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**There's Something Seriously Wrong with the People in Charge:**
**A Postmodern Study of American Literature from 1945**

Literature has had many movements that depict a shift in thinking as a response to the fundamental injustices of the generation. One is modernism, characterized by rationality, honest storytelling and the pursuit of progress. It left something to be desired among human history's unrepresented classes and races. Postmodernism, as a philosophy, challenges the idea of rationality, objectivity, and universal truth. Instead, it aims to highlight the richness of the human experience and the variety of human perspectives. Postmodernism argues that reality is constructed through language and culture and is inherently fragmented and pluralistic. Postmodernism was marked by techniques such as pastiche, metafiction, and intertextuality, which blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction. The term 'postmodernism' has been interpreted in numerous ways, with critics and authors frequently disagreeing on its fundamental principles. Literary theorists have attempted to suggest a way to read postmodern works to grasp their intentions and inspire thought. Writers such as Octavia E. Butler, Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter S. Thompson, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Art Spiegelman, and Leslie Marmon Silko have not only shaped and exemplified the principles of postmodernism in American literature since 1945 but have also redefined the literary landscape by challenging traditional narratives, exploring complex identities, and critiquing societal norms, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the postmodern condition.

"Recitatif" by Toni Morrison, published in 1983, explores the evolving friendship between Twyla and Roberta, two women of different racial backgrounds. Meeting in a children's

shelter, their lives diverge but intersect over the years, revealing racial tensions, particularly during the school segregation era and the memory of an incident with Maggie, a mute kitchen worker from their past, underscoring the story's themes of identity and perception. Famously ambiguous about the racial identities of its two main characters, Morrison's deliberate lack of information forces readers to confront their own bias, challenging the notion of fixed and knowable identities, an American postmodern feature. By leaving the racial identities ambiguous, Morrison engages in a meditation about storytelling itself, asking the readers to think critically about how stories are told and understood. Morrison believed that "racism is a profound neurosis" (Hyman) and reflects its constructed nature in her story. The characters' identities and memories constantly changing, and the story's linear but fragmented use of time is a primarily postmodern concept. The story jumps, always forward from Roberta's "last day [when they] went to the orchard to watch the big girls smoke and dance by the radio" (Morrison 1492) to Twyla's "working behind the counter at the Howard Johnson's on the Thruway just before the Kingston exit" (Morrison 1493) to "to my husband's family [Newburgh] was still some upstate paradise of a time long past" (Morrison 1494) over two pages. Morrison does not explicitly state that we are jumping ahead in time for each vignette. However, the change in circumstances, from girls in a 'shelter' to young women dating or working an entry-level job to settled, married women in their prime, implies it. Twyla's internal monologue displays her confusion and uncertainty with what Roberta is telling her: she "was puzzled by her, Roberta, telling [her] Maggie was black. When [she] thought about it, [she] actually couldn't be certain" (Morrison 1500). Using postmodern elements conspicuously leads to a multilayered story that questions identity and memory. The title' Recitatif,' derived from the French name for a concept in opera where the singer is allowed to adopt the rhythms and delivery of ordinary speech (Sadie & Tyrrell), contrasts with the short

story's focus on two individuals from low economic status. This juxtaposition implies a harmonious relationship between 'high art' and 'low art,' symbolizing a bridge over social and racial divides. The mixing of contradictory genres suggests the end of a divide caused by racism.

A prime example of a decentralized subject in postmodernism (i.e. a subject with no fixed essence shaped by external influences) is in Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds," where society has collapsed due to a pandemic that impairs communication abilities, leading to chaos and violence. The protagonist, Rye, who can still understand language, navigates this dystopian world, seeking safety and connection. A connection with a fellow survivor, Obsidian, gives Rye hope. The story explores themes of communication, isolation, and the resilience of the human spirit. Characters navigate their identity and relationships without traditional means of communication, highlighting identity's fluidity and constructed nature. bell hooks developed a postmodern literary theory of the 'decentralized subject,' which aligns perfectly with the struggles of characters facing newfound poststructuralism. Butler's narrative illustrates how Rye and the readers are left questioning the significance of identity when one can seem to function without it. The language loss further decentralizes the subject and creates an anti-essentialist feeling: "She would never hear her name spoken again" (Butler 97). The pin she uses to communicate her name becomes a cue and symbol, an attempt to establish a new form of communication that is often open to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings. Both hooks and Butler present the idea of the fluid nature of identity. Obsidian "had been the protector, had chosen that role for who knows what reason" (Butler 107). This demonstrates that one's identity can be recognized and defined by others, indicative of identity being formed by circumstances rather than the person to whom it belongs. The whole story is narrated in the third person, another nod to the decentered subject, never providing the reader with the true thoughts and emotions of the

characters. Moments like "she could not remember when she had last giggled" (Butler 100) emphasize this distance. This kind of postmodern literature forges a new path, breaking traditional writing rules and disrupting readers' thought patterns to explore complex themes of identity and self-perception in a fragmented world.

Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five follows Billy Pilgrim, a World War II soldier who becomes "unstuck in time." He experiences moments from his life in a nonlinear fashion, including his capture by the Germans and survival of the Dresden bombing. The narrative blends war trauma, time travel, and alien abduction, exploring themes of fate, free will, and the absurdity of war. The novel critiques the destructiveness of war and the illusion of free will, forcing the readers to confront their conditioned views on history and traditional heroes with a lively engagement with the text. Umberto Eco insisted that texts are woven from numerous references and quotations to increase the verisimilitude of the text and enrich the narrative with diverse meanings, noting that "plot could also be found in the form of quotation of other plots" (Eco 529). For example, Vonnegut writes, "It was a true account of the death before an American firing squad of Private Eddie D. Slovik, 3689415, the only American soldier to be shot for cowardice since the Civil War" (Vonnegut 45). This statement reminds the reader of the historical fact that a 24-year-old soldier was indeed shot for cowardice, highlighting the harsh realities of war. By littering the book with real people, places, businesses, and things, Vonnegut balances the otherwise extraordinary narrative of time and space travel, grounding the reader in a clever way that juxtaposes the fantastical elements with stark reality. This approach enhances the narrative's authenticity and underscores the absurdity and tragedy of war, reinforcing Vonnegut's critique of its chaotic and dehumanizing nature.

Eco also felt the need for terms to be laced with a certain level of irony, parody, and playfulness in order to engage the reader, noting that "with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously" (Eco 531). This could be because satire is somewhat traditional in observing societal discrepancies. For instance, Vonnegut writes, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (Vonnegut 101). This statement points to old lies, such as "it is very easy for any American to make money" (Vonnegut 129). It underscores the urgent need for new ones, providing a new consciousness about history and the present. Eco and Jean-Francois Lyotard had concepts that enabled the reader to engage with postmodernism with a deeper, more poignant perspective. They explored the idea of the work being a critique of war, aligning with Vonnegut's intention. Vonnegut's commentary on war, likened to a tree that "attracted human beings who killed each other around the roots and made excellent fertilizer" (Vonnegut 167), serves to highlight the absurdity and destructiveness of war, reinforcing the critical and reflective nature of postmodern literature. Vonnegut's intentional fragmentation and mixing of genres, timelines, and perspectives comment on the chaotic nature of war, given the inevitable presence of human elements. Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction aligns well with Slaughterhouse-Five, as her concept explores the politics of "novelistic narrative representation" (A Poetics). Billy Pilgrim, for instance, is not a traditional war hero, nor "was a female German Shepherd" named Princess (Vonnegut 52). Additionally, Vonnegut's insertion of himself into the book, such as when he writes, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (Vonnegut 125), demonstrates a deliberate disregard for traditional metanarratives. The technique of self-insertion does not disconnect us from history but questions the processes by which we represent ourselves. American postmodern works force one to wake up and invite

one's demons to play. This engagement with demons forces the reader to confront the fact that most history is speculative fiction, and most values and virtues of identity are shaped elsewhere, seldom within.

In Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream, Hunter S. Thompson narrates the drug-fueled journey of Raoul Duke and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, as they travel to Las Vegas in 1971. They aim to cover a motorcycle race and the American Dream but spiral into a chaotic and surreal adventure. The story critiques the hedonism and disillusionment of American society during that era. In the spirit of Thompson's gonzo journalism, where the writer becomes an integral part of the narrative, the postmodern impulses he embraces are starkly evident. Thompson places himself unapologetically at the center of his chaotic tales, openly acknowledging his biases and revelling in the subjective lens through which he views the world. By saying things like "history is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit" ("Genius' Round" 104) or "I want to leave this noisy black machine and sit naked on my porch for a while, in the sun" ("Jacket Copy" 215). This deliberate self-insertion undermines the illusion of objective truth and highlights storytelling's constructed and malleable nature. Parody and irony permeate his prose, as seen in his scathing critique of Nixon: "Nixon was a professional politician, and I despised everything he stood for—but if he were in my house right now, I would probably shake his hand" (Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72 214). Thompson mercilessly critiques and subverts societal norms and cultural icons with a tone that oscillates between irreverent and playful. His narratives unfold nonlinearly, capturing contemporary life's fragmented, disordered essence. For instance, he writes, "Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six?" ("Genius' Round" 104), reflecting a postmodern skepticism towards the idea of a singular, coherent story. This stylistic fragmentation

critiques grand narratives, echoing the chaotic unpredictability of the world Thompson inhabits and narrates with a distinctive, anarchic flair—a tendency unapproved by "the man."

In Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," Douglas Quail, a dissatisfied office worker, seeks Rekal's services in the future to implant a false memory of a trip to Mars. However, the procedure reveals hidden memories of his past as a secret agent, leading to a complex web of intrigue and identity. Quail's identity is not something he controls; it is shaped and reshaped by external forces such as Rekal and the government. This lack of control reflects the decentralized subject. The subject experiences a fragmented consciousness, conflicting memories, and identities, leading to a blurred line between what is real and implied, resulting in a fragmented sense of self. The narrative itself is self-reflective, drawing attention to the act of storytelling and the traditional construction of reality, "after all an illusion, no matter how convincing, remained nothing more than an illusion" (Dick 388). The participants of Rekal can write their own stories and create memories that seem more real than reality. By making both the characters and the audience continuously question what is real, Philip K. Dick engages in a metanarrative that encourages the reader to speculate on their realities.

Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49" begins with Oedipa Maas, a California housewife named the executor of her ex-lover Pierce Inverarity's vast estate. In the 1960s, Oedipa's journey takes her across various parts of California, where she uncovers a complex conspiracy involving a secret postal organization known as Tristero. Her interactions with various eccentric characters, including her husband Mucho Maas, lawyer Metzger and psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius, lead to her deeper understanding of the mystery. As she navigates this labyrinthine world, Oedipa grapples with questions about communication and the nature of reality, highlighting the themes of paranoia and the search for truth amidst an overwhelming and

fragmented modern society. The first real clue she uncovers is in a play directed by Randy Driblette called Richard Wharfinger's The Couriers Tragedy. "[He] seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (Pynchon 60), illustrating her search for answers to questions she has yet to discover. The play mentions Trystero, the object of her obsessive search. The Tristero system Oedipa investigates is a vast, elaborate tapestry, with threads connecting in unexpected and obscure ways, not unlike the plots found in Shakespeare's plays. To this sentiment, Driblette replies, "It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare" (Pynchon 60), further causing her confusion and paranoia. The concept of the play becoming parallel to works by William Shakespeare ties into Jean Beaudrillard's idea of hyperreality, where the play as a representation becomes more real than reality itself. Another example of the theory of hyperreality is "for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world" (Pynchon 11). Oedipa's experiences and the Tristero system she uncovers are layered with many symbols and references, in this particular case, the painting titled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre" by Remedios Varo. Oedipa's reaction to the painting is much like the play, prompting readers to reflect on the novel's themes and the nature of their reality. This self-reflexive quality (theory popularized by Hassan) is central to postmodern works, which often encourage readers to think about the act of reading and interpretation. Pynchon also uses pastiche to blend different genres, voices and styles. The novel incorporates detective fiction, sci-fi and conspiracy theory elements, among others. "Either Oedipa [is] orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero" (Pynchon 150) shows a blend that serves to create a complex, multifaceted narrative that reflects the fragmented and interconnected nature of contemporary society.

Another unique example of Postmodern writing can be found in Maus: A Survivor's Tale, My Father Bleeds History, where Art Spiegelman documents his father Vladek's harrowing experiences during the Holocaust. Vladek recounts his evasion of Nazi capture in Nazi-occupied Poland. The narrative alternates between these past events and the present-day interviews conducted by Art in New York. This dual timeline highlights these memories' enduring impact on Vladek and the complexity of capturing and understanding such a traumatic history. Art conducted the present-day interviews in New York. This dual timeline highlights these memories' enduring impact on Vladek and the complexity of capturing and understanding such a traumatic history. Art's frequent interruptions and questions emphasize the metafictional nature of the work, blending historical recounting with the challenges of storytelling. One of the key panels in Maus is where Art interrupts Vladek and asks, "Jewish Police?" (Spiegelman 87), to which he responds, "Yes-with big sticks" (Spiegelman 87). This bit is an exemplar of the sporadic pop of panels showing Spiegelman interviewing his father amidst a story of great peril, and antisemitism is increasingly meta. Vladek's narrative is frequently interrupted by Art's questions and commentary, bringing attention to the storytelling. This interaction tells the story and makes the reader aware of the act of recording and interpreting history, a primarily Historiographic metafictional tendency theorized by postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon. Spiegelman's use of anthropomorphic characters, with Jews depicted as mice and Nazis as cats, serves to underscore the dehumanization endured during the Holocaust while providing a stark visual metaphor for the narrative. Another metafictional moment is the panel with an emotionally exhausted Vladek saying, "Well... it's enough for today. Yes, Artie" (Spiegelman 91), a poignant moment where the story has to stop because the narrator is tired and the painful recounting of his reality has left him feeling unable to continue. The narratives "real" characters, jumping between

past and present, shows the fragmented natures of memory and history. This reflects the postmodern distrust of cohesive, singular narratives, suggesting that history and memory are complex, fragmented, and influenced by the present as much as the past.

In Leslie Marmon Silko's "From Ceremony," Tayo, a young mixed-race Laguna Pueblo World War II veteran, returns home to the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico from serving in a jungle in the Philippines. Deeply traumatized by his wartime experiences and the death of his cousin, Rocky, he struggles with PTSD and feelings of displacement. Tayo faces immense guilt and grief, compounded by the loss of his beloved uncle, Josiah. The narrative reveals Tayo's mental and emotional turmoil as he attempts to reintegrate into civilian life. Silko illustrates Tayo's journey towards healing and redemption through the reconnection with his cultural heritage and indigenous rituals, highlighting themes of cultural identity, the importance of tradition and the healing power of storytelling. This postmodern approach not only underscores the fragmented nature of Tayo's identity but also reflects the broader disjunctions and displacements experienced by Indigenous communities. The most devastating part of the text is when Tayo uses the healing powers of storytelling to keep up the strength of those performing a death march. "He made a story for all of them, a story to give them strength" (Silko 327). Tayo and the corporal carried a fellow soldier, Rocky, who was seriously injured as they were made to march in the rain. The death march is an immoral and grotesque method of torture aimed to break the spirit of the individual, here, who once thought it would be a good idea to join the army. The fear, emotional trauma, and physical exertion could only be made tolerable, Tayo thought, by means of distraction. So, his words profoundly affected them because they gave them something else to think about. Tayo's stories most affected the corporal. In fact, we hear from the corporal's internal monologue that "the words gathered inside him and gave him

strength" (Silko 327). Evolutionarily, homo sapiens sat around the fire and told each other tales making the act of seeking stories inherent. This absorption of content has a soothing effect on the individual, and Tayo's culture and indigenous roots hold this art form in very high regard. Thus, he gave them all that he could give within the limitations of the situation so he could bring them a little comfort. In a postmodern fashion, Silko challenges conventional structures and affirms the transformative potential of cultural narratives in restoring a sense of wholeness.

In conclusion, these works exemplify peak postmodernism, serving as prime examples of the genre. While Toni Morrison and Philip K. Dick delve into individual concepts such as race relations and questioning reality, Hunter S. Thompson and Kurt Vonnegut inspire a broader examination of the social and psychological beliefs of Americans. Their ability to weave deeper meanings into their stories makes them the pinnacle of their form. While Thomas Pynchon, Art Spiegelman and Leslie Marmon Silko all have distinct narrative styles and thematic concerns, they all share an exploration of identity and heritage, showing their characters attempting to deal with the traumas of the past through story-telling and recording. Literature provides the foundation, and postmodernism offers a critical lens, highlighting the inherent flaws in society as a reflection of human imperfection. Postmodernism serves as the cynical, critical friend to literature, celebrating humanity while challenging the pretenses we have become accustomed to. It presents familiar things in new ways, rarely introducing something entirely new but instead prompting us to rethink what we already know. It is with great care that we must read works by authors like Octavia E. Butler, Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter S. Thompson, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Art Spiegelman, and Leslie Marmon Silko to understand that identity is a construct, memory and history are manufactured, war is hell, drugs are treacherous,

and racism can be insidious. These authors remind us of the complexities of reality, urging us to question and engage more deeply with the world around us.

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