Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the principal figures of post-modernism, argues that every all-embracing way of achieving truth (rationalism, capitalism, communism, and science) is undesirable. Post-modernism sees multiple points of view as desirable. As long as there are many micro-narratives or dialogs, discussion stays open, and both sides can continue to communicate.

Although post-modernism is notoriously difficult to define, there is general agreement as to two ways in which the term post-modernism can be understood. In one sense, post-modernism can be seen as a reaction against modernism. In a second sense, post-modernism is viewed as a feeling that one all-embracing answer (any master narrative, such as rationalism, capitalism, humanism) is undesirable, and multiple answers (or micro-narratives) are best.

The hyphen separating "post" from the word "modernism" is a visual reminder that the terms are closely linked, like Siamese twins, to each other. To arrive nearer to an understanding of post-modernism, we must first take a look at the meaning of modernism. Modernism describes the revolution in literature and art that takes place from roughly the beginning of the 20th century to around 1945. The high point of modernism occurred in the 1920s and 30s. In modernism, disillusionment set in as a reaction against WW I and its resulting death and violence. The old answers seemed meaningless, and artists searched for new forms and techniques to express their alienation.

Modernism is usually seen as ending in 1945 with the use of nuclear weapons. Post-modernism was born in the 60s with its roots still in modernism, but with its trunk and branches influenced by late capitalism and by technology. Modernist literature is anti-realist, experimental and fragmented. It is also elitist in that it feels contempt or distrust for popular culture. Underlying modernism's fragmentation, though, is a sense that there are some unifying elements, such elements as myth, symbolism, reference to great, older works of art, and a belief that order in an artistic work is important.

Whereas modernism felt itself estranged from popular culture, post-modernism is anti-elitist, and has close connections with popular art forms such as magazines, comic books, television and films. It too is anti-realist, experimental and fragmented, to an even greater degree than modernism, but without any underlying sense of order or unity. More importantly, post-modernism takes on a much more cultural coloring than did modernism. Rather than referring primarily to art and literature, post-modernism has very wide boundaries that include elements of culture, psychology, feminism, economics, technology and so on.

In post-modernism, master narratives are out. Capitalism, communism, science, reason and the like

are seen as oppressive, as ways of controlling dissent. Since post-modernism denies that there is any final truth, small or micro-narratives are best because they don't pose the danger of domination over other narratives. Truth is relative, so the best way of seeking out any solution is to provide different ways of looking at and observing reality.

For example, Post-modernism asks, "why should reason be the only, or even the best, answer?" The enlightenment and its faith that reason will lead to improvement in the human condition eventually resulted in the unprecedented death and destruction of WW II, atomic warfare, and the holocaust. Post-modernism is skeptical of the very concept of progress.

There are a number of tendencies which mark certain kinds of literature as post-modern. There is a breaking down of the separation between high art and popular culture. It's writings are more influenced by technology than modernism. Post-modern literature is highly fragmented and often ironic or playful. There is a rejection of plot, character, and meaning. It is self-referential in that the work refers to itself more than it is a representation of the world. There is an absurdity woven into the works that mark them as different from logically structured narratives. It must be kept in mind that it is a topic of hot debate whether post-modernism is merely an extension of modernism or itself radically different.

Post-modern works often show that science and rationality should not be viewed as a privileged way of arriving at truth. They also focus on people at the margins of society, such as women, the poor, people of color or people of different nationalities. Woven into the fabric of post-modernism is a fascination with technology, television, movies and computers.

Post-modernism shows a valuable concern with people marginalized by society. Post-modern criticism is interested in works that are experimental, and that show a deep sense of humor or irony. In its search for new approaches to reality, there is a multi-sightedness that adds to the ways we can view the world in which we live.

On the other hand, post-modernism, because of its lack of faith in progress or in any final truth, has been criticized for its failure to provide useful answers for many of the world's ills, such as war, racism, poverty, hunger, pollution and disease.

One of the leading spokespersons and critics for post-modernism is Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard (1924-) was born in France. He was professor of philosophy at the University of Paris and later director of the International College of Philosophy. In his early years he was a Marxist, but he later became critical of many principles of the Russian brand of Communism. Lyotard rose to international prominence with a book written in 1979 entitled *The Post Modern Condition* written at the request of the Canadian province of Quebec. Besides France, Lyotard has also taught in South America, North Africa and the United States.

Lyotard's work, *The Post Modern Condition*, has been very influential. At first the term post-modernism had been applied specifically to a group of non-conventional writers such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. But with the appearance of Lyotard's work, the word post-modernism took on a broader meaning in that it also included many cultural concepts.

Lyotard had been searching for a word to describe the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. The word he chose was post-modern. He terms any knowledge that looks for an ultimate truth a master narrative, such as reason, science, or rationalism, and the like. He then goes on to

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say that post-modernism has a mistrust of master narratives or grand answers. Lyotard sees science as merely one narrative among many narratives. Science has its own rules, which only apply to science, and don't apply to other narratives. Each narrative has its own rules, and these rules apply only to its own narrative.

The word "differend" is an important term in Lyotard's vocabulary. The word differend refers to narratives that are sealed off from each other and can not know each other. For example science is a differend, and so is literature. One cannot "know" the other. We live in a world of multiple differends. When we attempt to answer something in literature by using the vocabulary of another differend, such as science, we are bound to fail.

The obvious next question Lyotard must deal with is the question of ethics. If everything in the world is just a narrative, and each narrative has no claim to any special truth outside of its own narrative, what do we do about ethics? What about good and evil? Is the mass killing of the Jews in the holocaust just another narrative, or differend? How do we answer the right or wrong of the holocaust? What should we do?

Lyotard's answer is that you do nothing. By deciding on any one answer to the discussion, the dialogue is closed. It is better to keep the dialogue open by not deciding. Then the dialogue can continue. Lyotard sees the strength of post-modernism in its understanding that many things can not be presented. What is the meaning of art or literature? There is no meaning. There is only an open dialogue. Post-modernism is not a tool of governments like reason or science are. It makes us sensitive to differences, and helps for better communication in the world.