



Hermeneutics of Postmodernism in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Buried Child*

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Abstract

Aim: *The Primary aim of this paper is an attempt to understand the hermeneutics of Post modernism in academics. It talks about postmodernism as historical and cultural condition. It primarily evaluates Ihab Hassan's essay "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." Postmodernism has fragmentation in plots,*

characters, themes, images. The secondary purpose of the reading is examining the effects of the hermeneutics of postmodern behavior in the select works.

Methodology/ Approach: *The paper is based on the postmodernist approach based on the qualitative methodology that is the measurement of quantity and critical study.*

Outcome: *Waiting for Godot – 1953 appears to be the manifestation of the postmodern conditions in literature. The novel The Crying of Lot 49 appears to be politically and socially turbulent discourse in the decades in the US history. It contains a persuasive sense of cultural chaos, the novel draws on all areas of culture and socially including the ways those mentioned above. Buried Child depicts out the fragmentation of the American family in a context of disappointment and disillusionment with American mythology and American dreams, the 1970 rural economic slowdown and breakdown of traditional family structures and values. Shepard uses postmodern style in corporate surrealism and symbolism in the realistic framework of family drama.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *It appears that postmodernist attitude affects over all storytelling in modern times. There is longing for the loss wherein the truth is questioned and, therefore, the narrator in terms of telling the truth is not trusted.*

Keywords: Postmodernism, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Buried Child*, Cultural Condition, Fragmentation, Cultural Chaos, Disillusionment, Breakdown

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Talking about *postmodernism* presupposes that there was and there is something known as modernism from which, or against which something can be “post”. Andreas Huyse thinks “either to eulogize or to ridicule Postmodernism *en bloc*, the postmodern must be salvaged from its champions and from its detractors”. Post modernism is one of the most abstract historical terms- “Simplifying to the extreme, I define the post modernism as incredulity towards meta-narratives” says Lyotard. In *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Jean Francois Lyotard says: “The postmodern as a historical / cultural “condition” based on a dissolution of master narratives or meta-narratives (totalizing narrative paradigms like progress and national histories), a crisis in ideology when ideology no longer seems transparent but contingent and constructed”. The works of William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed on the one hand, and the French new novel on the other, are also to be numbered among the varieties of what can be called postmodernism. (This essay was originally a talk, portions of which were presented as a Whitney Museum, Lecture in fall, 1982). Ihab Hassan in his “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” *The Postmodern Turn*, 1987 writes about postmodernism that:

Its origin remains uncertain, though we know that Federico de Onis used the word *postmodernismo* in his *Antologia de la poesia española e hispanoamericana* (1882-1932), published in Madrid in 1934; and Dudley Fitts picked it up again in his *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* of 1942.¹ Both meant thus to indicate a minor reaction to modernism already latent within it, reverting to the early twentieth century. The term also appeared in Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* as early as D.C. Somervell's first-volume abridgement in 1947. For Toynbee, Post-Modernism designated a new historical cycle in Western civilization, starting around 1875, which we now scarcely begin to discern. Somewhat

later, during the fifties, Charles Olson often spoke of postmodernism with more sweep than lapidary definition. (1-2)

Hassan in his essay deeply distinguishes between Modernism and Postmodernism as:

Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism/Symbolism	Pataphysics/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed) open)	Antiform (disjunctive,
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object/Finished Work Process/Performance/Happening	
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation /Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading Against Interpretation/Misreading	
Signified	Signifier
Lisible (Readerly)	Scriptable (Writerly)

Narrative/Grande Histoire	Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin/Cause	Difference
Differance/Trace	
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence (5).

Historically the notion of modernism emerges after WWI, beginning in Europe and progressing into American literature by the late 1920s. After the WW I many people started questioning on the chaos and the insanity in society. The world's "Universal Truths" and trust in authority figures began to crumble and modernism becomes a response to the destruction of the beliefs. Jeremy Green in the same connection adds:

In recent years, a number of critics have announced the demise of postmodernism. The death notices issue from all points of the critical compass. For some on the left, postmodernism has been primarily an academic ideology that grew out of the despair of the post-1968 generation, a failure of political nerve, and an immense evasion of the continued depredations of late capitalism. News of postmodernism's expiration can, therefore, be taken in good spirits, since urgent political and intellectual problems might now be addressed without a detour through the latest neo-Nietzschean mills

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flown in from France. Everything that such a theoretical trend ruled out of court—history, capital, the subject—can now be brought back to the table, and not before time. “Postmodernism is now history,” Alex Callinicos has declared with evident satisfaction. (19)

Fragmentation in plot, character, theme, images and over all storyline is modernist characteristics. Loss is a huge theme in modernist works. The truth is questionable, as a common theme. Thus, we cannot trust the narrator in terms of telling the truth. The modernist movement in fictional writing broke through in US with William Faulkner’s *Sound and Fury* 1929, which had a mixture of reviving and ranting reviews. It was super confusing but brilliant. Faulkner went on to influence future modernist works like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* 1940, and Hemmingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* 1940. In modernism authority figure is often untrustworthy reflecting the question of truth. This movement was away from religion, ambiguous ending, such works often leave a lot of questions with the reader. The use of improper grammar used to reflect dialects, more sexuality and the use of intertextuality are often found, more use of the first-person narratives, reflecting the lack of universal truth i.e. there are only Individual Truth as it is reflected in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction*

By Linda Hutcheon:

In other words, postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary (cf. Kroker and Cook 1986). And it does not really describe an international cultural phenomenon, for it is primarily European and American (North and South). Although the concept of *modernism* is largely an Anglo-American one (Suleiman 1986), this should not limit the poetics of *postmodernism* to that culture, especially since those who would argue that very stand are usually the ones to find room to sneak in

the French *nouveau roman* (A. Wilde 1981, Brooke-Rose 1981, Lodge 1977). And almost everyone (e.g. Barth 1980) wants to be sure to include what Severo Sarduy (1974) has labeled—not postmodern—but “neo-baroque” in a Spanish culture where “modernism” has a rather different meaning. (4)

Postmodernism as a notion, movement or term came about the end of the WW II, though not actually studied as a form until the mid 80s. Now the word “post” modernism is used to describe certain characteristic of WWII literature. It was a reaction against Enlightenment, ideas implicit in modernist literature. In today’s time postmodern literature like postmodernism as a whole is hard to define and there, we find a little agreement on the exact characteristics. It is clear that both modern and post-modern literature represent a break from 19th century realism, both explore subjectivity, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness in many cases, such as “stream of consciousness” styles of James Joyce and the poems like *The Waste Land*.

As with all stylistic eras, no definite dates exist for the rise and fall of post modernism. The prefix “post” however does not necessarily imply a new era, rather it could also indicate a reaction against modernism in the wake of the Second World War with its disrespect for human rights just confirmed in the Geneva Convention through the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, the Bombing of Dresden, the fire bombing on Tokyo and Japanese American internment. It could also imply a reaction to significant post-war events such as the beginning of the Cold War, the Civil Right Movement in the United States and the rise of the personal computer, cyber- punk-fiction and hyper- text fiction.

Some of the people argue that the beginning of the postmodern literature could be marked by significant publications or literary events, for example the first publication of John Hawks’ *The Cannibal* 1949, the first performance of

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Waiting for Godot – 1953, the first publication of “Howl” 1956 or of *Naked Lunch* in 1959. The emergence of existential philosophy given by Sartre was also responsible to postmodern theories and themes in literature. For others the beginning of post modernism is marked by movement in the critical theories, like the theory of the Derrida with his lecture “Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” 1966. The term Theater of the Absurd coined by Martin Esline to describe a tendency in theater in the 1950s was related to Albert Camus’s concept of the Absurd. The plays of the theater of Absurd paralleled postmodern fictions in many ways. One of the most important figures to be categorized as both absurdist and postmodernist is Samuel Beckett. The works of Samuel Beckett are often seen as marking shift from modernism to postmodernism in literature.

In literary history The Beat Generation is as an expression coined by Jack Kerouac for the disaffected youths of America during the materialistic 1950s. The Beat Generation is often used more broadly to refer several groups of post-war American writers from the Black Mountain Poets, the New York School, and The San Francisco Renaissance and so on. One writer associated with The Beat Generation who appears most often on the list of post-modern writers is William S. Burroughs. He published *Naked Lunch* in Paris in 1959 and in America 1961. This is considered by some the first truly postmodern novel because it is fragmentary with no central narrative, it implies Pastiche to fold on events from popular genres such as detective fictions and science fictions which is full of parody, paradox and playfulness.

Postmodernism in literature is not an organized movement with leaders or any central figures. Some people declare death to postmodernism in the 1980s with a new search of realism represented and inspired by Raymoul Carver.

Magic realism is a technique popular among Latin American writers in which super natural elements are treated as mundane. Though the technique has

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its roots in traditional storytelling, it was a center piece of the Latin American Boom, a movement coterminous with post modernism. Some of the major figures of Booms and the practitioner of magic realism were Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Julia Cortazar, known as postmodernist writers.

To treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way was a common factor in postmodernism, for example the way Heller, Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon addressed the events of WWII. The central concept of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* is about the irony of the new idiomatic catch 22 and the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Thomas Pynchon in particular provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly world-play within serious contexts. *The Crying of Lot 49* for example contains characters named Nike Fallopian, Oedipa Mass and Stanly Koteks and a Radio Station called KLUF, with the Novel as a whole has a serious subject and complex structure. Almost all the works of Pynchon are deliberately complex, plots are often difficult to follow because of their incredible twist and sometimes esoteric subject matter, Pynchon's characters further are hard to relate too. He reflects a tendency to fill his novel with new characters because of the novel's subject matter, character, language, technique, humor, story and deep insight into American culture and beyond, the book is an American Landmark. His novel is political, domestic, literal and scientific, Pynchon as an American novelist is well known for his complex fictional words of postmodern literature. *The Crying of Lot 49* has often been defined mostly inaccessible and complex work even as cultural, social, historical, technical and scientific references too.

The novel *The Crying of Lot 49* written in 1960 was one of the most politically and socially turbulent decades in the US history. The decade saw the rise of the drug culture, Vietnam War, Rock Revolution, the birth of numerous social welfare programs after democrats swept Congress in 1964 election, this

was also the decade of John F. Kennedy's, Martin Luther King's assassination and Civil Right movement.

The Crying of lot 49 is a novel which contains a persuasive sense of cultural chaos, the novel draws on all areas of culture and socially including the ways those mentioned above. At the end of the novel the heroin Oedipa Mass finds herself alone and alienated from society, having lost her touch with life and attempts to uncover the mystery of Teristero. The drug culture plays a big part in the sense of isolation. The world around Oedipa Mass seems to be world perpetually on drug manic and falls of conspiracies and illusion. Drug destructs Oedipa Mass' marriage. Oedipa comes to meet a chaotic sense of alienation. Many of the times in the novel we find chaos in the all spheres of American lives.

The gap in communication and meaningless are ironic, religion, language and science do not work properly. In the novel there is a dichotomy between mystery and reality. Pynchon coined the term Entropy which was meant for chaos or problem in communication in any particular specific culture where people are alienated and isolated in psychologically mentally, where there is chaos, bareness of interaction and meaninglessness.

The language of the novel is extremely technical and mechanical; Pynchon used puns and scientific terms in the novel. The novel is full of language games of all sorts, for instance the odd names of the characters which look symbolic. The word Lot in the title does not relate to anything until to the last pages. Language is full of jokes, satire, scientific and technical terms. In this way the novel includes all these elements in its own capacity of less than 200 pages.

Pastiche, one of the most fashionable terms in postmodern literature was related to the postmodern inter-textuality. Pastiche means to combine or paste together multiple elements. It is seen as representation of the chaotic pluralistic or information drenched aspect of post-modern society. It can be combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situation in

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postmodernity, for example William S. Burroughs uses scientific friction, dedicative friction; Margate Atwood uses science fiction and fairy tales etc. Though Pastiche commonly refers to the mixing of genres, for example Pynchon also uses meta-fiction, he includes in his novel's elements from detective fiction, science fiction, war fiction, song, pop culture references, which is well known for obscure and fictional history mixed together.

Meta-fiction is essentially writing about writing, or foregrounding the apparatus as its typical of its deconstructionist approaches making the artificiality of art or the functionality of fiction appearances to the readers and generally this regard the necessity for "willful sustentation of disbelief." Meta-fiction is often employed to undermine the authority of the author for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance the story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling. The temporal distance of emotion is a common technique in modernist fiction, fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features in both modern and postmodern literature.

The term Paranoia demonstrated most famously and effectively in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and to the works of Pynchon, the sense of Paranoia, the belief there is un-ordering system behind the chaos of the world. A search for order is, therefore, fruitless and absurd. *The Crying of Lot 49* has much possible interpretation. This often coincides with the themes of techno-culture and hyper-reality. Thus, many of the well-known postmodern novels and works of American literature deal with WWII, one of the most famous are Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*. Heller claimed his novel and many of the other American novels of the time had more to do with the state of the country after the war.

Buried Child, a play by Sam Shepard first represented in 1978 which won Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979 for him. Shepard found National name and fame by this work. The play depicts out the fragmentation of the American family in a

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context of disappointment and disillusionment with American mythology and American dreams, the 1970 rural economic slowdown and breakdown of traditional family structures and values. Shepard uses postmodern style in corporate surrealism and symbolism in the realistic framework of family drama. He creates images and imagination of people's thoughts, the sense of surrealism, symbolism and realism. He also uses mixing genres, the deconstruction of great narrative. He deals with myth-subjects and archetypal characters in his plays tending to his world as a sense of mystery.

Thematically Shepard was to create a narrative which communicated and reflected the frustration of American people, but at the same time was engaging and entertaining, he sets the American farming family and centered on issues which are universal frustration of American citizens. The play represents the family drama in realistic framework. Shepard prevents the disintegration of American family and suggests that as a culture Americans have embarrassments, richness and paucity of spirituality and morality. He shows American selfishness, brutality, hypocrisy and the interest of physical power over others. Shepard shows American poverty, the breakdown of morality and ethics, the illicit and incestuous relationships and coming up illegal babies without any tie and knot of relationship! I would end this paper with Jeremy Green's strange and strong observation, he writes that:

During the past decade, a number of critics, novelists, and essayists have announced the end of literature. For the literary theorist J. Hillis Miller, "[t]he end of literature is at hand. Literature's time is almost up"; he goes on to explain that "[t]he printed book will retain cultural force for a good while yet, but its reign is clearly ending."¹ The essayist Sven Birkerts, who has made a career out of elegizing the book, claims that "[t]he stable hierarchies of the printed page . . . are being superseded by the rush of impulses

through freshly minted circuits.”² And according to the critic Alvin Kernan, morbid symptoms of the “death of literature” can be traced throughout the institutions of publishing, the university, and the law.³ Marshall McLuhan’s flamboyant assertions about the end of the print era, elaborated in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and a string of other volumes published in the 1960s, have acquired a new currency in the last years of the twentieth century (45).

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