

The Pitfalls of Postmodernist Criticism: Identifying the Gaps in Analysis of Contemporaneous Literature

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When discussing postmodernism, critics Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon agree on very little. Jameson laments the lack of originality and individualism in post-World War II literature, while Hutcheon celebrates postmodernism's capacity to develop new stories by bending history to serve its narratives. The first of two things these two disparate critics agree upon is that no one may easily define postmodernism itself. In his 1983 essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson claims that "[t]he concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today" (1). Hutcheon, in her 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, declares, "Of all the terms bandied about in current cultural theory, postmodernism must be the most over and under-defined" (3). In their attempts to pin down the postmodern period, both authors skirt around offering a true definition and instead provide readers with a framing lens through which they may view postmodern works. This approach is very much akin to—and just as frustrating as—US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's non-definition of hardcore pornography: "I know it when I see it" (*Jacobellis*). The lack of concrete classifications for postmodernism from Jameson and Hutcheon requires scholars to piece together the positions of these critics from their respective essays.

Jameson asserts that postmodernism only emerged after the highly original and individual voices of modernism were claimed. The development of modernism into postmodernism was not spontaneous, but was brought about as "the age of cor-

porate capitalism" destroyed individualism by way of mass-culture and –consumerism (4). Therefore, according to Jameson, postmodernist writers must engage in pastiche—"blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor"—of modernist styles in order to assume any façades of originality (3). Hutcheon declares postmodernism a paradox, something that is only easily defined by what it is not, through "negativized rhetoric"—which she also refers to as "the rhetoric of rupture"—using terms such as "discontinuity, decentering, and so on" (3, 20). The paradoxical nature of postmodernism lends itself to the genre Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" (5). This genre consists of purely self-insistent fiction, which is to say that its stories exist independently of any actual reality and yet, paradoxically, draw heavily upon the personalities and events of the past in service to their narratives. Thus, we see the second point on which Jameson

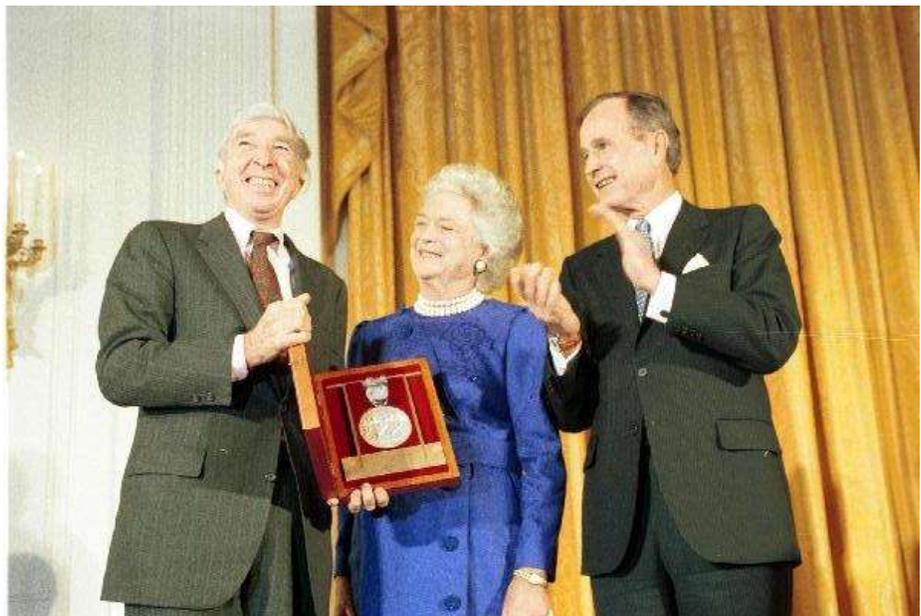


Figure 4 John Updike with First Lady Barbara Bush and President George H. W. Bush at awards ceremony for the Medal of Arts at the White House, 17 Nov. 1989. Photo Credit: George Bush Presidential Library. Image available at Wikimedia Commons.

and Hutcheon concur: that postmodernism uses the past to suit its own purposes, whether pastiche or historiographic metafiction. But where does this definition leave those works of fiction that are grounded in reality and do not delve into the past for content?

Most, being so far removed from the Lost Generation, certainly could not be considered modernist, and with so many works of contemporaneous literature—that is, set in the same era in which it is written, without the use of the nostalgic and historiographic tropes identified by Jameson and Hutcheon—spread out over seventy years of postmodernism, addressing them as a new period is out of the question. Scholars have only one answer, then: to admit that current postmodern thought has left large cracks through which works of literature written in and about their present times, without utilizing or revising history, have fallen. In order for society and academia to fully understand—and possibly move past—postmodernism these gaps must be acknowledged and analyzed. John Updike's short story, "Separating," is a prime example of this unaddressed postmodern genre.

Published in 1975, Updike's piece is the story of a couple who have finally decided to tell their children about their impending divorce. Its characters, being upper class and—presumably—white, would fit well in modernist literature; Richard Maple fits perfectly into the niche of Aristotelian hero: he is from the upper echelon of society, influential, with character flaws which are not too remote to destroy readers' sympathy. However, "Separating" bears enough postmodernist attributes to place it firmly within that period. The story is rife with materialism to the extent that it drives the narrative.

The Maples have just installed a new tennis court on their property, and it stands unfinished, a testament to Richard and Joan's failed marriage and flagrant wasting of money. Other various luxuries are casually referenced throughout the text, such as sabbaticals in Europe, camps, "lobster and champagne" dinners, and rock concerts (Updike 2269). Doubling down on this rampant consumerism, the children are frequently described as inanimate objects or concepts:

Joan reminds Richard that "[t]hey're not just some corporate obstacle to [his] freedom," and John exclaims, "We're just little things you had" (2269, 2271). Later, Joan describes telling Dickie about the divorce as "do[ing]" him, to which

Richard responds with an even more dehumanizing, "I'll do it" (2273). Although there is frequent insistence on the children's having separate identities, that the characters need to insist in the first place is telling: the concept of their individualism "is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade [them] that they possessed unique personal identit[ies]" (Jameson 4). There is no evidence anywhere in the text that would lead readers to believe it takes place outside of the mid-1970s.

Judith's "stories of bomb scares" during her study abroad in England fit nicely with the United Kingdom's political landscape during this period (Updike 2270). According to the *Canterbury Times* article, "University of Kent Expert Professor Feargal Cochrane: Canterbury's Bomb Scare and Northern Ireland," that was exactly when "the Provisional IRA [Irish Republic Army] exported their bombing campaign to Britain," and "in the peak year of violence, 1972, the death rate [in Northern Ireland] was an average of 1.3 per day." Jameson argues that postmodernism cannot accept its own present. He writes, "the very style of nostalgia films [is] invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience" (6). It is important to note that while Jameson is only questioning the ability of postmodern culture to live wholly in the present in the above passage, he does not back down from this argument. Therefore, it is acceptable to classify this as a concrete statement from the critic on the nature of postmodernism. The contemporariness of stories like Updike's "Separating" begs the question: is the past truly necessary in postmodern fiction? To insist that postmodern fiction draw from the past is to give in, primarily, to Jameson's pessimistic outlook on its nature. If postmodernists are "condemned to live in a perpetual present for which there is no conceivable future," then theorists cannot even so much as create a new period for contemporaneous fiction within the postmodern period, as creating something new would push analysis past the postmodern and over "the horizon" that Jameson argues will never be reached (7). Contemporaneous literature was inarguably more popular in pre-World War II periods, thus making its presence in the postmodern that of a somewhat problematic outlier for which theorists have yet to account.

It is important, then, to identify why contemporaneous fiction has not been as popular since the modernist era, and why Jameson and Hutcheon believe that postmodern fiction relies on historical play. Luckily, these questions inevitably have the same answer. The early decades of the postmodern period were full of significant changes that altered the American sociopolitical landscape. With the economy booming after World War II, and the G.I. Bill allowing returned veterans the chance to finish their educations or start businesses, America began making slow progress toward an inclusive policy of diversity, allowing the stories and experiences of non-Whites, non-Christians, non-heterosexuals, and non-males mainstream circulation. For the first time, minority writers were able to share their stories without a limited audience, and they had many tales to tell; they played catch up with centuries of literature focused outside their spectrums of experience, making sure to retell history as they had seen it. The emergent postmodern movement dove into nostalgia and historiographic metafiction in order to offer up vibrant novels and poetry that were truer than history. Thus, the postmodern face Jameson and Hutcheon saw and critiqued dripped heavily with such historical play and allowed contemporaneous fiction to slip past quietly, and unnoticed. The gaps left by currently accepted postmodern academic theories are not difficult to identify, but they will not be as easy to close.

Such an action, as previously stated, will require scholars to admit that postmodernists are capable of embracing the present as it is, without utilizing the historical play that Jameson and Hutcheon argue defines their work. In order to accept contemporaneous literature, such as “Separating,” as postmodern, scholarship must recognize the paradox of denying it as such: if

postmodernism describes more than literature, art, and film—if it describes culture—then those who live in it have, by necessity, been shaped by it. Writers, then, who have lived and worked over the last seven decades, must be considered postmodern; just as they shape their works, the period, in turn, shapes them. The simplest solution to the problem of the definitional gap is to cover the gaps broadly, with an explanation or definition such as the above, so that contemporaneous literature is held in as full regard as its nostalgic and historiographic cohorts. Admittedly, this argument does nothing to solve the problem of finding the next period in American literature. However, if it will allow postmodern authors to accept the present, then perhaps it will also aid them in sallying forth into the future.

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