

The Role Of Symbolism In Postmodern Literature

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Abstract

By contrasting its application with previous literary trends and examining how postmodernist writings use symbols to question meaning, identity, and narrative authority, this essay examines the function and evolution of symbolism in postmodern literature. This study shows how symbolism in postmodernism becomes a tool for challenging reality, upending interpretation, and expressing cultural disintegration through an analysis of important postmodern works and theoretical viewpoints.

Key words: postmodernism, symbols,

Introduction

Many of the ideas and ideals of Modernism are rejected, viewed with distrust, and scepticism in postmodern literature. Therefore, postmodernism involves alternatives to conventional ideals as well as fragmentation and various, contradictory identities. To put it briefly, postmodern literature questions the accepted standards of art. The foundation of Postmodernism is the realisation that reality is not only reflected in how humans see it, but is instead created as the mind attempts to comprehend its own unique and subjective reality. Postmodernism thus emphasises the relative truths of every individual. According to the postmodern perspective, interpretation is crucial; reality only emerges from our personal perceptions of what the world means to us.

The term "postmodernism" can refer to a wide range of topics, including philosophy, film, historical theory, and architecture. Because of this, some individuals differentiate between different types of postmodernism and propose that there are three types of postmodernism: In contrast to theoretical postmodernism, which includes the theories of intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and others, [1] postmodernity is seen as a historical period from the mid-1960s to the present. "Cultural postmodernism" is the third category, which encompasses postmodern influences in visual arts, literature, film, etc. In this way, postmodern literature is a component of cultural postmodernism.

As a result, postmodern literature explores the nature of knowledge through its stories, challenging conventional wisdom while also claiming fresh interpretations. James Joyce is among the best examples of a postmodern author. For example, he uses the distinctive stream-of-consciousness technique in his novel *Ulysses*, which deviates from all conventional structure; he uses pulp fiction idioms and clichés to mock the evolution of English literary style; and he uses scientific jargon in the style of the Catholic Catechism to relate the events of 1904. Another book is *Finnegan's Wake*, which one critic describes as "a dizzying web of allusions and languages," "bold" in its "technical innovations" such the use of the serious mixed with the ambiguous and humorous, and myth intermingled with history.

Literature review

The realism of the 19th century is broken by postmodern literature. In character development, both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness, in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the "stream of consciousness" styles of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, or explorative poems like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. Furthermore, fragmentariness in the production of narratives and characters is explored in both postmodern and contemporary writing. A common tool used to differentiate between postmodern and modern literature is *The Waste Land*. Like a lot of postmodern literature, the poem is incomplete and uses pastiche, although the speaker in *The Waste Land* states, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins." Fragmentation and intense subjectivity are viewed in modernist literature as an existential crisis or Freudian internal conflict that needs to be resolved, and the artist is frequently credited with doing so. However, postmodernists frequently show that this turmoil is unavoidable, that the artist is helpless, and that playing in the confusion is the only way to combat "ruin." Many modernist works, such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Woolf's *Orlando*, exhibit

playfulness. These works may appear to be quite similar to postmodern works, but postmodernism places a greater emphasis on fun and makes it less probable that order and meaning can actually be achieved. [2]

John Barth, a postmodernist novelist who frequently discusses the term "postmodern," released a seminal article titled "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967. To elucidate the work, Barth published "The Literature of Replenishment" in 1980. After modernism had run its course, "The Literature of Exhaustion" explored the necessity for a new literary age.[3] Modernist writers like T.S. Eliot or James Joyce used symbols to evoke a sense of hidden coherence or universal truths. The symbol in modernist literature often functioned as a key to understanding metaphysical or existential dilemmas. In contrast, postmodern literature undermines this idea. It treats symbols not as gateways to truth, but as signs floating without anchors. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, postmodern symbolism often operates in the realm of simulacra, where signs refer not to reality but to other signs.

Discussion and Results

Postmodern literature thrives on plurality and contradiction. Symbols in postmodern texts are frequently self-conscious, ironic, and unstable. For example, in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the muted post horn symbol is riddled with ambiguity. Is it a sign of a secret underground movement? Its very indeterminacy becomes its symbolic power, reflecting the uncertainty of meaning in postmodern thought.

Similarly, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* employs symbols like airborne toxic events or supermarket aisles to explore themes of media saturation and the banality of contemporary life. These symbols are not profound in the traditional sense; they are fragmented, absurd, and hyperreal.

Symbolism, the literary device of using objects, characters, or events to represent abstract ideas, has been a cornerstone of literature across ages. In modernist literature, symbols often carried deep, sometimes universal, meanings, serving as bridges between the conscious and unconscious, or as vehicles for cultural and psychological commentary. However, postmodern literature radically reconfigures the function and interpretation of symbols, reflecting its skepticism towards grand narratives and stable meanings. Symbolism in literature refers to the use of objects, characters, or events to represent abstract ideas, emotions, or moral concepts. In Western literature, symbolism has been employed across different movements—from medieval allegories to modernist experimentation—to explore human consciousness, societal critiques, and existential dilemmas.[4]

In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, symbols such as Saleem Sinai's sensitive nose or the children of midnight function on multiple levels: personal, national, historical, and magical. They are simultaneously allegorical and ironic, blending magic realism with postmodern skepticism. Rushdie's use of symbolism questions the stability of national identity, memory, and history.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* further exemplifies postmodern symbolic play, turning the labyrinth and the library into metaphors for epistemological doubt and the endless deferral of meaning. Symbols in Eco's work are metafictional; they not only mean but also question the act of meaning-making itself.[5]

A defining feature of postmodern literature is intertextuality—the referencing of other texts within a text. Symbols often emerge from this intertextual play, becoming layered and contingent. The rose in Eco's novel, for instance, recalls literary, religious, and philosophical allusions. Yet, Eco famously ends the book with: "Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus" ("The ancient rose remains only in its name; we hold only naked names"). This reinforces the idea that symbols in postmodernism often refer to a vanished or inaccessible reality.

Unlike in modernism, where symbols often guide readers toward a deeper truth, postmodern symbolism highlights the endless deferral of meaning. For example, in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, symbols such as the muted post horn and the mysterious organization Trystero act as signs that never resolve into a single interpretation. The protagonist's quest for meaning is mirrored in the reader's own interpretive struggle, emphasizing the impossibility of definitive knowledge. Postmodern texts frequently employ symbols in a parodic or ironic manner, undermining their traditional associations. Symbols are often recycled from earlier works (pastiche) or used in unexpected contexts, challenging the seriousness and stability of symbolic meaning. Postmodern literature is self-reflexive, drawing attention to its own status as a constructed artifact. Symbols are often foregrounded as literary devices, not as conduits to a transcendent reality but as elements in a game of signification. This metafictional approach invites readers to question the

very process of meaning-making. Symbols in postmodern literature often reflect the fragmented nature of contemporary identity and culture. They may represent multiple, conflicting ideas simultaneously, mirroring the pluralistic and unstable realities depicted in postmodern narratives.

I can analyze Pynchon's novel exemplifies postmodern symbolism:

a) The muted post horn: A recurring symbol whose meaning is perpetually elusive, representing secret communication, conspiracy, and the impossibility of closure.

b) Jungian Symbolism: The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, is interpreted through Jungian archetypes, yet these symbols are destabilized by the novel's layered narratives and parodic tone.

c) Mise-en-abymic structures: The novel's symbols reflect infinite regress and the impossibility of final interpretation, implicating the reader in the search for meaning.[6]

In his first novel, *V.*, Pynchon follows the track opened by the American historian and traces different manifestations of energy from the turn of the century, stopping for a while in 1922, the 257 magic year of modernism, and ending the historical quest in the last part of World War II, when the then-sinister Lady V. is killed by her own faction. At the time, she had already been very close to acquiring vital information about the most devastating manifestation of energy known so far to the human being: nuclear power. In Pynchon's third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), as critics soon pointed out, V. reappears in the form of the V2 rockets that the Germans fired against Great Britain in an attempt to change the course of World War II (Tanner 47–48). Eventually, Pynchon's magnum opus offers a complex interpretation of the manifestation of energy as nuclear destructive power, resuming his quest in *V.* to trace the human manipulation of energy along the last century. But does Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, play any role in the writer's endeavor to continue Henry Adams's project on the manifestation of energy in modern society? Where, what, or who is V. in this novel set in California in the 1960s? As advanced earlier, along her dense quest for meaning Oedipa also qualifies as the representation of the Lady V. in Pynchon's second novel.[7]

Conclusion

In postmodern literature, symbolism is not abandoned but radically transformed. It no longer serves as a portal to universal truth but becomes a tool for exploring ambiguity, irony, and the instability of meaning. Symbols are used to critique grand narratives, reflect cultural fragmentation, and engage the reader in the construction of meaning. Through its reimagining of symbolic function, postmodern literature challenges us to reconsider not only what symbols mean, but whether stable meaning is possible at all. Symbolism remains a cornerstone of Western literature, evolving from religious allegories to modernist abstraction. By analyzing symbolic elements, readers gain insight into the deeper layers of meaning in literary works. Future research could explore comparative symbolism across Eastern and Western traditions. Symbolism in postmodern literature marks a departure from the modernist pursuit of universal or transcendent meaning. Instead, postmodern symbols foreground ambiguity, multiplicity, and the constructedness of meaning. They serve not to unify, but to fragment, not to reveal, but to question. Through this, postmodern literature invites readers to participate actively in the creation—and perpetual questioning—of meaning.

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