

# Postmodernist and poststructuralist views of reality in literature and culture



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In what ways do postmodernists and poststructuralists complicate our understanding of 'reality' and its representation in literature and culture?

Although the lexis 'culture' retains many definitions, Thomas Stearns Eliot within *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948) argues that the progression of culture must be natural and cannot be consciously influenced. He says '[f]or if any definite conclusions emerge from this study, one of this is surely this, that culture is the one thing we cannot deliberately aim at'.

[1]On the other hand, culture is associated with social behaviours and expectations that derive from humanity. To a certain extent in some aspects, I agree that civilisation can become too involved in attempting to construct an ideologized culture. Nevertheless, maintaining the ability to determine unacceptable social behaviours, one must carry out that behaviour before it can be decided it is not acceptable. This could possibly hinder the accuracy and truth of reality.

For example, nineteenth-century realist writers who construct novels by crafting narratives, often try to illustrate honesty in their writing, however, the more times a novel is altered to appear more real. In terms of authenticity, makes the novel less 'literary' real as the more you change a realist text the further away the writer strays from legitimacy, as it is no longer natural. So, the novel becomes literary postmodern as there a complication between what is real and what is fake/disturbed.

Within Niall Lucy's *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). he states 'there are varying views on postmodernism'[2]and claims:

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Postmodernism was what happened when that tradition, including its critics, eventually abandoned the idea that there was something central and intrinsically valuable about literary texts, and began to apply its considerable analytical, emotional and political resources to the consideration of any text, in a universe of knowledge where, to the perceiving subject, everything presents as a text, including context (as Derrida famously remarked, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* – roughly translatable as 'context is everything').[3]

Lucy discusses the effect of romanticizing texts via the applying 'analytical, emotional and political resources' therefore, eliminating potential meanings/definitions which has 'damaged the value of literary texts'. He briefly introduces French philosopher Jacques Derrida who is well-known for his deconstruction work, and the need for context in relation to a text. This counteracts theorist Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author".[4] Lucy discloses Barthes' theory "The Death of the Author" and the theorist's transition from structuralist to post-structuralist, as Lucy adds '[w]e see Barthes move from structuralism to what will become a multiplicity of poststructuralist investigations (poststructuralism)'.[5]

Postmodern literature is categorized by narrative methods such as a paradox and an unreliable narrative. Postmodern-works are perceived as a 'comeback' against the following of Enlightenment thinking (postmodernity) and Modernist access to literature. This type of literature frequently challenges categorisations or definitions. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) and other works are characterised by a constant conflict of meta-narratives, generality and is critical of many claims of the Enlightenment. A literary example of this is A <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernist-and-poststructuralist-views-of-reality-in-literature-and-culture/>

*Sentimental Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2008) by Laurence Sterne. A postmodern novel which features a deceitful narrator, Yorick and his past travel experiences, typically his erotic encounters which are greatly exaggerated to fuel his ego and desires, for example:

Any one may do a casual act of good nature, but a continuation of them shows it is a part of the temper; and certainly, added I, if it is the same blood which comes from the heart, which descends to the extremities (touching her wrist), I am sure you must have one of the best pulses of any woman in the world.—Feel it, said she, holding out her arm. So laying down my hat, I took hold of her fingers in one hand, and applied the two forefingers of my other to the artery.[6]

This whole recital is satirical and fabricated by Yorick to accommodate what he wants to believe, that a woman is attracted to him because she is blushing. In retrospect she is blushing because she is embarrassed that a stranger is feeling her pulse for no medical purpose other than for his own fetish. Because Yorick is the narrator, readers have no other choice but to believe him and are unable to challenge his judgements. Therefore, depicts *A Sentimental Journey* as a postmodern work because Yorick acts as an unreliable narrator, consequently, the text's reality is complicated as it is laced with the narrator's fantasies.

Cultural narratives concerning postmodernism, Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* that we exceeded our needs for *grand narratives* due to the technological development and techniques since World War II. Lyotard also debates the opposing likelihood of condoning

narratives which fuse social expectations and regulations. For example, within culture the ' narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust'.[7]As now small narratives provide a suitable method for clarifying political issues and social revolutions. which Lyotard believes is the chief motive following postmodern science. As metanarratives begin to disappear, science endures a deprivation of belief in its hunt for truth, as a result, society must search for other methods of authenticating its efforts. The deterioration of the grand narrative, was Lyotard's development on ' grand narratives' as he introduces a clarification of the ' postmodern' as an ' incredulity towards meta-narratives'.[8]

Meta-narratives which are occasionally referred as ' grand narratives' by Lyotard. This involves substantial theories and attitudes towards the world, resulting in Lyotard's argument that we no longer believe that the nature of these type of narratives is sufficient enough to express and involve all of us. For instance, the notorious 9/11 conspiracy, implicates the US government pre-planned destruction of the World Trade Centre and of the Pentagon which resulted in thousands of lives lost. Many people refer it at as an ' inside job' because eyewitnesses who saw the whole event unravel did not believe how the media was portraying the narrative. This conspiracy ensued several critics to comment on the controversy, such as Slavoj Žižek and Paul Virilio.[9]

However, post-structuralist Michel Foucault, created the concept that reality is a social construction. To which that ' things' only exist because we grant those things ' reality' as society agrees with it, such as money which olds no real value other than what society has assigned it. Foucault was often <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernist-and-poststructuralist-views-of-reality-in-literature-and-culture/>

criticized for his conventions of social constructionism, some of whom regard his ideas provoking the concept of truth. Social constructionism can be viewed as an origin of the postmodern movement. The image of socially constructed reality emphasizes the ongoing beliefs about life via individuals in dialectical communication among society. This disrupts Eliot's attitude that ' culture is the one thing we cannot deliberately aim at' culture and reality are alike, they have similar systems, and both involve social consequences, for Foucault to announce civilization can be influenced unsettles Eliot's idea overall that collective systems are uninterrupted by people.

In addition, postmodern-works regularly participate with several forms of critical theory, for example, deconstructionist attitudes, reader-response and the unsettling of bonds between the reader, author and text. This relates back to Roland Barthes' theory of " The Death of the Author" which influences literature's representation of ' reality' through reader's understanding. Barthes comments '[o]nce the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.

[10]Barthes criticized the involvement of a writer and their texts and advised to disregard the writer's past experiences/ feelings and ideas which could force the reader to construct a misled meaning. Due to Barthes instruction that readers should neglect the writer's ideal definition of their work, this distorts postmodernisms portrayal of realism among realist writers.

Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher and cultural theorist who is associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism, investigates the relation <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernist-and-poststructuralist-views-of-reality-in-literature-and-culture/>

between society, reality and symbols. Primarily, the symbolism of media and culture and its involvement in establishing comprehensions of collective existences. He constructed the concepts 'simulation' and 'hyperreality'. In Mark Poster, *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings* (2001), Baudrillard claims '[a] simulation is different from a fiction or lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself'.<sup>[11]</sup> Baudrillard's simulation replicates the function of a real-world system, to simulate something one requires a model which embodies key functions, behaviours and features of the desired physical or theoretical process/system.

For example, flying simulators which exist for pilots and trainee pilots as part of training and efficient practice. A Simulation can also be utilized to display the inevitable real consequences of possible conditions and applied when the real system cannot participate: as it may not be attainable, it may be unsafe or unsuitable to engage with, it is being designed but not fully developed, or it may not exist. In connection to the last example as to why simulations are constructed. 'Culture is now dominated by simulations, Baudrillard contends, objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation'.<sup>[12]</sup> Further supporting that today's society is striving to construct false realities with no reason nor purpose. As Baudrillard alleges a '[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal',<sup>[13]</sup> he explains a simulation actually institutes reality and does not distort it.

Baudrillard's terms 'hyperreal/hyperreality' refers to the consciousness failing to determine reality from a constructed simulation of reality. Inflicting a state in which fiction and what is real are together fused resulting in confusion and cannot determine what is real and what is not.[14] This enables a combination of physical reality with virtual reality which is now being explored and introduced through video games. Virtual reality gaming if it is developed enough and if technology has advanced in the future, can replicate cognitive behavioural issues and reactions to real life situation. Concluding to Baudrillard's idea again that a simulation institutes reality and does not distort.

All the evidence I have provided shows the different way in which postmodernists and poststructuralists perplex our understanding of 'reality' and its representation in culture and literature.

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[1]T. S Eliot, *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* . p. 27.

[2]Lucy, N. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* . Preface.

[3]Lucy, N. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* , Preface xi.

[4]Bennett, A and Royle, N, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* , Fifth Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 22 ‘ The Death of the Author’.

[5]Lucy, N. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* , p. 4.

[6]Sterne, L. *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), p. 33.

[7]Williams, J. *Key Contemporary Social Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002), pp. 210-214.

[8]Lyotard, J. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* . p. 7.

[9]Wilson, E. “ *Europe’s 9/11.*” *Paragraph* , vol. 27, no. 3, (2004), pp. 100–112.

[10]Bennett, A and Royle, N, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* , Fifth Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 22 ‘ The Death of the Author’.

[11]Poster, M. *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings* . p. 6.

[12]Poster, M. *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*. p. 1.

[13]Poster, M. *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*. p. 7.

[14]Poster, M. *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings* . p. 2.