

***Post:* to display a notice**

***Post:* a long piece of timber or metal set upright into the ground and used as a support or marker**

***Post:* an official position or job**

***Post:* subsequent; after**

It was only in the 1960s that ‘post’ came to be used to mean ‘after’. Unlike its earlier usage, this ‘post’ was originally always hyphenated in a compound word: post-modern, post-colonial, post-structural. Yet at some point in the 1980s the hyphen fell away. This removal of space – the refusal of a break – was not unintentional. It marked, rather, a symptom of the very post that the hyphen represents: a period in which we are too uncertain to say that one thing is a definite break from what came before. Instead, we look to see continuity with the past and to recognize the history of the world not as a straightforward teleology (narrative of progress) but as a fluid movement both forwards and backwards in time.

What made us delete the hyphen, then, was the hyphenated: we found post-modernism and we were required to turn it into the postmodern. The ‘post’ in postmodernism implies an ‘after’, but the nature of this after has been much debated.

On the one hand, 'post' indicates the fact that postmodernism is a mode of critical thought that comes after modernism, in particular as a post-Second World War theory in the same way that modernism is a theory inherently connected to the aftermath of the First World War. On the other, the 'post' is not so much a temporal shift but a conceptual one, indicating a movement beyond modernism in terms of thinking. At the same time, much of what modernism stands for stylistically remains in postmodernism: free indirect discourse, non-linear narratives and stream of consciousness – the key strategies we discussed in [Chapter 7](#) as essentially modernist – are also prominent stylistic features of the postmodern text.

To understand postmodern literature, then, we must situate it within a broader context of postmodern culture. It is awareness of this culture that can be said to define a work as postmodernist rather than modernist: a matter not merely of stylistics but also of the underlying assumptions beneath these stylistics and the thematic concerns they are used to express. This is most simplistically defined as a difference in attitude. While modernist writers presented their current world as one in which truth had been destabilized, they believed a truth had once existed and grappled for its return. They saw the fragmentation of their society as a fall from the reassuring order of the past, destroyed by largely negative forces of war and technological change. In contrast, these forces are often (though not always) exciting for postmodernists, where fragmentation becomes translated into a celebration of difference. Moreover, while modernists lament the passing of stability and truth, postmodernists expose how these ideas have always been illusions. Thus, at the same time as they focus on the present, they are also involved in a process of rethinking the past and questioning assumptions about it.

Post, then, suggests both a development of and a going beyond. Postmodernism is rooted in modernist strategies but goes beyond them in its thematic concerns. It may be more or less formally experimental than high modernism. Its difference is one of attitude rather than style.

Postmodern culture

The term ‘postmodernism’ was first used in the way we now understand it in the late 1970s, although it has existed as a term since the 1930s. While modernism existed in a world before theory, postmodernism comes in the midst of these developments. For this reason, it is much more explicitly a theory, existing both in art works (including literature) and in philosophical texts. In 1984 the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) published *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he argues that the contemporary condition is characterized by what he terms ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’. By this, he means a disbelief in those grand ways of thinking about the world (such as Marxism, religion or science) that used to give people certainty. These, then, are the same narratives that modernists saw as eroded by modern culture, but that they continued to believe had once existed.



Key idea

Metanarratives are framing narratives for how we think about the world, and include Marxism, religion and science.

In later criticism, Lyotard’s original definition has been supplemented by a number of features that are seen to define postmodern culture. For example, Dominic Strinati (1947–), in his essay ‘Postmodernism and Popular Culture’ (1992), gives five key features, including Lyotard’s but adding four new elements:

- 1 The breakdown of the distinction between culture and society
- 2 An emphasis on style over substance
- 3 The breakdown of distinctions between high art and popular culture
- 4 More complex ideas of time and space
- 5 The decline of metanarratives.



Spotlight

A number of full academic papers have been written on the subject of the long-running animated comedy *The Simpsons* as postmodern, focusing on episodes such as ‘Bart of Darkness’, a parody of *Heart of Darkness*, or the narrative fragmentation of an episode such as ‘22 Short Films about Springfield’.

Postmodern and postmodernity can in this respect be distinguished from postmodernism. The former terms refer to a period in culture and its characteristics, while the latter refers to the philosophical ideas presented by figures like Baudrillard and Lyotard. You should be aware, however, that the critical use of these terms is often inconsistent and has changed across the short history of writing on the subject – for example Steven Connor’s early seminal study, *Postmodernist Culture* (1989), refers to the period rather than to philosophy, but more recent usage might describe this as postmodern culture and reserve ‘postmodernist’ for proponents of postmodernism.

The simulacrum

Now stop for a minute and imagine a simple scene. In an office, there is a large copy machine. It holds a thousand pieces of paper. One day, you enter the office and press the large green button on the front of the machine. And, just as you might expect, out shoots a piece of paper.

You have placed nothing under the glass, so you are surprised to see that there is an image on the piece of paper. You open the cover of the machine, but there is nothing there. Looking again at the image, it seems vaguely familiar to you. It is a picture of a small, ordinary house. In fact, it seems to remind you of your own house. But some things about this picture are not the same as your house. The door is different. The windows are larger. You scan the image and run an image search on your computer, but there are no exact matches.

The next day, for reasons you don’t understand, you go back to the copy

machine and copy the image again. As you do so, you put your original copy into the recycling. And, again for reasons you don't understand, you repeat this process every day until all one thousand sheets of paper are gone.

You go home, and put the image into a frame and hang it on your wall. And you are struck once more by how similar the house is to your own, and yet how different. But you are pleased with this image: a copy of a copy of a copy of a...with no original image.

It is this idea, of an image that has been endlessly repeated but is without origin, that defines what Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) refers to as the simulacrum. It is a difficult idea to understand, most obviously because we see an inherent link between copies and the idea of the original. What, then, does Baudrillard mean by invoking such an idea? He first introduced it in his book *Simulations* (1983), in which he argues that we now exist in a hyperreality – a world of exaggerated images where what is real and what is not has become blurred. This leads to the 'loss of the real'.

Baudrillard traces the process by which this loss takes place. In the beginning, the image represents reality. This, however, gives way to a second stage in which the image is not a true representation of reality but a distortion of it. In the third stage, there is no reality on which the image is based, but this is obscured, so we still think there is some underlying truth. Finally, in the fourth and last stage it is clear that the image has no reality behind it.

Baudrillard's most famous example of the third stage is the Disneyland theme park in the United States. Baudrillard argues that Disneyland pretends that there is a real place underlying it: an old-time America with a Main Street of soda fountains and candy stores, where trams and trolley buses deliver passengers to their destinations. This place is, however, a myth: it never really existed. There is no reality underlying the image.

If we think of Baudrillard's theory, then we can see how the idea of postmodernists celebrating the postmodern condition is somewhat problematic. Baudrillard here seems to represent an empty reality that is far from exhilarating. Rather, it is deeply ambivalent. This reflects what we see

in a number of postmodern novels, for example the works of American novelists Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, in which the postmodern lack of reality is often rendered as troubling and destabilizing.



Key idea

Simulacrum means a copy without an original.



Spotlight

According to its directors, Baudrillard's ideas regarding the simulacrum were a direct influence on the Hollywood movie *The Matrix*.

Postmodern politics

As for poststructuralism, one of the critiques of postmodernism is that it reduces serious issues to a kind of game and underestimates the significance of material inequalities and political issues. In particular, those examining issues of race and gender have been critical of postmodernism for a perceived white, masculine bias. This has led to critics attempting to define different strands of postmodernism, or adapt it to political concerns. Also like poststructuralism, however, postmodernism has itself responded to these concerns.

For example, Baudrillard's 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place' (1991) can be seen as an attempt to move away from theoretical abstractions in much postmodern theory towards a specific concern for how postmodernism might illuminate political issues. In his provocatively titled text, Baudrillard suggests that, while the violence of the Gulf War is undeniably true, what the West received via media reporting was not true but, rather, a specific manifestation of postmodernism. The war itself was a creation of an ideologically driven Western media that wished to turn horrific violence into something signifying in such a way as to generate media attention. This

media attention in turn served the needs of Western governments looking for public support. In this context, what happened in Iraq cannot be said to bear resemblance to what audiences received. Moreover, what really happened is rendered unknowable in this process. In this respect the ‘war’, being the event that we imagine took place, did not.

Another notable intervention into postmodernism from a politicized perspective comes in the form of Frederic Jameson’s Marxist critique, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). For Jameson, the artistic expression of postmodern culture is not a continuance of modernism but an attempt to recreate it by a generation for whom newness is increasingly impossible and the avant-garde ideas of the past no longer relevant.



‘Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly, they now strike us, on the whole, as rather “realistic,” and this is the result of a canonization and academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally that can be traced to the late 1950s. This is surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” as Marx once said in a different context.’

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (1991)

Yet this newness, Jameson argues, has been commodified by a culture that desires to turn everything – even art – towards profit: he tells us that ‘aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally’. For this reason, postmodern expression is merely the final phase of capitalism. Jameson’s famous example in this regard is the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, California. Reading the hotel’s architecture, Jameson explores how what would once have been a design

statement is now constructed to create a hyperreal experience that mirrors the experience of the individual in society more generally. The ‘mutation in space’ of the hotel creates an entire world within a building. Yet the result of this is to alienate the individual from the outside world and replicate the overwhelming global structures of late capitalism. The built space conditions us to accept the confusion of the outside.



‘So I come finally to my principal point here, that this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment – which is to the initial bewilderment of the older modernism as the velocities of spacecraft to those of the automobile – can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.’

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (1991)

In this sense, Jameson argues that postmodern is not merely one style or element of culture: it is *the* culture, *the* defining expression of the late capitalist moment.

Postmodern literature

For literary critics, it is from this postmodern culture and in response to it that the postmodern narrative emerges. As we have discussed, this narrative may appear very similar to the modernist narrative, differing only in its attitude. Nevertheless, literary critics have defined a number of features they see as

common to many postmodern texts.



Key ideas

Temporal distortion refers to movements across space and time; the disruption of straightforward clock or calendar time reflects the confusion of contemporary reality.

Metafiction is fiction in which the author draws attention to the artificiality of the work and its construction. This often includes self-reflexivity (the novel reflecting on itself) and self-referentiality (the novel referring to itself). It also includes features such as unreliable narration, a term first used by Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) but now widely associated with postmodernism.

Pastiche, related to intertextuality and metafiction, is imitation that draws attention to the artificiality of the text and its lack of originality. It often also facilitates an ability to construct a counter-discourse by parodying the original text or period.

Hyperreality is the blurring of reality and simulation, following from theories of the simulacrum, and draws attention to the artificiality of contemporary culture.

Irony is a playful, comic tone that reflects the surreal status of contemporary culture and the death of overarching metanarratives and moral frameworks.

Disruptions of realism include genres such as magical realism, which are often seen as postmodern forms, although postcolonial critics have recently argued that in fact it may be more accurate to see postmodernism as a derivative of magical realism. Nevertheless, the desire to expose realism's artificiality (related to metafictionality), and to engage with the surreal and/or absurdist nature of contemporary life, is something often seen in postmodern literature.

Within this framework, it is important to note that postmodern literature does not have a unified perspective on postmodern culture. While one postmodern text may celebrate technology, for example, another may lament its incursion into everyday life. What unites these texts is their sense of what contemporary culture looks like, rather than a particular attitude towards that culture.

Historiographic metafiction

One particular kind of metafiction associated with postmodern literature is historiographic metafiction. This term, first coined by Linda Hutcheon in her work *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), outlines the way in which postmodern fiction claims to relate historical events but then combines them with metafictional strategies that disrupt the idea of the text as a purveyor of ‘truth’. In doing so, the text draws attention to its unreliability as historical truth, whether this is a historical or a fictional text.

Hutcheon’s example of this form is the novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, in which history is disrupted by unreliable narration, such as the Independence of India being reported as taking place one day too soon. Rushdie’s framing for the story, in which the narrative being told is that of the narrative being written, is a common one in postmodern literature and it is used to undermine the sense of the text as an accurate reporting of events.



Spotlight

In *Midnight’s Children*, the frame story revolves around a pickle factory, where each jar contains one chapter of the novel. You can now make the green chutney that stirs the memories of the central character of Saleem, its recipe having been recreated by an Indian online culture site. The secret to the green colour? Coriander mint, and green chillies!

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While this undermines the status of the novel as truth, other fictions use historiographical metafiction to undermine the status of history as truth. For example, in his novel *Libra* (1988), Don DeLillo constructs the story of an investigator into the murder of American president John F. Kennedy in 1963. Rather than ‘solving’ the crime, the novel presents the fragmented discourse surrounding Kennedy’s supposed killer, Lee Harvey Oswald. The documents present only irreconcilable fragments that construct a man with no height, no eye colour – in the end not even a name, and certainly no politics. Using the fiction to show the fiction of history, historiographic metafiction in this case draws attention to the fictional nature of all narratives.



Case Study: *England, England*

The features of postmodern literature are nowhere more amply illustrated than in Julian Barnes's 1998 novel *England, England*. In Barnes's novel the simulacrum of Disney World that Baudrillard describes is an obvious intertextual inspiration for the imagining of a future England in which the real country is recreated as a theme park on the Isle of Wight. In order to make it attractive, the theme park is based on altered histories and corruptions of English myths and traditions. Everything is filtered, so as to not be offensive to the paying customers. As the theme park becomes established, the 'real' England becomes increasingly unpopular. The new England becomes a recognized state and member of the European Union, while the old England – the 'real' England – sinks into decay. What emerges, then, is a dramatic version of hyperreality in which it is no longer clear what is 'real'. In fact, the 'real' England is not so much real as the 'first'.

In addition to this focus on the hyperreal and the simulacrum, Barnes's novel features many of the other qualities of postmodern writing. Alongside its comment on the nature of reality, the novel functions as a satire of the tourist industry and the dilution of history in the service of commercial success. In this respect, it reflects the ironic, dark humour of the postmodern novel and its quality of parody and pastiche. It is unclear when the novel is set: the time frame appears contemporary but the events are such that we cannot place them in the present. Moreover, the novel's conclusion sees the real England returned to a feudal, pre-modern society. Finally, the novel disrupts ideas of realism: it is set in the 'real' world but the surreal nature of the plot exceeds realist boundaries.

One might speculate from this about the novel's attitude to postmodern culture. On the one hand, the fate of the island seems to critique the postmodern arrogance that one might recreate an entire nation. At the same time, however, the novel seems to suggest that even what is real is a fiction. This is present from the novel's very beginning, where the protagonist, Martha Cochrane, completes a jigsaw with her father showing the counties of England – a metaphor for the ways in which all places and our attachments to them are constructed, piece by piece, through memory and our associations with others. In this sense, the novel reflects the lack of nostalgia of a postmodern text against the kind of yearning for an ideal past that we might expect in a modernist fiction.

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Barnes's critique of empire through the lens of postmodern thought draws

attention to the political possibilities of postmodern literature, in the same way that postmodern theory has responded to critiques of its early white male bias. However, the novel seems happy at the same time to sit in a space of comic or farcical fiction, where political concerns are secondary. It is this tension that can be seen to sometimes make it unclear to what extent postmodern is suited to very serious questions of racial and sexual violence. More recently, collections such as Len Platt and Sara Upstone's *Postmodern Literature and Race* (2015) and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor's *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* (2013) illustrate the increasing sense of postmodernism as a strategy that is available for a political purpose.

Such texts do not adopt postmodernism uncritically – indeed, they are keen to point out the ways in which postmodernism might need to be revised in order to open itself to questions of politics and identity. In such a way, they respond to earlier texts such as Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?' (1991) and Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens's collection of essays *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-)Colonial, and the (Post-)Feminist* (1994). The notion of 'postmodernisms' in the plural represents the idea that, while some postmodernisms may be politically conservative, others may in fact be politically radical. Postmodernism has no definite politics of its own, but it is nevertheless open to being employed for a radical political purpose.

Post-postmodernism?

One of the questions surrounding postmodernism is whether we are still in it. In 2016 Len Platt and Brian McHale published *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*. This major landmark study presents postmodernism as something we are capable of historicizing; that is, it is a matter for the past. Likewise, David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014) suggest that we might now think of ourselves as in a phase called metamodernism: a post-postmodernism that has emerged from postmodernism.

For other scholars, however, it is not that postmodernism is a thing of the past, but rather that it has become so incorporated into our ways of thinking that it has ceased to require a special terminology. The pervasiveness of

reality television, for example, marks a world in which we have become comfortable with the blurring of fact and fiction. Social media, blogging and Internet publishing have opened up forums of public opinion, making them more democratic but also making us more used to the questioning of official discourses such as religion, history and government, so that the idea of questioning metanarratives is woven into our daily experiences.

As literature scholars, we need to distinguish between postmodern culture and postmodern literature. However, at the same time we might think that what was in the 1970s defined as 'postmodern writing' is now merely 'writing'. The mainstream success of 'experimental' fiction has relocated it from being something only read in largely intellectual and academic contexts to being widely appreciated. Equally, the strategies of postmodern writing have filtered into more mainstream fiction. Perhaps postmodernism is now just what there is...