

## **Lecture 3 – Postmodernism B: Language & Literary Criticism**

*“There is nothing outside the text.” Derrida*

### **Key Terms**

Postmodernism, hermeneutics, style, cultural artifact, genre, heroism

### **Objectives**

\*Summarize the way in which the postmodern style has affected our culture.

\*Explore examples of postmodern style in language, linguistics, and literature.

### **Introduction**

Hermeneutical Background: How do we read and understand a text?

The Enlightenment Project

Modernism: just assumed that we could understand each other due to human reason

Postmodernism:

### **B. Language & Literary Criticism**

1. There is nothing transcendent (neither God nor anything else) that understands everything.  
A world without God
2. Therefore there is no story or metanarrative that gives texts or language ultimate meaning.  
Themes of great literature:  
Consequences when Christianity is passionately rejected:
3. The meaning of a text, or any use of language resides completely in the person using the language or reading the text.  
No hope of understanding each other  
Our approach to Scripture  
Postmodernism’s conclusion: individual and cultural isolation
4. Literary Criticism plunges into an abyss, for meaning is lost. Texts are completely inaccessible to us, for every reading becomes a misreading.
5. Literature becomes a weapon in the culture wars for various groups to reinforce their previously held positions, and to use against each other.

**Quotations:** Note: These quotations are not all discussed in the lecture; they are provided for you to review on your own.

**Derrida** says “there is nothing outside the text.” He means that there is no meta-language; no language that can enable us to stand outside or over the text as critics of it, no structural rules to help understanding (for these themselves would simply be another text), no reference to the external world, no inherent meaning to a text or to language itself.

**Abrams** comments on this statement (“there is no meaning outside the text”) – “Like all Derrida’s key terms and statements, this has multiple significations; but a primary significance is that one cannot get beyond the sequence of verbal signs to anything that stands outside of, and independent of, the language system that constitutes a text – for example its referents, or else the intention of its speaker or writer to express a determinate signification.”

“Deconstruction...results in the claim that the meaning of any text remains radically ‘open’ to contradictory readings.” **M. H. Abrams – *A Glossary of Literary Terms***

In Deconstruction the meaning of a term is determined by its difference from other terms (*differance*), and therefore – because every term is defined this way – meaning is always deferred to another moment.

This failure to grasp an actual definition leads to what is called *decentering*, that is, that there is no center or reference point to anchor the meaning of a word.

It also leads to *free play* - any term has infinite semantic range, because every word is anchored to other words; any word can drift anywhere in the ocean of meaning.

“The text can have no determinate meaning at all. Every reading is a misreading.”

In answer to the criticism that his thinking is nihilistic, **Derrida** tries to deny this charge, but he says elsewhere that he is trying to put himself “at a point so that I do not know any longer where I am going.”

**Lyotard** tells us that now the scientific metanarrative has broken down all that we are left with is “an infinite plurality of language games.” We have moved “from the muffled majesty of grand narratives to the splintering autonomy of micronarratives.” **Jean-Francois Lyotard – *The Postmodern Condition***

**Examples from literature help to understand what is being claimed in postmodern theorizing and in deconstruction.**

The plays of **Samuel Beckett** or of **Eugene Ionesco**: In both of these dramatists language breaks down, so people cease to communicate with each other. See *Waiting for Godot* or *Happy Days* by **Beckett**, or *Rhinoceros* or *Chairs* by **Ionesco**.

The fiction of **James Joyce**: *Ulysses* or *Finnegan’s Wake*

The poetry of **T. S. Eliot** or **Ted Hughes**

We are the hollow men  
 We are the stuffed men  
 Leaning together  
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
 Our dried voices, when  
 We whisper together  
 Are quiet and meaningless  
 As wind in dry grass  
 Or rats’ feet over broken glass  
 In our dry cellar  
**T. S. Eliot – *The Hollow Men I***

Words strain,  
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
 Will not stay still. Shrieking voices  
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering  
 Always assail them.

**T. S. Eliot – *Burnt Norton V* from *The Four Quartets***



within the limited powers and experience of the finite human mind.” **Frances Young – A Cloud of Witnesses** from *The Myth of God Incarnate* p. 34

She then argues that to say “Jesus is God” turns myth into science. Our religious language works like music. She uses the illustration of **Hector Berlioz – Messe des Morts**. Such music has the power to convict and terrify me; so with our language about and to God.

The views of Frances Young are not new. Over 150 years ago **Strauss** in his *Life of Jesus* wrote: “The supernatural birth of Christ, His miracles, His resurrection and ascension remain eternal truths whatever doubts we may cast on their reality as historical facts....When we have finished critically studying the history of Jesus what remains is to re-establish dogmatically what we have destroyed critically....According to the mythical interpretation I do not see in the evangelical narrative any actual occurrence but yet retain a sense and purpose of the narrative....Despite the negative conclusions of historical research all that the Scripture declares and the church believes of Christ will still subsist as eternal truth, nor is there any need for one iota of it to be renounced.”