

# Post World War II Literature: Trends and Techniques

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## Abstract

The 20th century witnessed two nerve-racking wars. The 1940s, with the nuclear weapon, gave a new direction for the world, enforcing a subtle tension among the developing nations. The aftermath of the war can be heard in literary expressions of the decade. The effect brought social, political and economic change in broad perspectives, giving writers new subjects, who pen down the repercussions of the war in varied forms of literature. In December 1939, shortly after the war broke out, an article published in the *Times Literary Supplement* called poets back into their duty: “it is for the poets to sound the trumpet call....The monstrous threat to belief and freedom which we are fighting should urge new psalmists to fresh songs of deliverance” (Greenblatt 694). The message was clear: a call for literary response against the havoc. Cecil Day-Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Edith Sitwell, T.S. Eliot, Henry Reed, etc., strikingly wrote in response to the war. The outcomes of the battle were not much detriment for common men, as it brought significant changes both in necessities and opportunities. The shift in themes from modernism to postmodernism was one of the notable changes in literature. The writers showed a broader effect in their subject matters as well as literary forms. Disillusionment, anxiety, meaninglessness of life, existentialism, trauma, and loss of faith were the key highlights of their works through the techniques like narrative point of view, magic realism, intertextuality, hyper reality, pastiche, metafiction, subtle shifting of time zone etc. Several other forms, such as theatre of the absurd, angry young man theatre, dystopian fiction, movement poetry, poetry of witness etc., can be seen in literature. The present paper is a comprehensive study of the trends and techniques of post-World War II narratives.

**Keywords:** Post WW II Literature, Trends & Technique, Disillusionment, Meaninglessness, AYM, Absurdity, Existentialism, Movement Poetry

## 1. Introduction

Literature after 1945 was heavily influenced by World War II. The agony of war brought a sense of disappointment in various ways: rising unemployment, outbreak of starvation, and disbelief, voicing the movement such as the Angry Young Man. The movement gained momentum during the 1950s, arguing social injustice, hypocrisy, and the rights of common people in post-war England. The phrase, angry young man received widespread recognition after the Royal Court Theatre’s use to describe John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. The play is considered the manifesto of the movement. The

protagonist Jimmy Porter, a university-educated working-class man, outlets his frustration about life, class inequality, and social injustice; seeking no opportunities, he finds himself trapped in a terrain of disillusionment. Other playwrights such as Kingsley Amis, John Braine, John Wain, Alan Sillitoe, Arnold Wesker, etc., strikingly fueled the movement. The horrifying picture of the war spread tension among civilians. The savage attacks were condemned by several literary pieces. Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, before the outbreak of the war in 1938, was a polemical work against androcentric dominance. She, as a writer in her diary, states that "Thinking is my fighting." (Greenblatt 694)

Woolf's other groundbreaking work, *Between the Acts* in 1941, is considered a quick response to the devastation caused by the Allies. In this sequence, Edith Sitwell's *Still Falls the Rain* came with the depiction of the Blitz in London. It is considered a mournful account of the loss of humanity. T.S. Eliot, in his second part of *Little Gidding*, also personifies the physical ruin through devastation. To understand the term Postmodernism, one has to look back to the high Modernism. Postmodernism does not draw a line where one can see the endpoint of the modern period, but there are subtle shifts in the narration and style after the 1940s and 1950s, which is marked as the beginning of new kinds of subject matters. Brian McHale, in his *Postmodern Fiction* (1987), exemplifies that postmodernism is associated with ontology. He, giving an instance of chapter 8 of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner's acclaimed novel, for the postmodernist fiction says, "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. (McHale 10)

The term postmodernism or postmodern literature refers to the "literature and art after World War II (Abrams 277). The word was coined by Arnold Toynbee in 1939. But it is widely used in literature after Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979. Postmodernism rejects the idea of fixity for truths or universal meaning or essence, and the idea of inherent. It questions grand narratives and other ideologies that claim to explain rational thoughts. It directly came in reaction to the Modern age, which relied on objective truth, lamentation of fragmentation and found the meaning within, whereas postmodernism takes fragmentation as celebration and relies on uncertainty or fluidity of meaning. It says no truth is the final truth as it is skeptical in nature. Lyotard in *Postmodern Condition* writes: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). It talks about distrusting the grand narratives and existence of objective truth. Any truth or reality is highly subjective and contextual. It depends on how one person perceives that reality and interprets. It is usually based on discourse, and in reality, it works as a platform to shape. It views with disbelief towards metanarratives as all grand narratives are also questionable. Postmodernism gives a framework to understand the postmodern condition and its technical facets and representation.

Looking deep into the arena, early novels and story collections, such as *Don Quixote*, *1001 Arabian Nights*, *The Decameron* and *Candide*, are frequently cited by postmodernist authors as sources of inspiration for their experimentation with form and narrative. When speaking in English, Laurence Sterne's 1759 book *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is considered an early example of postmodernism because of its strong emphasis on parody and narrative variation. The experiment in postmodern narratives continues to grow. The reflection of the meaninglessness of life held its position through the theatre of the absurd. The movement began in the 1950s and showed post-war disillusionment. The term was first used by Martin Esslin, advocating the absurdity of life due to the chaos that emerged from the war. The fractured image of social, moral and religious tradition brought

the sense of absurdity. Influenced by existential philosophy, it questions the meaning of life, hence draws illogical plots in the narratives, which ultimately emphasise the purposeless life. Camus, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), draws an endless and purposeless action of Sisyphus, holding a view of the absurdity of human existence. He says, “The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” (Camus 75)

The vivid expression of such themes and subjects can be seen in other authors such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter, etc. *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is a landmark play by Beckett. His play repeatedly advocates the meaninglessness of life. He, in the beginning, expresses Vladimir’s lamentation through, [n]othing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful (Beckett 41). The title reflects their waiting for a reason that is never going to happen. The author’s exploration of such kinds gives a clear image of the absurdity of life. With the narrative experimentation and far of setting, a new subgenre emerged in the postmodern arena i.e., dystopian fiction. The wave geared up when the author started focusing on the ill effects of science and technological advancement in future settings. Totalitarianism is the central theme of the dystopian works, where the authors try to explore the oppressive mode of society through the ruling powers, associating it with the loss of one’s freedom. Another significant part of the fiction is the technological control that restricts one’s authority in many ways. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) are the canonical works in this trend. The gradual change also brings Science fiction into existence. The post-war effects also brought a shift in the interest of the reader. The frequent shift in themes such as space exploration, technology-driven stories, hyper-reality and the cyber world allowed readers to imagine for digital age.

The post-war trend gathered a group of poets, though from different social statuses, who wrote on uncertainty and everyday life in colloquial language. The group was termed the Movement by J.D. Scott. The leading figure of the group, Philip Larkin, is known for his realistic portrayal of modern society. Along with Larkin, the movement consists of Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Thom Gunn and Elizabeth Jennings. The movement spread during the 1950s, aiming to pen down their response against the modern poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. In poetry, another group of poets expressing their suppression, exploitation, and experience came into existence, called the Confessional poets, during the 1950s and 1960s. The autobiographical portrayal of taboo subjects such as physical relationships, sexuality, suicide, trauma and brave confessions of one’s life is the central part of the poetry of the movement. Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, and A.K. Ramanujan are the key exponents. Like in *Daddy*, Sylvia Plath uses harsh imagery to express deep emotions. She says, “Daddy, I have had to kill you// You died before I had time” (Daddy). Kamala Das’ Introduction is yet another example of such kinds. She is double or triple exploited by the androcentric society. She expresses her inner turmoil in the poem, stating,

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask/  
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
/Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me /  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
/The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. /  
I shrank Pitifully. /Then ... I wore a shirt  
and my //Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored /  
My womanliness. Dress in sarees,

be girl /Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, /Be a quarreller with servants.  
(Kavindu)

The poetry of witness is a recent phenomenon in postmodern literature. The term was coined and popularised by Carolyn Forché in her 1993 anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. It is driven by personal experience, trauma, memory, and displacement, emphasizing the role of the poet as a witness to such facets.

Postmodern writing comes up with several experiments in narrative. Intertextuality is one of the techniques introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1966. The term refers to a literary borrowing in one's work, aiming to create something new. The postmodern writers do not hesitate to reference other texts. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) echoes several intertextual allusions such as the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante and the Hindu Upanishads. Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is yet another example of such kinds advocating Bertha Mason. It is a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) from a feminine viewpoint. Taking references from past works can also be termed as Pastiche, but it includes tongue-in-cheek rewriting or reworking of an old work, making it new in the postmodern discourse. Sometimes, it is also referred to as a playful rendering of the earlier work. There are numerous examples, such as J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), which is a jovial reimagining of Daniel Defoe's canonical text *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1983) is also considered a landmark work, which is a retelling of the Trojan War from a feminine perspective, giving voice to a marginalised woman character.

The art of storytelling synced with magic realism in postmodern literature. The term was used for visual art for the first time by Franz Roh, a German art critic, but it flourished from Latin American writers' use for narrative experimentation. The technique of magical realism caters realistic setting with some magical or unnatural facets in such a way that it seems natural. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Midnight's Children* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison are popular examples of magic realism. Rushdie's description of the aftermath of Indian independence from the children born at midnight with supernatural powers showcases the use of the technique. The echoes of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Günter Grass's *Tin Drum* can be seen. The sketch of Salim Sinai's personal life and family history, combining it with Indian political accounts, parallels that of Tristram's birth, childhood, and personal development and Oskar's personal life and national history.

When the artificiality of any literary text reflects some kind of reality is simply recognised as metafiction. For instance, when a writer deliberately alludes to the literariness of the text to break the traditional narrative style is metafiction. The opening line of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse: Five*, "All this happened, more or less" (Vonnegut 1) suggests a non-sequential form of the story blending it with subjective experience which he himself encountered. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* can also be studied through the lens of metafiction in which he says, [t]here are two countries, real and fictional...My story, my fictional country exists..." (Rushdie 29). Closely associated with metafiction but not the same, Self-Reflexivity is a narrative technique of postmodern novels that reflects its creation as a text or novel within the body of the story. For instance, the opening line of Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) tells about its being and directly addresses the reader in the authorial voice.

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close

the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don't want to watch TV” Raise your voice-they won't hear you otherwise” I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!” Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: “I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!” Or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone. (Calvino 3)

Historiographic metafiction is also one of the striking features of postmodern fiction introduced by Linda Hutcheon. The historiographic fiction incorporates the historical events from the character's point of view in a fictitious manner. It sometimes rewrites the whole event, but in a fictional framework. Hutcheon, in the preface of *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), says,

Based on the notion that any theorizing must derive from that which it purports to study, my focus here is on those points of significant overlap of theory with aesthetic practice which might guide us to articulate what I want to call a “poetics” of postmodernism, a flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture and our discourses both about it and adjacent to it. (Hutcheon ix)

She further describes the points of these overlaps occur when “modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come against a counterforce” (ix), foregrounding the historical, social and political realm. She through her analogy terms such postmodern fiction as Historiographic Metafiction and exemplifies the popular works of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Fowles' *A Maggot*, etc.

## Conclusion

Literature, a social construction, always gives a platform to advocate one's dynamic knack. With the passage of time, the interests of the writers changed. Picking up the subjects from various aspects of society, the author foregrounds the actuality of things. Literature after World War II brings a notion of social, political and economic fluctuations, thus giving space for the writer to rethink the actuality of the discourse. Postmodernism provides a platform through which innumerable movements find a place to shape in literary discipline. From social novels to science fiction, metafiction to historiographic metafiction, the shift of interest, techniques and experiments can be seen in narratives. The poetic expression also gets charged with the rhythmic boom of the Movement poetry to confessional poetry and then to the witness poetry. From the 1950s, the fluidity of meaning also began to be shaped through several theoretical approaches. Such dynamism can be seen in Postmodernism, Post Structuralism, postcolonialism, Cultural Studies, and so on. The interdisciplinary approach of the authors gave rise to several other perspectives in literature.

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