

Post-Modern Literary Theory
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What IS Post-Modernism

- Modernity is post WW I to late 1950s or 1960; Post-Modern is situated historically from 1960s to 2000
- Post-Modernism is the theory that:
 - ⑩ Absolute Truth is Inaccessible
 - ⑩ Knowledge is relative
 - ⑩ Truth is embedded in language
 - ⑩ Language is fluid and “slippery”
 - ⑩ Knowledge is personal rather than universal

Key terms in Post-Modernism

- Moves (in places of logical progressions)
- Positions (in places of conclusions and theses)
- Takes (in places of propositions and arguments)
- Construction (in place of discovery)
- Frame; how you present a question; i.e., contextualizing
- Texts (in place of literature)
- Agenda (in place of bias)

Post Modernism in Relation to Modernism

- Modernism:
 - ⑩ Loss of Faith (Nietzsche and God);
 - ⑩ Humanism revealed as weak and false by Industrialism, Capitalism, and Colonialism
 - ⑩ Despair avoided by some utopian “move” such as Beauty or Art as a source of refuge from challenge of Modernity (Woolf, Joyce, and Proust)

Post-Modernism As a Response

- Questioning becomes THE point rather than a point along the way toward some solution
- There is NO explanation for a text; merely a series of potential “takes”
- The author and text do not create meaning; the critic “constructs” meaning from the text
- Literature is not limited to texts; Text comes to signify anything that signifies—movies, cartoons, newspapers, TV, music, etc.

- Theory replaces Literature!

Post-Modernism and History

- History is “written by the winners” is taken to mean that History is nothing more than propaganda
- History pretends to be universal but it is really always parochial and limited—culturally defined by the power structure and hierarchy in which it is produced
- Hence, preference and privilege given to men’s roles in history (Phallogentric) , Western Civilization (Logocentric)
- Creation of Departments of Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, Asian Studies, African-American Studies, Latin-American Studies, broadly, Cultural Studies

Types of Post-Modernism

- Marxist (focus upon social relations in literature)
- Psychoanalytic and Freudian
- Gender Studies and Feminism
- Post-Colonial (focus upon literature of the Other in colonized cultures)
- Reader Response (Stanley Fish)
- Multi-Culturalism (focus upon Non-White literature in America)
- Identity Theory (Essentialism): Includes almost all of the above from the point of view of how “identity” is constructed
- Deconstruction (tears down traditional notions of literature and literary theory by showing the weakness of language)
 - Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”
- Critique of Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology
- Structuralism assumes a tension between a “Center” and the structure itself
- Everything is understood in relation to the Center
- The Center “limits Freeplay” in understanding the structure
- Levi-Strauss privileges Nature over Culture
- Derrida “deconstructs” Levi-Strauss: Incest-Taboo is universal; hence, Natural. Yet, it is rule-based and normative and prohibitive; hence, Cultural.
 - Because of Language, this “centering” is inevitable
- “Ethnology—like any science—comes about within the element of discourse. And it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them. Consequently, whether he wants to or not—and this does not depend on a decision on his part—the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them.”

Consequences of Decentering

- “There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.”

- Nietzsche “showed us the way” to “this second interpretation of interpretation.”

The Current State of Theory

- Backlash against “Theory”: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0127/p11s01-legn.html>

- Terry Eagleton, 1983, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*; *After Theory*.

- “Somewhere in the 1980s, says Prof. Lathbury, “Eagleton began to be a hero to some” and “theory became the object of study more than the works it purportedly was designed to explicate.””

Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom

- V.D. Hanson and John Heath, 2000

- Homer as a metaphor for Greek Wisdom, for Western Civilization, for Absolute Truth, for Western Science and Philosophy

- In the 1980s and 1990s, Classics, which is the preserver of the past and the interpreter of Western Civilization succumbed to Post-Modernism

How Post-Modernism killed Scholarship

- “Thus in our postmodern age of cynicism, nihilism, and skepticism, anyone foolish enough to talk “grandly” of “the Greeks” in ethical or moral terms may be dismissed as naïve, obtuse—or worse, himself but a tawdry purveyor of exploitation. In other words, the Greek adherent creates out of thin air the idea of “the Greeks” just to advance his own subliminally racist and sexist agenda: to oppress the present “other” he has invented a past high culture that never really way.”

- They name names and quote passages from famous classicists, pointing out the obvious—that they are unreadable and meaningless!

Examples of Post-Modern Literature

- Characterized by Irony, Playfulness, Inter-textuality, and meta-fiction

- Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*

- Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie* (absent third person narrator)

- Kurt Vonnegut

- Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

■ Absurdist Theatre: Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*

Summary

- Post-modernism is a response to the problem of Modernity
- It's answer is a question—one that can never be answered affirmatively and definitively—because to do so, would be to create a false system
- All systems of thought and culture are compromised by language and cultural relativity
- Truth is always only partial and limited and particular
- This approach to literature and knowledge is a worthy correction to absolutism and arrogance—but it very limited and empty and hypocritical as a system of belief and practice