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## Unit-3 □ Towards Postmodernity

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### 1.3.0 Introduction

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After reading about Modernism in the previous Units, here you will read about Postmodernism. It will naturally strike you as learners that if we are talking of post-modernism, does that mean the end of modernism? As stated in the previous Unit, to talk of Postmodernism is not to imply that we are over and done with modernism. You may on a broad scale look upon it as a general intensification of the traits of modernism in a way that seemed difficult to contain under the same bracket; hence the new terminology. The term “postmodernism” first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by the French philosopher, sociologist and literary theorist **Jean-François Lyotard**. That postmodernism is undefinable is a truism. However, it can be described as a set of critical practices employed in architecture, art, literature and culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. J. A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes Post-modernism as characterised by “an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche”. By “eclectic” he means the use of fragmented forms, whereas “aleatory writing” suggests the incorporation of chance and randomness. “Parody”

and “Pastiche” suggest the abandonment of divine authorship. As you proceed along this Unit you will find an in depth analysis of these terms and thereby arrive at an understanding of what the journey “Towards Postmodernity” means.

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### 1.3.1 The term Postmodernism

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From your reading of the previous Units you must already know that Modernism is of crucial importance in the understanding of twentieth-century culture. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* writes “Modernism was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature, and architecture.” So if Modernism was an earthquake it is important to trace its epicenter. One of the important epicenters was the artistic and cultural developments in Vienna from 1890 to 1910 whose effects can still be felt today. It successfully toppled several structures which were impossible to rebuild. However due to the economic and political crisis perpetrated by successive World Wars and the attendant developments, Modernism started to retreat considerably in the 1950’s. This phase was marked by people’s change in attitude and critical thinking. Several critics therefore began to use the term **Postmodernism** to refer to the socio-historical condition and a change in people’s perception from 1950’s onwards that was highly influenced by:

- Emergence of media (television, video, computers)
- Globalisation
- Consumerism
- Popular Culture (rock music, TV soaps, horror stories, science fiction)
- Tremendous growth in information and communication technology

In simpler terms postmodern literature and culture, should be understood as a vision of the world influenced by socio-historical conditions of the post-World War II period and marked by a rapid growth of advanced technology, mass society, media, popular culture influencing individual’s vision of the world as manifested in arts and culture especially of the post 1950s period. You realize that at once we are talking of something highly negative as the devastation of war, and something positive in the sense of advancements in terms of culture, thought, technology communication and so on. It is basically this hiatus between the two – in other words the indeterminacy of life, that is broadly the subject of the postmodern condition.

The term Postmodernism however was used at different times and with different meanings. Let us trace the evolutionary history of the term:

- In **1870** an English painter **Chapman** wanted to launch a Postmodern painting which was meant to be a reaction to French Impressionism. However, the term was not used systematically and gradually went out of use.
- The first person to use the term Postmodernism was sociologist **Rudolf Panwitz** who in his work *The Crisis of the European Culture* (**1917**) tried to define “a postmodern man” as one who in his view was self-conscious, religious and nationally aware individual. Panwitz wanted his “postmodern man” to overcome the crisis of Modernity.
- In **1934**, **Frederico De Onis** used the term to chart a new tendency in Latin American Hispanic literature. He went on to use the term “postmodernismo” (1905-1914) as a successor of “modernismo” (1896-1905) and a predecessor of “ultramodernismo” (1914-1932) but then again failed to express the term as it is used today.
- **Charles Olson**, a leading poet of **1940s** was the first to use the term in poetry which is closer to its contemporary understanding.
- In **1947**, a British historian and philosopher **Arnold Toynbee** published his *A Study of History* where he used the term to mark the transition from nation state to globalizing relationships.
- In 1949 the term came to be associated with architecture when a British architect **Joseph Hudnut** published his work *The Post-Modern House*.
- **Leslie Fiedler** in **1965** started to use the term in context of literature. He used it as a term for the emergence of the new literature which he found was very different from that of **Eliot, Joyce, Proust** and **Kafka**. He found this new literature to be a celebration of popular culture as opposed to the more academic and difficult Modernist works.
- The term however began to be used more systematically in literature with publication of **Ihab Hassan’s** work *PostmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography* where he tried to bring out the difference between Modernist and Postmodernist literature. In another work *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971) that was later reprinted in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* (1998), Hassan came out with his famous table of differences between Modernism and Postmodernism, that has hence been the subject of much controversy.

- **François Lyotard** in his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) treated the term as a philosophical concept and tried to theorise the nature of science and knowledge and their legitimacy in the period of Modernism and Postmodernism.

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### 1.3.2 Precursors of the Postmodernist Tendency

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The philosophical Modernism at issue in Postmodernism begins with Immanuel Kant's "Copernican revolution". Kant assumes that we cannot know things in themselves and that objects of knowledge must conform to our faculties of representation. Ideas such as God, freedom, immortality, the world, first beginning, and final ending only have a regulative function for knowledge because they cannot find fulfilling instances among objects of our daily experiences. With the growth of mass communication and transportation in the later nineteenth century, the human perceptions were reshaped. They lost distinction between natural and artificial experience. Postmodernists challenge the viability of such a distinction. A consequence of Modernism is what Postmodernists refer to as de-realisation. De-realisation affects both the subject and the object of experience, such that their sense of identity and constancy is either upset or dissolved. Important precursors to this notion are found in Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche.

**Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher, poet, social critic and religious author who is considered the first Existentialist philosopher. He wrote critical texts on religion, ethics, morality and psychology. He had a fondness for metaphor, irony and parables.**

**Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, poet, philologist, critic whose works have exerted tremendous influence on Western philosophy and modern intellectual history. Nietzsche's work deals with art, philology, religion, history, culture, science and tragedy.**

**Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German scientist, philosopher, economist, journalist and revolutionary social thinker. He is known for his most influential work *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). His work has largely influenced economic and political theory, and has ever since been the foundation of the anti-capitalist bloc.**

Nietzsche can be considered as an important precursor for postmodernism for his analysis of the fundamental concept of Western metaphysics, the “I”. According to Nietzsche, this concept of “I” arises out of our moral sense to be responsible for our actions. In order to be responsible we must acknowledge that we are the cause of our actions and both reward and punishment are the consequences of our actions. In this way, the concept of the “I” comes about as a social construction and moral illusion. According to Nietzsche, the moral sense of the “I” as an identical cause is projected onto events in the world, where the identity of things, causes, effects, etcetra, takes shape in easily communicable representation. Thus logic is born from the demand to adhere to common social norms which shape humanity into a society of knowing and acting subjects. For Postmodernists, Nietzsche’s concepts in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* is also an important reference where he attempts to provide a critique of the contemporary considerations of truth and concepts.

In Nietzsche’s view, the life of an individual and a culture largely depend on their ability to repeat an unhistorical moment, a kind of forgetfulness, along with their continuous development through time. The study of history ought therefore to emphasize how each person or culture attains and repeats this moment. Historical repetition is not linear, but each age worthy of its designation repeats the unhistorical moment that is its own present as “new”. In this respect, Nietzsche would agree with Charles Baudelaire, who describes modernity as “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” that is repeated in all ages, and postmodernists read Nietzsche’s remarks on eternal return accordingly. Nietzsche presents these concepts of his in *The Gay Science* and develops it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This concept of Nietzsche is taken up by many as an identical repetition of everything in the Universe, such that nothing occurs that has not already occurred an infinite number of times before. Postmodernists read these theories of Nietzsche in conjunction that history is always the repetition of a specific moment, the moment that is always new in each case, meaning the new always eternally repeats itself as new and therefore recurrence is a matter of difference rather than identity. Postmodernists join the concept of eternal return with the loss of distinction between the real and the apparent world.

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### **1.3.3 The Postmodern Condition**

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Jean-François Lyotard’s influential work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* has been viewed by many as the “bible” of Postmodernism. In this

work Lyotard analyses how the processing of knowledge has changed in the twentieth century with the rapid growth in computer science. The postmodern

**Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998)** was a French philosopher, sociologist and literary theorist. He is best known for his work *The Postmodern Condition* where he analyses the impact of postmodernity on the human condition. Lyotard's work continues to be important in politics, philosophy, literature, art and cultural studies.

condition is the fundamentally different outlook on knowledge post Enlightenment and especially after the World War 2. As said before, the word "postmodern" came into the lexicon with the publication of Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne* in 1979 (English: *The Postmodern Condition*). Lyotard was heavily influenced by Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and

based this work on his model of language games. He took Wittgenstein's concept from speech act theory to account for what he calls change in the rules of game for science, art and literature since the end of nineteenth century. He calls his work a combination of two very different language games, i.e., of the philosopher and the expert. According to his theory, the expert knows what he knows but the philosopher knows nothing and poses questions.

Lyotard claims in his work that in the age of computers knowledge has been transformed to information. This proposition basically explains the whole concept of the postmodern condition as the absence of certainties and a loss of what was earlier considered heroic and celebratory. Knowledge is thus downscaled into becoming nothing more than just a coded message within the system of communication. To analyse this knowledge, it is important to comprehend the pragmatics of communication. This in turn means that communication is a process that includes coding the message, selecting the mode of transmission and finally its reception. This process or the order of it must be followed by the one who judges them. However, Lyotard believes the position of the judge is also within this language game which in turn raises the question of legitimation. The languages of science and that of politics and ethics are strongly interlinked. Science is always dependent on government and administration for huge amount of capital and infrastructure required for research. Science plays the language game by displacing the narrative knowledge including the meta-narratives of philosophy. This is the result of the rapid growth in technologies and techniques in the second half of twentieth century, where the

emphasis of knowledge has shifted from ends of human action to its means. Lyotard says, “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives”. ‘Meta’ in Greek stands for an idea that is transcendent and ‘narrative’ is a story characterized by its telling. Lyotard used the term to show that postmodernism was basically characterised by a mistrust of the grand narratives that had formed an essential part of modernity. In his view, meta-narratives should give way to localised narratives, which can replace grand narratives by bringing into focus the specific local context.

In Lyotard’s view Postmodern sensibility does not lament the loss of narrative coherence any more than the loss of being. However, the dissolution of narrative leaves the field of legitimation to a new unifying criterion: the performativity of the knowledge-producing system whose form of capital is information. The performativity criterion threatens anything not meeting its requirements, such as speculative narratives, which perform the functions of de-legitimation and exclusion. Nevertheless, capital also demands the continual re-invention of the “new” in the form of new language games and new denotative statements, and so, paradoxically, a certain “paralogy” is required by the system itself. By the term “paralogy”, Lyotard meant a flood of good ideas that are inspired by conversation. According to Lyotard, the Postmoderns have a quest for “paralogy”. In the given context, this means a hunger for stimulating conversations and ideas that work in a satisfying way. To get those ideas, paralogists often share an irreverent attitude towards well accepted theories, breaking them up and recombining them in a revolutionary new way. The point of paralogy is to help us shake ourselves loose of stultifying traditional frameworks that we have come to take for granted in order to enhance our spontaneous creativity.

In “What is Postmodernism?” which appears as an appendix to the English edition of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard addresses the importance of avant-garde art in terms of the aesthetic of the sublime. Modern art, he says, is emblematic of a sublime sensibility, that is, a sensibility that there is something non-presentable demanding to be fit into sensible form and yet overwhelms all attempts to do so. But where modern art presents the unrepresentable as a missing content within a beautiful form, as in Marcel Proust, postmodern art exemplified by James Joyce, puts forward the unrepresentable by foregoing beautiful form itself, thus denying what Kant would call the consensus of taste. Furthermore, Lyotard says that a

<p><b>Marcel Proust</b> (1871-1922) French novelist, critic, and essayist best known for his work <i>Remembrance of Things Past</i>.</p>
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work can become modern only if it is first postmodern, for postmodernism is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state, that is, at the moment it attempts to present the unrepresentable, “and this state is constant”. The Postmodern then, is a repetition of the modern as the “new,” and this means the ever-new demand for another repetition.

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### 1.3.4. Postmodernism in Art

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In this sub-section you will see how Postmodern art questioned the idea that there was only one inherent meaning to a piece of work and that is determined by the artist at the time of creation. For Postmodern art, the viewer became the determiner of meaning. They aimed at breaking distinctions between “high” and “low” art. Postmodern artists intended to incorporate popular culture in their paintings as **Pablo Picasso** often did by including the lyrics of popular songs on his canvases. Postmodern artists wanted to uphold the idea that no formal or aesthetic training is required to enjoy a piece of visual art. The artists challenged any traditional demarcations of “high” or “low” art and focused on the importance of consumerism in the 1960s. This idea was successfully put forward by **Barbara Kruger** in her artistic work *I shop therefore I am* (1987) where she juxtaposes photographs with aggressive slogans and visuals from advertisements. Kruger’s work was basically a photolithograph medium that she used on paper shopping bags. The title of her work subverts **René Descartes’** philosophical claim “I think therefore I am”, thereby critically showcasing how consumerism shapes a person’s identity more than their inner selves in a Postmodern world.

An earlier example of such postmodernist art could be found in **Andy Warhol’s** popular work *The Marilyn Diptych* (1962) became another icon of postmodern art. This again was a silk screen painting by an American pop artist. The work is a collage of fifty images of Marilyn Monroe based on her film *Niagara* (1953). Twenty five pictures of the actress on the left side of the diptych are brightly coloured, while the twenty five on the right are in black and white. This image suggests the multiplicity of meanings in Monroe’s life and legacy.

However, the most important aspect of Postmodern art is the introduction of **Surrealism** in paintings. Surrealism was officially introduced by the writer **André Breton** with his publication of *The Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924. This movement was characterized by a profound disillusionment with the Western emphasis on logic



and reason. Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious influenced this movement to a great degree as the surrealist artists aimed to tap the dream-world of the subliminal mind, visualizing its secrets and mysteries. Eminent surrealist artists include **Salvador Dali**, **René Magrite**, **Max Ernst** and **Man Ray** among others. Dali's most influential and iconic artwork *The Persistence of Memory* introduced a surrealist image of soft, melting pocket watches which rejected the rigid and deterministic concept of time. Surrealism served as an important precursor to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic developments such as Neo-Dada, Nouveau Realisme and Institutional Critique.

#### Activity For the Learner

The preceding sub-section tries to provide certain examples of postmodern art, to place your understanding of Postmodernism in perspective. With the help of your counselor try to look up the pictures with reference to the examples provided in this section. You are also encouraged to find out more such examples of Postmodern artworks. This will provide you a better understanding of Postmodernism, far more than any conventional text book!

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### 1.3.5. Postmodernism in Literature

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While postmodernism as a cultural wave came only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you will be surprised to know that in literature, the elements of postmodernism appeared as early as in **Laurence Sterne's** novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759). However, given the complexity of the postmodern milieu, we can hardly consider Sterne's work to be a typical postmodern work if we take it as a whole and if read against its socio-historical context. All the same, we need to remember that *Tristram Shandy* represents an exception in the development of the 18th century English realistic novel. This novel, did not have its followers until the 20th century and it did not form a more systematic movement or tendency as the works of American and other postmodernists in the 1960's.

Ihab Hassan sees the roots and early beginnings of postmodernism in Nietzsche's philosophy, Einstein's theory of relativity, and the beginning of the postmodern age around 1939 with such works as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, and *The Counterfeiters* by André Gide. Hassan further emphasizes the principle of uncertainty, doubt, fragmentation and radical pluralism to be the most important features of postmodern literature. By pluralism he means not only a

plurality of different forms and genres juxtaposed and used within a single literary work, equality of meaning each of these forms creates, formal and thematic diversity, but also the plurality of meaning secured by the openness of a literary work which leaves a space for a reader to be involved in the completion of the literary work.

Postmodern literature is characterised by its depiction of the postmodern life and culture. Through its works postmodern literature tries to bring to the forefront a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, social, cultural and sexual). There can be no doubt that these themes were previously treated in Western literature but started to be taken more seriously after the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960's, the Vietnam War, and student protests in Europe and the US. The result of these protests led to the democratisation of public life, and provided education and publishing opportunities for the minorities of the Western nations. As a result, new authors got opportunities to be published. Authors coming from different cultural backgrounds, specially from former British colonies started to appear. Examples of such writers include **Ben Okri, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Quereshi** in British literature; **Collin Johnson, Kath Walker, Sam Watson and Kim Scott** in Australian literature.

This period also saw the rise of the **Beat Generation** which included authors like **Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Snyder, Gregory Corso** and others. These authors expressed strong negative attitudes towards Western civilization and excessive growth of industrialization. They emphasized oriental philosophy for a peaceful way of life with an appreciation of drugs and alcohol as a liberating alternative to the Western hypocrisy. They wrote poems not for reading at home but to be recited in public places accompanied by pop, jazz, and blues music.

Another literary phenomenon that surfaced during this period which the journalists conceptualised for the mass public with the phrase "Angry Young Man" It included writers like **Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine** and **Kingsley Amis**. The anger of these writers were directed against age old establishment, middle class society and was marked by their disillusionment of the Labour Party that rose to power. Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (performed 1956, published 1957) supplied the tone and the title for the movement. Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954) provides an effective metaphor for the protesting young men. In his work a young university teacher tries to break the rules of his social class to connect with the

working class, who experience a different life from the one he knows and who he believes have stronger and deeper feelings than the people living around him. Other examples of Angry Young Man drama include John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958).

The 1950s also saw the emergence of the theatre of Absurd with the publication of Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The term eventually came to be applied to a group of dramatists in 1950s who shared a common attitude towards the predicament of the man in the Universe. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is considered as a masterpiece of absurd theatre. It is a two act play about two characters Estragon and Vladimir –forever waiting for the arrival of someone named Godot but as Vladimir points out “nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.” The play remains absurd as it is comic and irrational at the same time. Apart from Beckett's work, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is also considered as an important absurd work. Albee's work marked a more naturalistic departure and showed an interest in closely observed human relationships. Other writers associated with absurd theatre were Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet. You are advised to have a close reading of their works which will provide a better understanding of the workings of the Absurdists.

**Postmodernism in literature can be characterised by:**

- **Irony and Black Humour:** Use of irony in their works became a hallmark of Postmodern writers. The Postmodern writers were frustrated by the World War II, the Cold War and the conspiracy theories. They tried to amalgamate it in different ways and therefore took the path of irony and black humour. In fact, several postmodern novelists were initially labeled as black humorists. Examples include **John Barth, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gaddis** among others. Irony often gave way to radical irony. Radical irony does not necessarily manifest itself on verbal level but sometimes on the level of the text as whole, in juxtaposition of different styles creating an ironic effect or in the use of burlesque or travesty as a part of parodic mode. A best example of this can be **Joseph Heller's** *Catch-22* where the phrase Catch-22 bears idiomatic irony. Also the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies.
- **Metafiction:** Metafiction is a dominant literary feature of Postmodern works. To a simplistic understanding, it is that “metafiction is a fiction about fiction” . However Postmodern fictional work is more about issues than only

about fiction. **Patricia Waugh's** definition of metafiction provides a most suitable understanding of the term in Postmodern literature. In Waugh's view metafiction is "...a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictitiousness of the world outside the literary/fictional text".

By using metafictional elements, the postmodern authors point out a difference between reality and its linguistic representation and they emphasize the fact that a language works on different principles than reality. At the same, the use of metafictional elements points out to the fictionalities of fiction, involve a reader in a creation of meaning of the literary (artistic) text, and shows a difference between the past and contemporary forms of art. For example, the first chapters of British author **John Fowles'** novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) begin as a traditional Victorian realistic novel, but later a narrator suddenly breaks a narrative and directly addresses the reader by commenting on the previous plot, possible development of the story and on the writing techniques. Later, as readers learn, the characters from this novel overlap with the characters in a film based on this book and a story of a Victorian love is left unfinished (in both the book and a film) and left to the reader's interpretation. Thus direct addressing a reader and the comments on the fictionality of fiction become metafictional elements. Like Fowles, another Postmodern author, Italo Calvino in his work *If on A winter's Night a Traveller* emphasizes the fictionality of his fiction and draws the reader to participate in the construction of meaning.

- **Intertextuality:** One of the most important aspect of postmodern literary work connected with metafiction is intertextuality. The term was coined by French theorist Julia Kristeva in 1966. Kristeva derives her theory of intertextuality from Michael Bakhtin's idea of a "polyphonic novel" as one that is open to various voices and interpretations and understands a literary text as part of other literary texts in the history of the literary tradition. Thus, what stems from it is the undermining of the idea of authorship—the text is not a product of an author, but exists within specific literary and cultural contexts and thus is open to various understandings and interpretations. In this sense, the role of an author is diminished, as is the study of his biography as in traditional criticism. Intertextuality in postmodern literature

can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or adoption of a style. A good example of intertextuality in Postmodern literature is its references to Medieval romance of Don Quixote. Don Quixote is a common reference with Postmodernists, for example **Kathy Acker's** novel *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*. Another example of intertextuality in Postmodernism is **John Barth's** *The Sot-Weed Factor* which deals with Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same name. Often intertextuality is more complicated than a single reference to another text. Example is that of **Umberto Eco's** novel *The Name of the Rose* takes on the form of a detective novel and makes references to authors such as Aristotle, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Borges.

- **Pastiche:** Related to Postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine or paste. It comes from the Italian word "pasticcio" meaning "a medley of various ingredients: a hotchpotch, a farrago, jumble". This implies a similarity with a Postmodern literary work consisting of different styles, genres, narrative voices. In Postmodern literature the authors combined or pasted elements of previous genres or styles to create a new narrative style, or to comment on their contemporaries. For example, **Margaret Atwood** uses science fiction and fairy tales. **Thomas Pynchon** uses elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction. However, pastiche always does not refer to narrative technique but also to compositional technique. One of the commonest examples of a pastiche is **B. S. Johnson's** 1969 novel *The Unfortunates*. Johnson released his book in a box with no binding so that readers could assemble it in whatever way they chose. You will definitely understand from this, the heights to which indeterminacy can get in the grip of postmodernity!
- **Magic Realism:** Considered to be one of the most important Postmodern literary technique, Magic Realism is the introduction of fantastic or impossible elements into a narrative in ways that they begin to seem real or normal. Magic realist novels include fairies and dreams, wild time shifts, myths as a part of the narrative structure. Magic realism has its roots in the works of **Jorge Luis Borges** and **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and **Salman Rushdie's** *Midnight's Children* serve as the finest examples of this technique.
- **Palimpsest:** Postmodern authors often use a palimpsest technique. It is a way of rewriting of the old texts by putting them in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Palimpsest was originally "A paper or parchment on which

the original text has been partly erased or effaced to allow a new text to be written, leaving fragments of the original still visible". A French theorist **Gerard Genette** first used the term in reference to Proust's works. As in the postmodern authors' works, palimpsestic technique of writing means the writing of a new text on the layers of the old, traditional (pre)text by the operation of which it acquires a new meaning. In his chapter on Literary Text in Context from his book written jointly with Silvia Pokrivèáková *Understanding Literature*, Anton Pokrivèák gives a fine survey of the use of the term palimpsest and different kinds of textuality.

➤ **Postmodern Literature : An example**

You have by now definitely understood that unreliability of language is an important theme explored by Postmodernists in their work. Language, according to Postmodernists is based on arbitrary signs that can be interpreted differently. To take an example from your syllabized authors, Harold Pinter used the scepticism of language and communication extensively in his plays. The play in your syllabus - *The Birthday Party* (1957), was Pinter's second play and it deals with the acute rupture in human communication. In the play as you will find, language fails to connect people as the characters in the play do not have much to say to each other. They use language only to talk and not to converse. Pinter uses the language game to comment on the emptiness of relationships among the characters. The best example from the play is that of Stanley's narration of his successful piano concert to Meg. When Meg narrates Stanley's story to Goldberg she produces a completely different version of the story. In Pinter's play language is thus used to confuse and puzzle instead of informing. Questions are answered with further questions as can be seen in Act 1 in the conversation between McCann and Goldberg regarding finding the right house. Use of absurd language leads the play to another facet of Postmodernism, i.e., ambiguity. In the play, Stanley, Lulu, Meg, Goldberg all have an ambiguous past. The problem of identity surfaces with Goldberg being called "Nut", "Benny" and "Simey" and McCann is referred both as "Demerot" and "Seamis". Irony being an important characteristic of Postmodern writing, it is used to glory by the playwright in the title of the play itself. *The Birthday Party* is an occasion of celebration and happiness, but the play is about the mental breakdown of the protagonist. As you will further notice, Pinter also plays with the idea of the traditional ending. The play closes with the same tone of banality with which it opened. Stanley's departure raises innumerable questions in the mind of the audience/reader. The ending builds up the

suspense instead of bringing all the issues to a close as we expect in traditional dramaturgy.

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### 1.3.6 Postmodernism in Literary theory

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A major theorist of Postmodernism is the French writer Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's book *Simulations* (1981) is considered one of the most influential works in Postmodern literary criticism. According to Baudrillard there has been "the loss of real" in contemporary life with infiltration of popular culture in every sector of private life. It has led to a loss of distinction between real and imagined and has given birth to what he famously called "hyper-reality", in which distinctions between these are eroded. Baudrillard goes on to say that if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but of some other signs, then the system becomes what he calls "simulacrum". He then proposes a four-stage model of how sign works.

- First stage: The sign represents a basic reality
- Second stage: The sign misrepresents or distorts the reality behind it.
- Third Stage: The sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath
- Fourth Stage: The sign bears no relation to any reality at all.

Baudrillard himself provides an example of the third stage by bringing a reference to Disneyland. He tells that "Disneyland" is presented as "imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real". Disneyland has the effect of "concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle". Postmodernism, in fact blurs the distinction between real and unreal and leads us to a "hyperreal" world as Baudrillard calls it.

#### **The work of Postmodernist critics:**

1. Discover Postmodernist themes and tendencies in literary work
2. To find out the intertextual elements in Postmodern works; i.e.; to find out the use of parody, irony, meta-fiction, allusion, pastiche that are at work.
3. Postmodern critics challenge the distinctions between high and low culture.

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### 1.3.7 Postmodernism and Popular Culture

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With the rapid growth in commercialisation, globalisation and the pervasive

impact of international capital, Postmodernism got closely connected with popular culture. In section 1.3.4 you have already seen how Postmodernism influenced art. This section will tell you how Postmodernism got connected with the popular culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

➤ **Film:** Postmodern films explore elements of surrealism by using bizarre images and symbols to provoke emotional reactions within the audience, which otherwise would have been difficult to create using a realistic plot. Luis Buñuel's film *Un Chien Andalou* (English: The Andalusian Dog) written by Buñuel and Dali can be considered as a cult in Postmodern cinema. As such the film lacks a plot, in the conventional sense of the word and is a chronology of disjointed and unconnected events that follows a dream logic in the narrative. Other filmmakers like **Quentin Tarantino**, **Stanley Kubric**, **David Lynch** use postmodern influences in their work. **Kubrick** in his film *The Shining* (based on *The Shining* by Stephen King) designs his set abnormally to bring out the sense of madness in his characters and disorientate the audience. Other examples of Postmodern cinema include **David Lynch's** *Blue Velvet* and *Eraserhead*, **David Fincher's** *Fight Club*, **Spike Jonez's** *Her*, **Quentin Tarantino's** *Pulp Fiction*.

➤ **Music:** Popular music experimented with fragmentation in its chronology. They used disoriented and unconventional orchestral pieces that challenged the perception of time. For example, **David Bowie**, an influential musician of the period uses several fragmented songs and composes one long song in an effort to disorient the listeners. Postmodern trends in musical compositions can also be noted in the works of **Beatles**, **Pink Floyd**, **Radiohead**, **Courtney Love**, **Michael Jackson**, **Madonna**, among others.

➤ **Sports:** With the spread of international capitalization, Postmodern world has seen the commercialization of sport stars. They are often used as a face of advertisements to promote distribution and sales of the particular brand they are endorsing. The sports stars' outfits of the club or national team are manufactured by brands like Reebok and Nike which sell it as a casual wear to the sports fanatics which in turn actually eradicates the distinctions between high and low cultures.

This eradication of a former distinction between high and low culture in literature and culture connects literature to the emerging field of cultural studies which tries to place literature within the context of a broader cultural product.



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### 1.3.8 Summing Up

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The purpose of this Unit has been to acquaint you with the key features of Postmodernism. It is a movement that initially began in art and architecture and moved on to literature, literary criticism popular culture. You are suggested to constantly go and read the section on Modernism in the previous Units because Postmodernism can be best understood in relation to Modernism.

#### **Think and Apply**

This unit gives you a rough idea of what postmodernism is all about. However, there have been controversies galore regarding the nature(s) of postmodernism and the extent of its influence. The whole issue stems from the fact that while several critics believe that it was a reaction to modernism, there are yet many others who look upon it as a continuation of the former. For example, Charles Jencks who is understood to be one of the most significant representatives of postmodernism in architecture and architectural thinking claims that postmodernism started exactly on July 15th, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, when a residential quarter Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, a typical symbol of modernism, was blown up. This residential quarter was built in keeping with rationalist and pragmatic thinking of modernism and modernist architecture. While these are unending debates, you can on your part, with help from your counselor, engage in discussions on the scope and nature of postmodernism. In the present days of neocolonialism that is the ensuing stage of postcolonialism, the aspect of the postmodern renders itself anew to interpretations and reinterpretations that are radical to say the least. You will thus find that it all remains an open-ended proposition.

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### 1.3.9 Comprehension Exercises

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#### ● Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks

1. What are the important features of Postmodern literature?
2. In your opinion how can Lyotard be seen as an important figure of Postmodernism?
3. How did the term Postmodernism come into existence?

#### ● Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks

1. In your opinion how did Postmodernism get connected with Popular Culture?

2. How did Postmodernism begin as a movement in art?
3. How can Baudrillard be seen as a key figure in Postmodern Literary criticism?

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

1. Comment on Baudrillard's four stage model of signs.
2. How is pastiche used in Postmodern literature? Elucidate with examples.
3. Meta-fiction or meta-narrative has been an important characteristic of Postmodern literature. How far do you agree with this statement?

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### **1.3.10 Suggested Reading List**

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Benjamin, Andrew, ed. *The Lyotard Reader*. New Jersey: Blackwell, 1977.

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