

(19) Postmodernist Experiment

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Postmodernism

Characteristics

- a general term referring to the various cultural changes, developments and tendencies since the 1940s or 1950s
- incorporates whatever follows after the exhaustion of Modernism, may be viewed even as a reaction against it
- postmodernist literature tends to be experimental, non-traditional, oriented against authority and signification
- includes experiments with form and content, for instance concrete poetry, theatre of the absurd, transformation plays, magic realism in fiction, new modes in science fiction, the popularity of neo-Gothic and the horror story
- exploits eclectic approach, aleatory writing, fragmentation, allusiveness, travesty, **parody**, **pastiche**, **collage**
- employs irony, self-mockery, immersion in popular culture, refusal of grand ideas, fluidity of time and space

Related Concepts

- related to the literary and philosophical theories of **post-structuralism** and **deconstruction** as described by Jacques Derrida, an approach deconstructing the old and defunct and building up something new out of the ruins
- challenges, rewrites and deconstructs ancient mythology, fairy tales, religious concepts, historical facts etc.
- refuses grand narratives and deep meanings, prefers assuming masks and presenting but images and surfaces
- aspects of postmodernism are discussed in **Jean-François Lyotard's** *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) or **Frederic Jameson's** *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) etc.
- the blurring borders between high and low culture are dealt with in **Susan Sontag's** 'Notes on "Camp"' in *Against Interpretation* (1966), describing 'camp' in terms of artifice, frivolity, naïve pretentiousness and excess

John Barth (b. 1930)

Writing in Voices

- employs language to set up distance between reader and character, the narrator and character, text and world
- presents energetic and comically ebullient voices speaking with sometimes playful and sometimes angry irony
- creates worlds within worlds, uses parody and pastiche, verbal and generic play to produce multiple simulacra
- his texts and characters constantly comment on themselves and subvert any temptation to link fiction to reality

World as Language

- his self-reflexive fiction presented in a self-referential language qualifies both as **metafiction** and postmodern
- we construct our world from the inside out by using language, we cannot get out of the prison of our language
- our world is the sum of our constructions of it and any apparent essence or meaning is really a social construct
- insists that life equals language equals story, which means that to abandon the language is to surrender to death

Suicide Memoir

The Floating Opera (1956)

- his first novel, an autobiographical discussion of suicide, shows his skills but is still rather traditional in form

The End of the Road (1958)

Multiple Identities

- the novel presents a man so aware of the **plural possibilities** of existence that he ends up incapable of reacting
- he is haunted by a sense of the absence of any identity outside of roles and meaning apart from performance
- the protagonist is advised to attempt to remedy his condition by becoming a college teacher to 'teach the rules'
- he becomes involved with the wife of a fellow teacher who believes life can be contained within one version
- the novel finishes with his leaving the college and taking a cab to the airport, giving the instruction 'terminal'

History Pastiche

The Sot-Weed Factor (1960)

- the novel takes its protagonist from the author of the eponymous poem about whom virtually nothing is known
- the protagonist is involved in a lusty picaresque tale, a pastiche of history, historical fiction and autobiography

Giles Goat-Boy (1966)

Fiction within Fiction

- the novel begins with fictive letters of introduction by several editors who dismiss it as unhealthy and dubious
- the letters liberate the author from the authority of authorship and advise the reader to read the book as fiction
- the fiction is a series of self-referential sings whose value lies in the intrinsic language interplay between them
- conceives the whole modern world as a university campus, controlled by a computer which tyrannizes people
- parodies the genres of myth, allegory or the quest, also parodies a variety of literary texts, including the Bible
- translates the **earth into an artifice**, suggests that the world is a fictional structure created but by out language

Stories & Novellas

Lost in the Funhouse (1968)

- a short story collection featuring the ultimate postmodern protagonist who 'becomes no more than her voice'

Chimera (1972)

- a collection of three loosely connected novellas, one of them using the figure of the storyteller Scheherazade

Epistolary Novel

Letters (1979)

- the novel reveals several narratives through correspondence by characters from the author's fiction and himself

Later
Novels

Sabbatical: A Romance (1982), *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991)

Robert Coover (b. 1932)

Forms &
Subjects

- his writing is characteristic for its improvisation and violation of formal principles and bourgeois decorums
- favours the **pastiche** approach, heavily draws on shared **popular culture**, especially films and film characters
- his earliest work is an exercise in creating, fracturing, mythologising, ironising, entertaining and confounding
- his later writing addresses important **public issues** without comprising its commitment to excess and revelry
- exploits satire and the tendency of language to self-parody, but also conveys essential insights about humans
- enjoys the freedom of inventing his own reality, but also responds to the claims of a reality not of his making

Novel on
Sectarians

The Origin of the Brunists (1966)

- his first novel, revolves around the sole survivor of a mine disaster who founds a numerological religious sect

Game
Over Life

The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968)

- turns to the game of baseball to explore the journeys of Americans in and out of the literal and the imaginary
- the game progressively devours every person and relationship entangled in the intricate weave of this novel
- presents as the protagonist an unhappy accountant who spends nights immersed in his invented baseball league in which every action is ruled by the dice and whose life crumbles as his favourite player dies on the table-top

Fantasy
Stories

Pricksongs and Descants (1969)

- a collection of short fiction, a fiendishly clever exercise of unfettered imagination and compulsive stylisation

History
as Fiction

The Public Burning (1977)

- intermixes the grotesque and the pathetic, the outrageous and the sober, the plausible and the impossible etc.
- his finest novel, transfers actual events from the period of the presidency of Eisenhower to the figurative realm
- turns the actual execution of the Rosenbergs¹ into a fictional public burning held in Times Square, New York
- presents Times Square as a source of history, for it is here that the records of the *New York Times* are created
- analyses how historical record is made and suggests that both **fiction and fact** aid in the rehearsal of the past
- draws the past into subjective reality and offers a postmodernist meditation on history and the origins of story

Erotic
Perversion

Spanking the Maid (1982)

- the novel tells the story of a master and his maid who are bound by the obsessive ritual suggested by the title

Detective
Romance

Gerald's Party (1986)

- the novel is a takeoff on detective stories and a complex romance built around dreams, false leads and memory
- encompasses one night at a party given by the title character, who records its progress with painstaking detail

Cinema
Stories

A Night at the Movies, or, You Must Remember This (1987)

- a collection of short fiction on topics related to the cinema, including the story 'Charlie in the House of Rue'

Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937)

Forms &
Subjects

- the most acclaimed and personally the most elusive of the postmodernists, very little is known about his person
- shows a world on the edge of **apocalypse**, threatened by a vast **conspiracy** directed by or against a power elite
- replicates the world as text, as an extraordinarily intricate system of signs that must but cannot be interpreted

Seminal
Short Story

'**Entropy**'² (1960)

- his first major short story, formative for his later fiction, uses entropy as a figure for civilization running down
- follows carefully the statement by Henry Adams³, 'Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.'
- presents a deliberately schematic situation and two equally schematic central characters of **opposing qualities**
- Meatball Mulligan occupies a downstairs flat where he is holding an outrageous party moving towards chaos
- Callisto⁴ occupies an upstairs flat and is trying to warm a freezing bird back to life in his small hothouse jungle
- Mulligan's party moves through chaos to consequent torpor, and he does what he can to stop the deterioration
- Callisto's bird dies, and his girlfriend smashes the window of the hothouse to break the shell of his fantasy life
- the story mediates between binary opposites, which are also the opposites of modern consciousness and culture

¹ Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were a Jewish American couple accused of espionage on the atomic bomb for the interest of the USSR, found guilty by the jury and both electrocuted in 1953. The question of their guilt or innocence remains today a subject of dispute.

² Entropy is a measure of the natural decay within a social system; the amount of entropy gives the amount of **disorder in a system**.

³ Henry Adams (1838–1918), author of autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), was a historian and intellectual, the grandson of President John Quincy Adams (in office 1825–1829) and the great grandson of President John Adams (1797–1801).

⁴ In Greek mythology, Callisto was one of the nymphs of Artemis, who transformed Callisto into a bear and set her among the stars.

Inside v.
Outside

- Meatball is the pragmatist, active to the point of excess, working inside the chaos in attempts to mitigate it
- Callisto is the theorist, passive to the point of paralysis, constructing patterns for the chaos trying to explain it
- the story illustrates the alternatives of hyperactivity and containment, the open and the closed, present and past
- his later work similarly shows the formative principles of immersion and separation, the flexible and the fixed

V (1963)

Drifting v.
Seeking

- his first novel, presents the modern world as an entropic wasteland inhabited by people devoted to annihilation
- employs characters who are ciphers, seeing others and themselves not as people but as things, objects, masks
- contrasts Benny Profane, a loser type who drifts through life in such enterprises as hunting alligators in sewers, and Hubert Stencil, son of a former spy on search for the mysterious female spy and anarchist known only as V.
- V. stands by turns for Venus, Virgin and Void, an absent presence who seems to be everywhere and nowhere

Meaning
& Identity

- Profane stands for the deconstructive, one who floats, while Stencil stands for the constructive, one who seeks
- Profane lives in a world without signs or discernible patterns, Stencil in a world of elusive signs and apparent patterns, for his father left behind enigmatic clues pointing to a vast conspiracy in modern history and to lady V.
- Stencil's quest is for a fulcrum identity of his own and for the identity of modern times, he moves through events of the twentieth century seeking to recover the master plot, the meanings of modern history and this book
- the only meaning which Stencil finds is the **erasure of meaning**, the emptying of a significant human history
- Profane and Stencil are eventually linked together by their failure of significance and their failure of identity

Conspiracy
Mystery

The Crying of Lot 49 (1966)

- the novel follows Oedipa Maas, whose onetime lover, Pierce Inverarity, makes her an executor of his estate, which leads to the discovery of a conspirational underground communications system from the sixteenth century
- Oedipa hopes to solve the enigma through a mysterious bidder keen to buy Inverarity's stamp collection, but the novel ends with the enigma unsolved and Oedipa awaiting the crying out at the auction of the relevant lot 49

WWII
Maze

Gravity's Rainbow (1973)

- the novel is set during the Second World War, the author was not a witness to the war but an inspired fantasist
- involves a Nazi Lieutenant and an American Lieutenant, both in disguise, and V-2 rockets raining on London
- presents individuals as creatures simply reduced to nonentities by large organizations and technological forces
- uses technology and stereotypes of spy fiction to flatten his characters, to render them absurd and ineffectual
- contains cartoonish elements, dizzying multiplication of bizarre plots, oddball characters, pop-culture myths
- describes the V-2 rocket in similar terms as V., compelling and mysterious, beautiful and dangerous, compares the V-2 rocket to a rainbow arched downwards as if by a force of gravity that is dragging humankind to its death
- the rocket initiates a need to find meaning but it offers an **excess of meaning**, an excess which is an evacuation

Surveying
Boundaries

Mason and Dixon (1997)

- the novel moves back to the years of the early republic when men like the two surveyors mentioned in the title⁵ were trying to establish boundaries in the boundlessness of America in order **to appropriate** it for themselves

World's
Apocalypse

Against the Day (2006)

- the novel sprawls over more than a thousand pages and features over a hundred of characters all over the world
- portrays a world of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic fecklessness and evil in high places

1960s
Detective

Inherent Vice (2009)

- the novel is set during the 1960s and follows the bizarre experiences of a marijuana-smoking private detective

William H(oward) Gass (b. 1924)

Aesthetic
Views

- a philosophy professor, literary critic, fiction writer, an unapologetic spokesman for the consolations of form
- insists on the autonomy and purity of art while struggling to avoid the pale formalism of empty aestheticism
- regards the sound as well as meaning of words, characteristic for audacious and flamboyant **verbal opulence**
- seeks to create characters unlike ourselves but also resembling us enough to make readers interested in them
- prefers the internal to the external but also sees that there is no inside without outside, no self without others
- makes his fictional landscape a metaphor for an actual physical environment rather than its straight depiction
- manages to evoke in the language of his fiction much that language is helpless to alter or register adequately

Multiple
Viewpoints

Omensetter's Luck (1966)

- his first novel, follows a man who settles with his family in a small town in Ohio in the late nineteenth century
- the protagonist's actions lead to supernatural occurrences, such as weather changes, and his good fortune and purity are tainted when he is unjustly connected to a mysterious death of his landlord, frustrated by his powers

⁵ Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon surveyed what is now the Mason-Dixon Line, a demarcation line forming parts of the borders among Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia, a resolution of the border dispute among the colonies in the 1760s.

- the novel pieces together various viewpoints without using the quotation marks to distinguish the speakers

Multiple
Rhetoric***In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968)**

- a collection of five short stories or novellas, each of them evoking the usual small-town life in the **Midwest**
- experiments with a variety of rhetorical styles in the extravagant languages of the otherwise naïve narrators

Mixed
Media***Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1970)**

- a lively novella about a stripteaser's recollections of her life and activities, also a commentary on art in general
- a wilfully outrageous mixed-media piece, highly digressive, full of **typographical** and other visual devices

Colour
Blue***On Being Blue* (1976)**

- a fanciful meditation on the significance of the colour blue, indebted to Gertrude Stein's theories of language

Tunnelling
in and out***The Tunnel* (1995)**

- an enormous novel which took nearly thirty years to complete and first appeared in fragments in periodicals
- refuses linear narrative continuity, features a historian's attempt to write an introduction to his masterpiece on *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany* and his producing a deeply personal writing on his own history instead
- tunnels figuratively through his mind and literally in his basement, from where he starts digging a tunnel out

William Gaddis (1922–1998)Forms &
Subjects

- travelled extensively in Europe and Central America, which provided him with knowledge of various settings
- exploits the possibilities of the **satirical** mode, assesses contemporary society in both harsh and humorous way
- characteristic for his disconnected unpunctuated dialogues, minimal plot lines and all-pervasive black humour

Satire
on Arts***The Recognitions* (1955)**

- his first novel, an elaborate experimental satirical work crowded with highly outlandish and sinister characters
- the settings range from the nineteenth-century New England to Central America and contemporary New York
- the protagonist is a Yankee artist whose original talent is overwhelmed by his career as a copyist of old masters
- incorporates a range of cultural references, literary allusions, references to pop culture, parodies of other works
- gives a bizarre and disturbing image of contemporary society, in particular the shallow New York intelligentsia

Satire on
Business***JR* (1975)**

- his second novel, published after a twenty-year-long creative break, eventually won the National Book Award
- the eponymous protagonist is an ambitious boy who amasses a corporate empire by using telephones and mails
- satirizes public education and business practises, exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of the business world

Satire on
Society***Carpenter's Gothic* (1985)**

- formally a more accessible novel, explores the helplessness engendered by dependent love and family disorder
- offers a bleak vision of America that has been eroded by reactionary fundamentalism and materialistic greed

Satire
on Law***A Frolic of His Own* (1994)**

- a bulky novel centring on the complexities and bafflements of the law, including much technical legal detail
- a National Book Award winner, satirically assesses the American legal system and the fashion for litigation
- the protagonist is a community-college teacher who sees himself as 'the last civilized man' and who tries to hotwire his own car, gets run over and injured in the attempt and spends much time figuring out whom to sue

Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)Activities
& Writing

- became involved in the formation of the Black Arts Movement, but never identified with the Black Aesthetics
- helped found the *East Village Other* as one of the first influential alternative newspapers based in New York
- made it his aim to live between cultures and as a poet and fiction writer dramatize the exchanges between them
- does not shrink from controversy or from going against the grain of any prevailing critical or creative fashion
- his writings mix elements of satire, surrealism, science fiction and pop art with political and racial commentary
- sees human history as a cycle of battles between the oppressed and the oppressors and undertakes to revise it

Views on
Culture(s)

- uses tradition to illuminate and reinvigorate it, combines continuity and spontaneity in the dynamic of culture
- takes up the theme of the return to the past and revolt against the presents to give it a new multicultural twist
- introduces his Voodoo Aesthetic⁶, a mutually reflective uncoercive mixture of cultural forms rooted in plurality
- replaces monoculturalism with its presumptions to a monopoly on the truth by the idea of **multiculturalism**

Dead &
Living***The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967)**

- his first major novel, a subversive departure from the autobiographical style of earlier African American works

⁶ Distinguishes between Voodoo, the traditional black folk religion, and **Hoodoo**, rather a set of folk magic or conjure practises with predominantly black roots but also various different influences. The most important aspect of Hoodoo is ecstatic music and dance.

- the title suggests the author's abiding interest in the connection between then and now, the dead and the living

Hoodoo
Novel

Mumbo Jumbo (1972)

- the novel dismisses any traditional kind of African American narrative that limits experience to a single model
- metamorphoses the writer into the **voodoo-man**, weaving backwards and forwards in time and narrative levels
- confronts proponents of rationalism and militarism with those who are believers in the magical and intuitive
- mingles historical, social and political events with fictional inventions, draws freely on conspiracy theories, the attempts by whites to suppress jazz music, also includes for instance Harlem Renaissance authors as characters

Slave Tale
Pastiche

Flight to Canada (1976)

- the novel picks up the slave narrative form and transforms a remembrance of servitude into an act of liberation
- uses parody, deliberate anachronism, irreverent humour and constant crossing between histories and cultures
- surprises with shrewd mixings and sudden splicings, as of the Civil War with the civil rights wars of the 1960s
- follows the protagonist of a **runaway slave** of the pre-Civil War era who escapes to freedom via bus and plane
- refuses to be slave to his narrative, presents a world following no other rules but diversity, chance and change
- suggest that freedom springs from confluence, from an easygoing commerce taking place between cultures

Later
Novels

The Terrible Twos (1982), ***The Terrible Threes*** (1989), ***Japanese by Spring*** (1993)

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977)

Back-
ground

- born into a wealthy and prominent family in Russia, his father opposed the tyranny of the tsar and then of the bolsheviks and took his family into exile, where he was murdered by a reactionary fellow countryman in Berlin
- lived in Berlin and Paris between the wars, produces his first successful poems, stories and novels in Russian
- emigrated to the United States (1940) to escape the onset of totalitarianism, started teaching Russian literature
- explains his own aesthetic of **subjective idealism** as writing for the sake of pleasure, not for a moral purpose

Early
Novels

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941)

- his first novel in English, about a man who discovers the nature of his half-brother while writing his biography

Bend Sinister (1947)

- a novel about a politically uncommitted professor in a totalitarian state who tries to maintain personal integrity

Lolita (1955 in Paris, 1958 in New York)

Decon-
struction

- a novel about the passion of a middle-aged European émigré for the twelve-year-old girl, or 'nymphet', Lolita
- uses traditional **romance patterns** to deconstruct them, the elements of quest, attainment, journey, loss, pursuit and revenge in the narrator's desiring, possessing and fleeing with Lolita, losing her and killing her new lover
- creates a style both outrageously lyrical and outrageously jokey, constantly teasing and eluding his audience
- produces a **lexical playfield**, a verbal game, a magical maze created of a slippery story and protean characters

Subjective
Reality

- the narrator commits child abuse and statutory rape but above all acts like a moral totalitarian with his victim, imprisons her within his own reality and denies her the right to a reality of her own, however vulgar or ordinary
- concludes with a brief moment of the pain of knowing, realizing that his guilt lies especially in his having robbed the girl of her childhood, stealing from her the chance to assert right from the start her life and her reality

Poem
Novel

Pale Fire (1962)

- a postmodernists tour de force purporting to be a poem about an exiled Balkan king in a New England college town and the involved critical commentary on the poem by an academic who admits to being the king himself

Parody
of Form

Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (1969)

- a parody of the family chronicle form, a difficult novel which is a medley of Russian, French and English
- intimates the lifelong affair of a brother and sister who discover this relation too late to overcome their feelings