

# Postmodern representations of truth essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



" As a writer, after getting over the idea that I had to know only one truth, I realized that my problem is that I have too much truth to tell rather than too little." --Maxine Hong Kingston

These words of author Maxine Hong Kingston reflect a very unique take on postmodernism. According to the tenets of postmodernism, there is no real absolute truth; the subjective nature of the world allows for everyone to have a different perspective on reality and " truth." With this in mind, Kingston speaks to a unique capability for authors and writers to express this ambiguity of truth; since all of the characters in a book have their own unique truth and perspective, it is the responsibility of the author to reflect those truths in their characterization. Multiple truths are presented in many postmodernist novels, in an effort to flesh out the world even more and get the reader to understand characters' motivations. This particular idea of truth in postmodernism is reflected in the novels *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, and Kingston's own *The Woman Warrior*.

William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* is thought to be one of the foremost novels to originate the cyberpunk genre of literature and science fiction; as such, it presents a vision of the future that has its own unique version of the truth. Humankind devolving into a dark, muddy and rainy sea of corporate logos and fusion with technology, a major component of life in this world is the " Matrix," a virtual reality world which acts as the equivalent of cyberspace. The characters (hacker Case, assassin Molly Millions) of the novel hack into and navigate the Matrix in order to achieve their various

goals, often villainous, all while learning the nature of a developing AI named Neuromancer.

Frequently, the novel's characters have to toe the line between these two realities, these two "truths." For Case, Molly and the other characters in this book, there are two worlds in which they can reside; real life and the Matrix. At one point in the novel, Case is trapped in the Matrix, or lured into believing it to be an ideal reality where his old lover beckons him to stay. With this aspect of the Matrix in particular, the lines between the realities are blurred, the Matrix becoming the "truth" to Case in that moment.

Kingston's words apply to Neuromancer especially in terms of the world(s) that are built in the book. An entire corporate-sponsored and operated dystopian future is created, alongside a virtual reality that melded a new reality with ideas of posthumanism. The characters (particularly Case) obsess over their roles and their goals in the real world, often more than they do in the Matrix. In this respect, Gibson had "too much truth to tell" in terms of these characters' stories, their relationship to the Matrix, and the Matrix's relationship to the real world of the novel.

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, different truths are presented through the guise of conspiracy theories that constantly reshape reality and the expectations of these characters throughout the novel. In the book, housewife Oedipa Maas unravels conspiracies galore revolving the Tristero, a mysterious courier service that may or may not even be real. She is made aware of it through the stipulations of Pierce Inverarity, an ex-boyfriend, who had passed away. Throughout the novel, Oedipa constantly questions the

reality or legitimacy of the Tristero concept altogether, constantly attempting to find out the truth.

The overabundance of "truth" found in Pynchon's novel, particularly regarding the Tristero, is where Kingston's idea of postmodernism comes into play. Essentially, Oedipa is constantly torn between these two worlds, trying to track down clues to find out whether or not Tristero is alive and well, and following her, or whether or not it was an elaborate trick to trick and punish her for jilting him. "He might have written the testament only to harass a one-time mistress, so cynically sure of being wiped out he could throw away all hope of anything more. Bitterness could have run that deep in him. She just didn't know" (Pynchon, p. 148).

The novel itself is a pitch perfect example of the elusiveness of truth - no matter how far she travels, Oedipa is always just one step too far from learning whether or not Tristero is a real organization. The often-jokey or farcical names of the characters (Mucho Maas, Dr. Hilarius, etc.) make the nature of reality even murkier for the reader, as Oedipa constantly questions the legitimacy of everything around her. The presence of the hornlike Tristero symbol throughout the world shows hints of its existence, but that uncertainty always puts Oedipa (and the reader) in a state of unease, exemplifying the Kingstonian idea that there is "too much truth to tell" to make anything certain.

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, postmodernism and truth are very well-traveled subjects. The wildly differing stages of the book (following different characters, using different styles and tones, and varying the subject matter)

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provides the overabundance of truth in the book that Kingston talks about. Jack Gladney's trip through consumerism and the American Dream involves many episodic events where he attempts to rationalize or make sense of the world by stringing connections together. However, he is left wanting, as the postmodernist stance on truth is that it cannot be found objectively. Subjective truth is the only reality, and that is something that Gladney ignores in lieu of some kind of greater knowledge.

The idea of the SIMUVAC organization offers yet another reality to deal with in DeLillo's book, not unlike Gibson's Matrix in *Neuromancer*. Again, we are beset with a series of simulations that are meant to displace reality, and even replace it, for a subset of people too afraid of their own mortality to really face it. Instead of living in a world where they will die, they choose one in which they do not; this reality is equally as present and tangible as the one they leave behind. This is one of the foremost tenets of truth in postmodernism; SIMUVAC's reality is just as real as real life, since there is no one truth. What one makes of the world is what is true, and those who accept help from SIMUVAC embrace a new reality free of the toxin that threatens them .

DeLillo's *White Noise* is one of the premier examples of the postmodernist stance on truth; the amount of truth that is told is far too much for one single perspective or reality, which demands the constant shift of perspective. Gladney, in his attempts to make sense of the horrific world that surrounds him, invents new realities and considers alternate ones by making new connections between events to rationalize them. However, he is still left

wanting; this is an attempt to eschew the concept of objective truth, and to show that one can only accept the world as is, and not reach for absolutes.

## **WOMAN WARRIOR**

Finally, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* demonstrates clearly her stance on the idea of "too much truth to tell" in postmodernist fiction. The story itself is split up into five chapters, all of which are somewhat unrelated, though the No Name Woman story runs through each chapter like a thread. However, this thread is thematic at best; Kingston seems to have accepted the reality of the "No Name Woman," but is willing to accept different interpretations of the woman herself. Even in the first chapter to truly deal with the No Name Woman story, Kingston herself casts doubt on the real version of the tale, and starts to address alternate versions using her own knowledge of the culture and history of China to reconcile what she'd heard with what she knows. At first, she believes that No Name Woman was impregnated via rape, due to the lack of choice women had in China at the time. Then, she thinks about a No Name Woman who was more promiscuous, to which she responds, "Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either. Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (Kingston, p. 8).

Kingston's notions of the objective truth are extremely flexible in this book; in attempting to discern the real nature of the No Name Woman, she embraces all of the alternate theories and possibilities that surround the historical figure's life. Due to the book's shifting perspectives, always moving

around in scope and style, the different realities of No Name Woman's world are made apparent and given life. Kingston recognizes that there is so much truth to tell, as there is no one reality that is truly sufficient to convey the story of her subject. In this way, *The Woman Warrior* is a postmodernist biography, melding fiction with fact to create alternate worlds that are all equally as valid as the one before it.

In postmodernism, the truth is flexible - there are many different worlds and realities that surround us, and we must acknowledge that each of them has a distinct meaning and significance to them. Gibson's book tackles the line between reality and virtual reality; Pynchon deals with the ambiguity of the past and the paranoia that comes with seeking significance to random events; DeLillo satirizes the American experience by giving the reader different visions for what consumerism is doing to us; and Kingston constantly reimagines an historical figure to find out what she could have been like. With these ideas, having "too much truth to tell" is at the heart of the postmodernist viewpoint of truth, and the authors try to offer all of these truths equally, in order to allow the reader to make up their own mind about said truth.

## **Works Cited**

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