

A Very Brief Overview of Contemporary Literature

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In the early 20th century, when the idea that God is dead was first introduced into the general culture, it caused infinite anguish and a great sense of loss. Writers and artists, and then people in general began to question the very meaning of life, and finally arrived at the conclusion that, if there is no God, life is inherently meaningless. Objective truth does not exist; all we have to rely on is our own perspective – our own truth – since that is all we can see.

Most of the literature written before World War II (most notably T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) dealt with the issue of how people could go on living with these realizations.

By the end of World War II, though, these ideas had been culturally (although not necessarily individually) assimilated. After the atrocities of the war, it wasn't so hard to accept the idea that there was no benevolent God watching over every little sparrow, and life had been thrown away on too large a scale for people to deceive themselves that it had any real meaning. Even in the midst of their joy and relief that the war was over, the predominant attitude was disillusionment: "Okay, so God is dead and life is meaningless. Now what?"

In the aftermath of a war whose actions and results were almost incomprehensible, writers found themselves with new dilemmas: the pre-war world was gone, and a whole new world had taken its place. Postwar writers concerned themselves not so much with moaning over the loss of God, but with how to find ways to cope with a world in which the only constant was change. And as life changed ever more and ever more rapidly, literature changed with it.

Contemporary literature is difficult to characterize because it reflects contemporary life and culture, which is rapidly changing and full of contradictions. But there are certain trends which stand out. (These are generalizations, remember; there are exceptions.)

First, contemporary literature is no longer "innocent," but ironic. It reflects our political, social, and personal disillusionment, and no longer dares to believe it can create anything new. It can only cast the old in new forms. In the postscript to "The Name of the Rose," Umberto Eco explains:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this she will have received a declaration of love all the same.

Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already sad, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony ... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

Some writers (although not all), in fact, believe that innovation is no longer possible. There are only so many ideas and combinations of ideas, and they've all been used. All that's left is to imitate, in as fresh a way as possible, what the past has left us. As an example, critic Fredric Jameson points to *Star Wars*:

...One of the most important cultural experiences of the generations that grew up from the '30s to the '50s was the Saturday afternoon serial of the Buck Rogers type – alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliffhanger at the end whose miraculous resolution

was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon. *Star Wars* reinvents this experience ...[it] satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again.

An increasing number of novels and plays are set in the past, but their events are seen with contemporary cynicism; notable examples are Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*, and Charlie Frazier's novel, *Cold Mountain*.

A second trend in contemporary literature is a new cynicism about the role of art and literature itself. For previous generations, literature and other arts were meant by their creators to be "anti-Establishment" – that is, to repudiate and subvert established values and traditions. In other words, Art set itself apart from Society, seeing the masses as people who needed to be enlightened, but who were so bound by social and religious tradition and apathy that they probably couldn't be. Many contemporary writers and artists still feel this way, but increasingly, the line between "High" and "Low" culture is hard to distinguish, since the mass media co-opts art and images for its own so quickly, and since "serious" writers no longer limit themselves to the drawing rooms of Henry James and Jane Austen, but often set their novels in seedy, B-movie locations and surround their characters with the paraphernalia of the consumer culture. As Kirk Vardenoe and Adam Gopnik, the directors of *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, have written, "In the age of Joe Isuzu, a hardened knowingness about the value-emptied amorality of media culture was, far from being the preserve of a small cadre of vanguard thinkers, the sour, commonplace cynicism of the whole commercial culture."

In a third trend, contemporary literature accepts as given the idea, handed down from the early 20th century, that everything we know is dependent on our perspective. I see things one way, and you see them another. Thus, since there is no truly objective observer, there is no such thing as "Truth." There is only my truth and your truth, and those can change at any moment with the addition of more facts.

But contemporary literature takes this idea a step or two further, calling into question facts themselves, and arguing that "facts" are unreliable, influenced by culture, historical perspective, language games, and other undiscovered or deliberately omitted facts. Thus, contemporary literature argues, two contradictory "truths" can (and often do) exist side by side.

Because of this ability to encompass contradictions, contemporary literature, like contemporary society, sometimes seems schizophrenic. Even as it questions and denigrates the use and value of language, it uses language carefully and precisely to illustrate its ideas. Even as it documents fragmentation and disintegration, it draws all the fragments into a cohesive whole.

Even as it celebrates human diversity and laments human alienation, it reveals the universality of human character and emotion.