

Post Modernism and English Literature: What is Post Modernism?

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It is possible to identify a singular feature- the hallmark of post-modernism, which would suggest a unity in diversity. Post structuralism and post-modernism are partners in the same paradigm. Together they exercise a joint critique of modernist ideas of order and unity. Both share a profound ontological uncertainty.

Historically post-structuralism had its origin in October 1966 during the symposium on “The Language of criticism and sciences of man” *Post –modernism and English Literature* held in John Hopkins Humanities Centre where the objective was to “bring into an active and not uncritical contact leading proponents of structural studies in a wide variety of disciplines.” *Post –modernism and English Literature* Lucien Goldmann, Todorov, Barthes, Lacan and Derrida, among others were present. It is here that Derrida attacked the traditionalist position in general and the Levi-Strauss’ version of structuralism in particular. He shows how the structuralist texts like Levi-Strauss’s can be made to embarrass their own logic. Derrida contends that the “structurality of structure has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by giving it a centre of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin.” Derrida coins a word “différance” out of two words, “difference”, and “deference”. The structure of the sign is conditioned by differing and by deferring. Differing is the one not being the other, it is spatial. Deferring is something delayed or postponed, it is temporal. In other words, the structure of the sign is “différance” which means that a sign is something which is different from another sign and something that is not fully contained in the sign. Therefore, the half of the sign is what it is not and half of it is not there. A sign has no fixed meaning; all that it can do is to send us in search of meaning. The sign therefore is a trace and literary work is a structure of traces. By “decentering” Derrida means that out-side discourse there is no fixed point from which one can establish metaphysical boundaries for legitimate signifiers. The critic’s desire to find a center is a kind of wish fulfillment and such centering should be summarily dismissed as useless legacy of the old metaphysics. The idea of decentering has opened up what was supposed to be a closed system of empirical data and the

result is free play and indeterminacy. There is such an indeterminacy in any fictional art work that neither consistency nor certainty is possible. The text must be read as slippery, deceptive, unknowable and most importantly, an unstable narrative; language lets us down just when we think it meaningful. The meaning is indeterminate. The text is not a closed system but an open one into which we can have access through many different entrances none of which can be claimed as the main one. Each single text, again, is a network that recalls the many other texts and opens up the horizon of intertextuality. A text is no longer seen as a veil hiding a meaning, but a web without a centering spider; free play without closure. Once the physical condition of a book is separated from the chain of communication associated with verbal discourse, the book becomes a simple code that can be interpreted as one interprets hieroglyphics. For Stanley Fish a text is a kind of empty container waiting to be filled with meaning. The reader is the co-author and the text or, more precisely a sub-text, emerges out of the vital interaction between the text and the reader.

The most important postmodern feature is indeterminacy. Nothing is certain: we cannot be certain about anything. This indeterminacy is also partly due to our sense of fragmentation. The seamless totality of the classical and the Christian worlds are lost to us. With the death of God, the world is fragmented; the society is fragmented; the family is fragmented; the process of fragmentation is an on-going process. In post-modernism, this is reflected in the breaking of forms, use of montage and collage and mixing of genres in an unexpected manner. Since post-modern culture is essentially mass culture, all canons are discredited. The traditional values are flouted; the culture is decanonized. Art is trivialized and carnivalized. Post-modernism insisted on the pleasure of the moment and looked for things easy to like.

David Lodge identified six narrative strategies generally used in post-modern fiction: Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness and the Short-circuit. Post-modernism is interested in pleasure. For post-modernism realism is just an incoherent and deluding notion. Post-modernism points a radical indeterminacy. For post-modernism the pattern or the centre is only a wishful thinking; an imposition. The idea of a meaningful pattern is a comforting fiction at the best.

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