

The University of Western Ontario  
London Ontario

Department of English

**English 9058B**

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### **Postmodernism(s) and the End of Everything (?)**

Few cultural moments have met their deaths so frequently and as spectacularly as Postmodernism. Even a brief survey of criticism will discover that Postmodernism died with the election of Obama (2008), with the tragedy of 9/11 (2001), and with the death of JFK (1963). The 2009 Tate Triennial exhibition, "Altermodern," proclaims "Postmodernism is Dead" in the first line of its Manifesto. Only the Facebook group, "Death to Postmodernism" suggests that there might be sufficient life in the term to prompt ongoing murderous thoughts. Even during its brief life, Postmodernism was the subject of apocalyptic pronouncements by critics who found it guilty of the deaths of certainty, tradition, politics, history, the subject, literature and good taste. Most recently, Jordan Peterson has pronounced it "a rehashing of the Marxist claim of eternal and primary class warfare," and it has been blamed for apparent complicity in "alternative facts."

From (approximately) the 1960s until (approximately) the 1990s, however, the term "postmodernism" was ubiquitous. From architecture to zoology, as Thomas Docherty notes, "there is hardly a single field of intellectual endeavor which has not been touched by the spectre of 'the postmodern'" (1993). In many of these fields, it was hailed initially as revolutionary, progressive, demystifying, avant-garde, self-reflexive and, in Lyotard's famous phrase, as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1979).

Postmodernism, then, is messy; it is everything and nothing, ghostly and ghastly, the beginning and the end. The aim of this course will be to engage with the theory and practice of postmodernism as an aesthetic style and as a political and cultural reality in order to determine why it has been subject to such extremes. We will focus largely on literature, but will also consider architecture, film and visual art in addition to fields and subjects that arise from the readings.

#### **Schedule:**

**Week 1, January 11:** Introduction

**Week 2, January 18:** Jeannette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*.

Supplementary: Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: "Theorizing the Postmodern" (3-21); "Historicizing the Postmodern" (87-101). **Available online through the library.**

**Week 3, January 25:** Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*.

Supplementary: Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” from *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. <https://web.education.wisc.edu/halverson/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2012/12/jameson.pdf>

**Week 4, February 1:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*.

Supplementary: from Raymond Federman, *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*. (OWL)

**Week 5, February 8:** Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*.

Supplementary: Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern” (OWL)

**Week 6, February 15:** Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

Supplementary: Michael Shermer, “The Unfortunate Fallout of Campus Postmodernism” (OWL); Sumantra Maitra, “Methods Behind the Campus Madness (OWL); Jordan Peterson, “Postmodernism: How and Why it Must be Fought.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf2nqmQIfxc>

**Week 7, February 19-27: Reading Week**

**Week 8, March 1:** Graham Swift, *Waterland*

Supplementary: Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*. “Introduction”; “Epilogue” OWL

**Week 9, March 8:** Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*.

Supplementary: Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*. “Introduction”; “Filters, Silos, and Tribes” (OWL)

**Week 10, March 15:** Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Supplementary: Charles Lemert, *Postmodernism is Not What You Think*. “Beast, Frogs, Freaks, and Other Postmodern Things.” (OWL)

**Week 11, March 22:** John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

Supplementary: Matthew McManus, *What is Postmodern Conservatism*. “Postmodern Conservatism: Or How the Right Became What it Hated.” (OWL)

**Week 12, March 29:** Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*

Supplementary: Irmtraud Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism*. “Epitaph on a Ghost, or the Impossible End of Postmodernism.” (OWL)

## **Assignments:**

### **1. Seminar on literary text: 20%**

You are required to lead one class for 45 minutes. If possible, try to make it an interactive presentation rather than a speech. These presentations work best if you think of them as teaching

exercises in which you engage the class in discussing a problem, issue or question in the text, directed by your insights.

**2. 8-10 page write up of seminar: 20%**

Essentially, this will be a write-up of your seminar, due two weeks after you present it. The length is about that of a conference presentation. The seminar does not have to be all-inclusive, but should be an argument about a particular aspect of the text. Feel free to engage critical and/or theoretical works from the syllabus or from elsewhere.

**3. Seminar on a supplementary text: 15%**

A 10-15 minute presentation on one of the supplementary readings for that week. If the supplementary reading is a long one, you may choose to focus on a part of it.

**4. 15-20 page major paper: 35%. Due April 20.**

The topic is open as long as the paper explores some aspect of postmodernism/postmodernity. Feel free to choose a text which is not on the course, a film or a cultural phenomenon. You may choose to include the text upon which you presented your seminar, but you should also broaden the discussion to include other literary and supplementary texts.

**5. Participation in class discussion: 10%**

**NB:** Late papers will be penalised 2% per day unless you have made prior arrangements with me. If there are medical reasons, please let me know. If you miss your seminar for reasons other than documented, medical or other tragedy you will not be able to make it up.