

# Postmodernism in literature

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Postmodernism is difficult to define, because we go through it on a daily basis. Some would say it began in the 1950's, and others say it began with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Postmodernism is characterized by a variety of elements that question the reading experience. Postmodern authors celebrate this by using humour and absurd experiences to create a bizarre alternate reality. The different elements that are used throughout postmodernism stories include magic realism, metafiction and irony.

Magic realism is where the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. Magic realism differs from fantasy because it is set in a normal, modern world with accurate descriptions of humans and a society that does not question it. Another element is Irony. Irony is used in postmodernism literature. Irony is when that which one would not expect occurs is true. Finally, Metafiction is a device that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction. This often happens by the author introducing themselves into the story. Post modernism and post colonialism are linked.

The use of these techniques and elements encourage the reader to contemplate or query their reading experience and ones understanding of life and societies political and cultural values. Magic realism is where the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. Characters accept rather than question the logic of the magic element. Magic realism is displayed in a short story; A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings by Gabriel Marquez. The story is about an old distorted man with enormous wings found on the beach by a couple. They try to communicate with him but find it is useless as he speaks a different language.

The neighbor comes over and tells the couple that he is an angel that has come to take their sick child. The community and people from all over the world were astonished and wanted to see the angel. The couple grew tired of having so many people at their house that they began to charge money to see the angel they became rich and built a mansion. After a while the community grew tired of the angel because a woman who had turned into a spider by disobeying her parents arrived to town to share her stories with the community. Eventually the angel began to roam free and finally took off into the sky.

This story directly relates to magic realism because the crowd does not question the angel or spider woman. The couple's neighbor does not question it at all, but she is quite familiar with it " He's an angel," she told them. " He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down" (3). The woman is not shocked or surprised to see this man at all, in fact she is not questioning it either, but in reality it would seem very bizarre. The use of magic realism makes the reader question the reading experience and reality itself.

Magic realism also plays a role in *The Snow Horse* by J. Winterson, A story about a man who drives to a party in a horrible snow storm but is stopped by a strange man who insists on telling him a ghost story. After dropping the strange man off he decides to take a short cut that his wife warned him not to take and ends up in a car crash, but as it is crashing he sees a horse running up beside the car. The story that the strange man told him consisted of a man getting ambushed and robbed and was left for dead his horse died beside him as well.

The story exhibited a richness of details that the man believed in the snow horse and seen it as he was crashing. When he gets home and into bed he hears something “ Then I heard it, unmistakable, the steady clip of hooves under the window and towards the drift, and out, further and further, faster and faster, on the high old coaching road, beneath the rack of stars. ”(6). Here Winterson is making a reference to Santa’s reindeer. This effect leaves the reader uncertain, whether to believe the magical element of the snow horse or the realist events in the story.

Last but not least magic realism is displayed in *The Night Face Up* by Julio Cortazar. This story is about a man who is running from the Aztecs but is dreaming of being on a motorcycle and ends up in a car crash, yet the way Cortazar sets up the story makes it seem the opposite way around. This story is a good example of magic realism because it makes the reader question which world is reality and which one is a dream “ It was unusual as a dream because it was full of smells, and he never dreamt smells” (266).

Here is a distinct part where reality is being confused with a dream. The story is very descriptive of both worlds which makes the reader uncertain and question which is world is real and which is not. This disrupts the reading experience. Irony is when that which one would not expect occurs is true, when reality is different from appearance. Irony is seen in *Araby* by James Joyce. *Araby* is about a young boy who falls head over heels for his friend's older sister. He has never spoken to her but he seems to be deeply in love with her.

When he finally speaks to her she mentions the *Araby Bazaar* and how she could not go, the boy brings himself to go to this bazaar to bring her back

something but realizes it is not as he imagined it. This narrative is ironic because it is perceived as the boy writing it, but in the ending it confirms that the narrator has learned his lesson and the reader learns it is an older, mature and more emotionally experienced version of the boy “ I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. ”(4).

The young boy went through tough situations to get to the bazaar and when he got there it was not what he pictured it to be. When he describes his anger it then tells the reader it is an older version of the boy telling his experience from the past. By using this technique it creates an ironic tension because it is human nature to change what was said, how it was said and how other people acted, so it makes the reader question the reading experience by thinking whether he told the story correctly or not. Irony also plays a role in A Girls Story by David Arnason.

This story is ironic because it is not “ a girls story” it is a man who is stereotyping a female. It is the opposite of a girl’s story. Arnason is constantly stereotyping women and predicting what the reader expects out of the story. Arnason seems to stereotype how a woman would write the story as well “ I’m going to have trouble with the feminists about this story. I can see that already. ”(228). Here you can tell that it is a man stereotyping a woman because of the fact he is directly addressing women who will read this story and how they will dislike it.

Irony also occurs in The Happy Man by Naguib Mahfouz. The happy man is about a man who wakes up extremely happy and cannot understand why. He is usually faced with strain and contemplation, but he wakes up happy. He

then goes about his day and cannot even stay at work or sleep because of this strange happiness. He goes to a doctor to see why he is so happy “ I haven’t come to see you because I’m ill,” he told the doctor in a hesitant tone of voice, “ but because I’m happy! ” (240). It is ironic because being happy is not an illness is very ironic to go to see a doctor because of it.

He questions himself because he usually is not a happy man, but because of the grief and contemplation he has gone through has cause him to lose his mind and become inconceivably happy that he goes to doctors to try to cure it. This makes the reader question the reading experience and life itself. Metafiction is a device that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction. This often happens by the author violating narrative levels by intruding to comment on their writing, involving his or herself with the fictional characters or even directly addressing the reader.

The use of metafiction makes the reader contemplate their reading experience. In A Girls Story by David Arnason metafiction is strongly used. Satire is also used throughout the story as well. Satire is the use of irony, sarcasm and ridicule. Here Arnason disrupts the reading experience by satirizing what the reader would think of this part of the story by saying “ I could do a lot more of that but you wouldn’t like it” (228). Arnason predicts what a reader would like or dislike in the story.

Another strongly use of metafiction in the story is where Arnason directly mentions himself “ He even looks a little like me and he smokes the same kind of pipe” (232). Here Arnason is directly addressing the reader by involving himself with the fictional characters. This disrupts the reading experience and makes the reader question the cultural and political views

held by society. Another example of metafiction is displayed in *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth. Barth displays reflexivity where this enables to reader to understand the process by which he or she reads the world as a text.

He casually interrupts to explain how he created the story “ Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of the several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction. ” (54). Barth tells the reader how describing physical appearance is important Alex 7 to keep the reader’s imagination and interest going. Throughout the story Barth interrupts to comment on his writing to explain what is going on and why he is using these different techniques.

This makes the reader question the reading experience and their understanding of Barth’s writing. Finally metafiction is used in *Araby*. The reader perceives it as being the young boy telling his story, but in the end it is shown to be a more mature, older version of the boy. Usually when telling a story from the past people tend to change what happened, so this makes the reader question whether the narrator has changed anything about the story or not “ Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger. (4). Here we see a different side of the boy, a more experienced angry version. This shows the reader the man who is now telling the story from a past experience. These elements and techniques that the postmodern use disrupt and question the reading experience and encourage the reader to question it. Postmodernism and Post colonialism are linked through these techniques, magic realism, irony and metafiction.