

To for describing late
twentieth-century
literature and essay



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In her article ' Postmodern Literature does not exist', Lena Petrovic claims that postmodernism, though a valid term in politics and society, is not the correct term to describe the literary and cultural movement of the late twentieth-century.

Postmodernism, in so far as it means an obliteration of this kind of the creative self, its dispersal, to use the current idiom, into a plurality of subject positions inscribed within language, is the negation of art. False and misleading in the literary debate, the term ' postmodern' has its legitimate uses elsewhere, of course. It is employed meaningfully to describe the massive material and political changes that have lead to the post-industrial, consumer, or mass media society, and to the re-colonization by that society of the rest of the not yet so postmodern world. It is valid, too, when applied to a mood or a state of mind accompanying or generated by these changes [..

. which pervade popular media culture and is endorsed and promoted, whether intentionally or not, by major postmodern theorists. (Petrovic, p. 2) I think this is an interesting statement, because I agree that postmodernism is a term that is rightfully used in political, philosophical and sociological theories.

However, the problem with this term is that it is not relevant for literary critiques: The literary techniques and devices usually singled out to distinguish the specifically postmodernist outlook are not decisive. For such deliberate interruptions of the processes of knowing, and of feeling, such a dispersal of experience and understanding into a meaningless kinetics of

intellectual and aesthetic games at which formal literary devices like, say, heteroglossia, or heterotopia [...] are, in fact, contrary to the purpose of art, which still is what it was for Conrad: 'to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions..

. and ...

make you feel,... above all, make you see .

.. that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask'. There is no postmodern literature, there are only postmodern interpretations of literature. Petrovic, pp. 8-9) I think that, to discuss the word 'postmodern' as an effective term to describe late twentieth-century literature and culture, first we need to look at its meaning and compare postmodernism to modernism.

Whether it is considered a reaction to Modernism, or a part of it, the Postmodern trend possesses specific qualities which can be followed not only in the worldwide culture, but also in several aspects of life. Concepts as post industrialisation, cultural imperialism, post history are signs of a world that has experienced remarkable changes. Postmodernism can be seen as a cultural condition: living in an increasingly technologically orientated society, with lower levels of trust in authority and 'truth' than previously, where the meaning of things is unstable and open to interpretation. In 'Toward a Concept of Postmodernism', Ihab Hassan poses some questions in order to come to the concept or definition of postmodernism: Can we really perceive a phenomenon, in Western societies generally and in their literatures

particularly, that needs to be distinguished from modernism, needs to be <https://assignbuster.com/to-for-describing-late-twentieth-century-literature-and-essay/>

named? If so, will the provisional rubric “ postmodernism” serve? Can we then-or even should we at this time-construct of this phenomenon some probative scheme, both chronological and typological, that may account for its various trends and counter-trends, its artistic, epistemic, and social character? And how would this phenomenon-let us call it postmodernism-relate itself to such earlier modes of change as turn-of-the-century avant-gardes or the high modernism of the twenties? (Hassan, p. 3) These questions are exactly the questions that arise when talking about postmodernism, but they are not easy ones to answer, as Hassan himself admits. He states that the word postmodernism “ sounds not only awkward, uncouth; it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself.

” (Hassan, p. 3) Unlike the terms romanticism and classicism, baroque and rococo, it contains its enemy within, and therefore it is not appropriate.

However, Hassan later claims that: Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once. And an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work. (Hassan, p.

3) These two statements seem somewhat contradictory to me but I do agree with both on some level. Firstly I agree that the term postmodernism does not describe the literary and cultural movement of the late-twentieth century accurately. Even though modernism and postmodernism have a lot of characteristics in common, postmodernists do not try to be like modernists, but rather wish to break away from the traditional use of, for example, <https://assignbuster.com/to-for-describing-late-twentieth-century-literature-and-essay/>

fragmentation. Postmodernism is often characterized as a critique of Modernism and the project of modernity. Secondly, I also agree that it is difficult to distinguish between the two, because, as mentioned before, they share certain characteristics, and history has shown that an author can indeed write both modernist and postmodernist pieces. However, in my opinion this does not mean that no division can be made between the two movements.

Postmodernism, as it relates to literature, can be understood to refer to texts that can be seen to represent such instability and unreliability. A key feature of postmodern texts is the intrusion of the author. As De Villo explains in 'The Decline of American Postmodernism': The most notable quality of postmodern fiction is its use and intensification of modernist fragmentation to create a completely self-reflective text. Rather than speaking in an exclusively naturalistic or realistic mode, the postmodern text finds it necessary to keep reminding the reader, in various ways, that he or she is reading a language construct, that fiction is, simply, LANGUAGE.

(De Villo, p. 9) Slaughterhouse Five is a good example of this focus on the process of writing in postmodernist writing. This is especially evident in the first chapter of the novel, which is about the writing process of the novel: writing about writing. Vonnegut expresses the problems he encountered when trying to write his story, and also manipulates fiction and reality by stating that: "all this happened, more or less." Another important characteristic of postmodern literature, and of postmodern art in general, is the mixing of styles and genres and blurring boundaries between high and low culture.

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This is seen for example in Ginsberg's poem 'A Supermarket in California', which portrays a mixture of high and low culture and questions the grand narrative of suburban life. Ginsberg uses the supermarket as a metaphoric setting for dreaming about the possibilities that America offers and lamenting the country it has instead become. He wonders whether America will continue to be a place of empty material values, and alienated individuals, if it will embrace the possibilities for living in a real human community. "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?" Ginsberg is troubled and looking to Whitman for answers.

That the poem ends with a question, not a statement, suggests that Ginsberg remains unsure about whether America can live up to its potential. Postmodernism follows most of the same ideas as modernism, rejecting boundaries between high and low culture, rejecting strict genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, irony and playfulness. Postmodern art favours reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity and an emphasis on the decentred and dehumanized subject. While postmodernism seems very much like modernism in these ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends.

Modernism tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history, for example in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, but presents that fragmentation as something tragic, something to be mourned as a loss.

Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life; art will do what other human institutions fail to do. Postmodernism, in <https://assignbuster.com/to-for-describing-late-twentieth-century-literature-and-essay/>

contrast, does not lament the ideas of fragmentation or incoherence, but rather celebrates them. Because of these differences I think that the term postmodernism, which suggests some sort of continuation of modernism, is not the right word. A good example of this 'celebration' of fragmentation is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. Some of its key postmodernist qualities are the mixing of fantasy with nonfiction, a clear-cut moral position and the questioning of grand narratives and a fragmented form.

A mixing of fantasy and nonfiction is shown in Vonnegut's use of time travel and the Dresden bombing. The novel also possesses a fragmented form. Billy travels randomly to different events in his life and jumps from one point to another. Space and time become relative through Billy's time-travelling, which shows the popular postmodern view of reality in crisis. Vonnegut explains the fragmentation and unhinged time in chapter 1: "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.

Slaughterhouse Five is a good example of the difference in the use of fragmentation in modernist and postmodernist literature. When Billy becomes "unstuck in time", Vonnegut can have his main character travel around in time and space, having Billy experience only fragments of his life before moving him again. This creates a collage effect, made up of bits and pieces of Billy's life. By fragmenting Billy's experiences like this, Vonnegut can actually bring the events that make up Billy's life closer together. The constant fragmentation of Billy's life serves to unify his character for the reader.

By going back and forth in his life, the reader can see the whole picture and find out what Billy is like, instead of just seeing one fragment or aspect of his personality. Vonnegut also uses fragmentation of time to keep the Dresden bombing fresh in the reader's mind. When Billy returns to Dresden, the reader goes with him. This helps the reader to acquire a first hand account of the massacre, but at the same time the reader can take a step back and distance himself from it. Vonnegut gives the reader a view of both worlds, which enables them to experience the horrors of war, and reflect on them at the same time. The fragmentation of Billy's life during and after the war facilitates a combination of an emotional and intellectual response of the reader.

By having Billy's story read as a series of fragmented events, Vonnegut can return to Dresden many times. Billy never leaves the war for long, and as a result neither does the reader. This way the cruelty in Billy's life and the experience of war cannot be buried in the past, and war is a never-ending affair. Postmodernism marked a deconstructive turn in society, or the deconstruction of our world, which was a response to the experience of post-war trauma's.

This is evident in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut writes in the first chapter that he was once given advice against writing an anti-war novel, because "... there would always be wars, [and] that they were as easy to stop as glaciers". Rather than trying to write an anti-war novel, Vonnegut wrote a response to the tragedy of war through the eyes of a soldier. Dresden and World War II are ever-present in the minds of those that were affected by it,

yet little can be done to ease the pain, both physically and mentally.

Vonnegut's novel actually is a protest against war, not by showing the cruel atrocities of war, but rather the effects it has on survivors. In 1969, at the time of the book's publication, the US was in the midst of the Vietnam War.

Vonnegut was a pacifist and criticised the war. Slaughterhouse Five therefore also served as a protest against the campaign in Vietnam. Another problem Hassan identifies with the term postmodernism, is that, like other categorical terms, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars. Some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism or even neo-avant-gardism, while still others would call the same phenomenon simply modernism. " The term postmodernism certainly is a problematic one, but the question is: if postmodern is not the right term, then what is? Hassan suggests some alternative names: " The Atomic, or Space, or Television, Age? These technological tags lack theoretical definition.

Or shall we call it the Age of Indeterminance (indeterminacy + immanence)

Or better still, shall we simply live and let others live to call us what they may? p. 3) I think that the problem in finding a name or term that would be better suitable for the period, is that because there still remain quite a few similarities with modernism, the invention of a completely new term, like the distinction between romanticism and realism, or realism and modernism might be too drastic. Maybe the best solution would be to give this period a name that is based on when it started, or took place, such as post-colonialist or post-World War II, instead of giving it a new label suggesting certain elements or features. In conclusion, I do not think that postmodern is an effective critical term for describing late twentieth-century literature and <https://assignbuster.com/to-for-describing-late-twentieth-century-literature-and-essay/>

culture. The term can be used to describe political theories or philosophies, but for literature and culture it just does not evoke the true essence of the period or movement. I think it suggests too much of an extension of the attributes of modernism, instead of the reaction against modernism that it really is.