

# Brief Survey of Post- Modern Literature

Dr. Alan Haffa

# Deconstruction

- Jacques Derrida
- A decentering of binary opposites: Male/Female, Colonizer/Colonized, Christian/Muslim, Black/White, Communist/Capitalist
- Modernist: search for meaning and beauty in a way that broke with tradition
- Post-Modern: Truth is impossible; play and explore many truths through decentering and up-ending hierarchies of power and structure
- Reader constructs meaning rather than author revealing
- Play with language's ability to connote multiple meanings

# Novels of Robbe-Grillet

- *Jealousy*, 1957
- “A first-person narrator who, however, never says “I” and whom one never sees or hears, draws us into an identification with him, installs us in the “hole” that he occupies in the center of the text, so that we see, hear, move, and feel with him.” (Bruce Morrisette)
- Repetitions—with slight variation to account for point of view
- Minute descriptions
- Reversals of chronology
- Objectivist: no inner monologue or psychological analysis—purely descriptive but in a relativistic way

# Objective themes

- Objects that reappear—the reader imposes signification on these objects
- “Network of stains,” chiefly “a centipede crushed on the dining-room wall by Franck, the lover of the jealous narrator-husband’s wife A, whom we often see, with the husband’s eyes, through the *jalousie* or sun blind of a window...” (Morrissette)
- The crushed centipede takes on symbolic meaning, perhaps conveying eroticism, physicality, life/death...

# Characters

- “A”, wife
- Unnamed husband who observes
- Franck, the neighbor
- First person narrative that appears to be a third person narrative. The husband has written himself out of the narrative as he jealously observes his wife and Franck and re-imagines various scenes with slightly different details
- You don't know which one really happened and which is the narrator's imagination

- After “A” says she needs to go to town and Franck offers to drive her tomorrow...
- “A centipede!” she says in a more restrained voice, in silence that has just fallen.

Franck looks up again. Following the direction of A...’s motionless gaze, he turns his head to the other side, toward his right.

On the light colored paint of the partition opposite A..., a common *Scutigera* of average size (about as long as a finger) has appeared...

It is not unusual to encounter different kinds of centipedes after dark in this already old wooden house. And this kind is not one of the largest; it is far from being one of the most venomous. A...does her best, but does not manage to look away, nor to smile at the joke about her aversion to centipedes.

Franck, who has said nothing, is looking at A....again. Then he stands up, noiselessly, holding his napkin in his hand. He wads it into a ball and approaches the wall.

A...seems to be breathing a little fast, but this may be an illusion. Her left hand gradually closes over her knife. The delicate antennae accelerate their alternate swaying...

Franck lifts the napkin away from the wall and with his foot continues to squash something on the tiles, against the baseboard.

About a yard higher, the paint is marked with a dark shape, a tiny arc twisted into a question mark, blurred on one side, in places surrounded by more tenuous signs, from which A...has still not taken her eyes.” (64-65)

# The spot is everywhere...

- “The spot in on the wall of the house, on the flagstones, against the empty sky. It is everywhere in the valley, from the garden to the stream and up the opposite slope. It is in the office too, in the bedroom, in the dining room, in the living room, in the courtyard, on the road up to the highway.” (1-2)
- What does this mean?

# “Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery”

- Novella by Bahaa' Taher, 1996
- Set in 1967, the period of the war with Israel, but this is only hinted at
- Nameless narrator in small Egyptian village, 12 year old boy
- He recalls how he would take cookies to the Coptic, Christian monastery—the Coptics and Muslims get along well
- Saffiya is like a sister to him though she is a distant cousin
- Many men woo her and the family wants to marry her to Harbi, another cousin
- One day the old Bey comes and asks to marry her and surprisingly she says “yes”
- Soon after she gives birth to a boy, Hassan
- There are rumors in the village, but none explicit.
- The Bey has Harbi attacked by his men; Harbi shoots the Bey
- She will raise Hassan to hate Harbi and to kill him

# Aunt Saffiya as Post-Modern

- Setting with a local, non-Western point of view
- Gender tensions
- Cycle of Revenge as a metaphor for religious and national strife is questioned
- Tension between modern and traditional
- Change: people move from the village and the village modernizes; even the monastery changes, becoming more scholarly and less connected to community
- What divides Egypt? Is peace possible?

# “The Death of Artemio Cruz”

- Carlos Fuentes, Mexican author, 1962
- Cruz is on his deathbed
- He was a revolutionary, politician, business tycoon
- We see how corrupt he became; how he had lovers; how he betrayed those he loved
- Multiple narrators; multiple points of view
- Abrupt shifts in time

# Summary

- Traditional novelistic form tested: narrator; non-sequential time; point of view;
- Represents characters from previously under represented groups: third world countries, or minorities, women
- Invite us to look at questions differently—Recenter or decenter our own point of view

# *Love In Two Languages* (1983)

- Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938-2009): Moroccan writer
- Born during French Colonialism; French speaking, educated at Sorbonne, Ph.D. in Sociology in 1967
- *Amour Bilingue* explores love between a North African man who is bilingual and a French woman
- No plot; no drama

# Words and Connotations

- “He calmed down instantly when an Arabic word, kalma, appeared, kalma and its scholarly equivalent, kalima, and the whole string of its diminutives which had been the riddles of his childhood: klima... The diglossal kal(i)ma appeared again without *mot's* having faded away or disappeared. Within him, both words were observing each other, preceding what had now become the rapid emergence of memories., fragments of words, onomatopoeias, garlands of phrases, intertwined to the death: undecipherable.”
- Kalma is the first Pillar of Islam; it defines what it is to be a Muslim

# Love

- “What was it that he wanted? That she should be this abyss between him and himself, in their common language? Was he asking the impossible of her? In order to speak to her, he himself was doubly translated: translated from his mother tongue to a foreign language, and from one foreign thing to another through an auto-metamorphosis, God only knows for what extravagances.” (20)

# Bilingualism and Identity

- “When I speak to you in your language, what happens to mine? Does my language continue to speak, but in silence? Because it’s never eliminated from these moments. When I speak to you, I feel the flow of my mother tongue divide into two streams: one is gutturally silent, the other, running on empty, unmakes itself with an implosion into the disorder of bilingualism. I don’t know how to say the whole chain of names and sounds of my native speech, born as I was in the mouth of an invisible god, this chain, similar to a speech impediment, which destroys itself and then comes back backward, stammering. It’s then that I lose my words, forgetting which one belongs to which language.” (41)

# Circle, center, and boundary: Identity

- “But, I had broken this circle, renounced, besides the somewhat likeable linkings, my family and my country: first lesson of the insurrection against my name. To go from place to place comfortably, provoke little incidents along the ways, was accorded me by the grace of this detachment.” (85)
- He is truly multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and he is a world traveler, and in doing so he has broken away from traditional center of culture and family and native language.
- But the price he has paid is that he is a stranger in his own land, a wanderer with no home, lost and alone, even while in love.

# Conclusion

- Post-Modern literature explores individual identity and love and culture from a point of view outside traditional Western culture, and traditional binaries
- Colonialization from point of view of colonized
- Female protagonists
- Minority protagonists
- Non-Western protagonists
- This is good as it broadens our understanding of what it means to be human
- But we need to work to retain some universal values or the value of literature and the meaning of culture become devalued