

More modernism (and postmodernism)!

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 Oct 1999

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Daniel Fusch — 28 Oct 1999, 02:14

Well, I'm glad I didn't just annoy everyone by bringing up modernism! Especially glad...I'm having a lot of fun with this discussion.

The rest of you people are far more familiar with the current modernist trends than I am! I've mostly studied the early modernists.

While we're on the topic of who we've left out, it seems that we've skipped quite a few fantastic writers from the midcentury generation. Ralph Ellison, for instance. Not to mention Eudora Welty.

By the way, I hold up "Invisible Man" as another example of modernist fiction that is "easily readable." The novel is told in "fairly straightforward" first-person narrative (like TBOTNS). Someone a while back asserted that it is interesting how little Wolfe used modernist techniques (i.e., stream-of-consciousness) in The Book of the New Sun. Well, I'd just like to say, purely for the sake of debate, that if modernist techniques are reduced to stream-of-consciousness and distorted-perceptive language, then it is very interesting how few modernists use modernist techniques.

On the other hand, I admit that I'm just being outrageously argumentative. It IS notable that Wolfe does not use stream-of-consciousness, and it is worth speculating why stream-of-consciousness would not serve his purpose. (I would answer: Severian's story is, as far as plot goes, a heroic romance--a fantasy about a torturer's apprentice who has many adventures and eventually becomes the ruler of the land. Wolfe used first person narrative because he wanted to write the memoirs of Severian, as it were; stream-of-consciousness is unfortunately not very effective for writing memoirs.)

So whoever brought up stream-of-consciousness had a point (I've forgotten who it was). I do think we need to go further and analyze the modernist techniques that Wolfe DOES use, however. The shifting into Thecla's consciousness is the most obvious example, but there are others, as well.

But for the sake of argument, how does this shifting into Thecla's viewpoint work? When is it used in the narrative, and why? How does it function in the story? It would be interesting to get everyone's thoughts on these questions.

Also--what do we learn about Severian during these shifts? How do these shifts point the reader to certain themes? Finally, what is Wolfe trying to say about the perception of reality?

Now that I've tossed out a few questions, I'll answer one, or try to. Robert asked for some information on modernism/postmodernism.

(snip)

"But all of his work has that air of "everything's been done before, so I'm just going to throw all past and present genres and styles in the blender and have fun riffing off them," which is what I think of when I think of postmodernism. Modernism (Joyce being the keystone example) always struck me as a lot more rigorous. Didn't the modernists believe that they were dragging art into a more advanced era, with the postmodern era arriving when people finally decided that this progress was an illusion?

Anyway, I'm speaking out way beyond my knowledge. Please feel free to correct me.

-- Bob"

Bob, I think the modernists also had a reputation for throwing all past genres and styles into the blender (Faulkner and T. S. Eliot in particular--but perhaps we shouldn't bring up Eliot lest we end up sidetracked onto a whole other topic--modernist poetry!). The modernists did want to bring art into the modern era...specifically by examining our fragmented perceptions of reality in the modern age. They were very interested in time, in applying mythological structure to ordinary people and events, and in experimenting with new types of narration that would better convey the actual perceptions of the characters.

The modernists were extremely interested in the way we perceive reality. A modernist would argue that we can never fully capture reality as it is, although we can get as close as possible (that's where stream-of-consciousness and experimental narration come in). Or we can take many different perceptions and add them all together to get as close as possible to the Truth. Faulkner does this in "The Sound and the Fury" -- a book which he described as a work at which he failed...four times. Meaning that none of the perspectives in the book gave us the final and complete Truth, although by adding all the perspectives together, we get as close as possible to having the big picture.

LeGuin is a modernist writer of science fiction. Her novel "The Left Hand of Darkness" begins: "I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination." Also, LeGuin shifts between two separate first-person narratives throughout the book, for as the first narrator says, "The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story."

That is a distinctly modernist view, and indeed, it is very Faulkneresque. When reading "The Sound and the Fury," we may not be entirely sure whose story it is, but it is "all one story," though composed of multiple narratives.

If you remember the old Eastern fable about the ten blind men examining the elephant...well, that's modernism.

So, in summary: modernism deals with the nature of our perception of reality.

Now to postmodernism. It is very difficult to say anything concise about postmodernism, because by its nature it is a very nebulous philosophy--complicated by the fact that there are postmodern narratives (in which you apply the postmodernist philosophy to art) and there is also postmodern criticism (in which you apply the postmodernist philosophy to literary criticism...which is a whole 'nother ball of wax).

Damien--I think it was Damien--paraphrased McHale earlier in saying that postmodernism looks not at the perception of reality, but at the reality of reality. This has to be the best definition of

postmodern literature that I have heard to date. I'll see if I can expand on it. Possibly Damien can explain it better.

But here goes. Postmodernism (as a philosophy) questions the reality of our reality. While modernists wonder whether we can ever reach Truth through our flawed perception, postmodernists question the existence of Truth at all. A postmodernist believes either that there is no Truth, or that there are many truths, each of them valid. In postmodernism, it is not "all one story." It is many, or none at all. Postmodern literature, you see, is also very experimental.

For example--one of the more popular branches of postmodern literature is deconstructionism, which questions the idea that you can convey ideas through language. In a deconstructionist view, language can take on any meaning because there is no final Meaning to language. There can never be a connection between the word "chair" and the Platonic ideal chair.

An example of postmodern science fiction--I'm reaching a little here--might be Doris Lessing's "The Memoirs of a Survivor." That work owes something to modernism as well, I think--but in the end, the book questions the reality of reality. The narrator exists in at least two realities (I'm referring to the existence in her apartment and the journeys "through the wall"), and at the end, reality breaks down altogether, and the events of the ending are open game for the reader. In the end, the events don't really matter.

Postmodernism, then, forces the question: "Is there a reality? Is there a truth?"

Does this help you any, Bob?

By the way, I'm MUCH more familiar with modernism than postmodernism, so if anybody can clarify or correct my explanation here, I won't mind!

Daniel