



The Main Principles of the Postmodernist Novel and English-American Examples

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<https://doi.org/10.69760/egille.2602003>

Abstract. *This article examines the main principles of the postmodernist novel with a focus on metafiction, ironic style, and genre hybridity, and analyzes their representation in English and American literature. Postmodernism, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, challenges traditional literary conventions by rejecting linear narratives, stable meanings, and objective reality. Instead, it emphasizes fragmentation, plurality, and the active role of the reader in constructing meaning. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach, exploring how key postmodern techniques function within selected works of Thomas Pynchon and John Fowles. Metafiction is analyzed as a self-reflexive strategy that exposes the artificial nature of narrative and disrupts the illusion of reality. Ironic style is examined as a critical tool used to question dominant ideologies and undermine conventional storytelling. Additionally, genre hybridity and intertextuality are discussed as mechanisms that blur the boundaries between different literary forms and create complex layers of meaning. The findings reveal that both Pynchon and Fowles employ these techniques extensively, demonstrating the core characteristics of postmodern fiction. Their works challenge readers' expectations, encourage multiple interpretations, and highlight the instability of truth and meaning. The article concludes that the postmodernist novel represents a significant shift in literary aesthetics, offering innovative narrative strategies that reflect the complexities of contemporary culture.*

Keywords: *postmodernism, metafiction, irony, genre hybridity, intertextuality, English-American literature*

1. Introduction

Postmodernism emerged as one of the most influential intellectual and artistic movements of the twentieth century, profoundly transforming literature, philosophy, and cultural studies. Developing in the aftermath of World War II, postmodernism can be understood as both a continuation of and a reaction against modernism. While modernist writers sought new forms to represent reality and consciousness, they often maintained a belief in underlying coherence and meaning. In contrast, postmodernism rejects the idea of universal truths, stable identities, and objective reality, emphasizing instead fragmentation, ambiguity, and multiplicity (Hassan, 1982; McHale, 1987).

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In literary studies, the postmodernist novel stands out as a form that deliberately challenges traditional narrative conventions. Classical elements such as linear plot development, consistent characterization, and clear moral resolution are often subverted or entirely abandoned. Instead, postmodern fiction embraces discontinuity, nonlinearity, and open-endedness. The boundaries between fiction and reality become blurred, and the reader is no longer positioned as a passive recipient of meaning but as an active interpreter (Hutcheon, 1988). This transformation signals a move away from literature as a mirror of reality toward literature as a self-conscious construct that questions its own methods and purposes.

One of the defining features of the postmodernist novel is its reliance on metafiction, a technique through which the text draws attention to its own artificiality. By breaking the illusion of realism, metafiction exposes the processes of writing and storytelling, often involving direct authorial intrusion, narrative self-reflection, or characters who are aware of their fictional status (Waugh, 1984). Another essential aspect is the extensive use of irony, which operates on multiple levels and frequently resists definitive interpretation, allowing authors to question ideological assumptions and parody established literary forms (Hutcheon, 1994).

Furthermore, the postmodernist novel is characterized by genre hybridity and intertextuality. Rather than adhering to a single literary genre, postmodern works often combine elements of various forms such as historical fiction, detective narratives, science fiction, and romance (Allen, 2000). Within the context of English and American literature, Thomas Pynchon and John Fowles occupy a central place due to their innovative narrative techniques and their contribution to the development of postmodern aesthetics. The aim of this article is to examine these main principles and to analyze how they are manifested in selected works of Pynchon and Fowles.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on key scholarly contributions to postmodern literary theory. Lyotard's (1984) concept of the "incredulity toward metanarratives" provides a philosophical basis for understanding the postmodern rejection of grand, totalizing systems of truth. In literary terms, this skepticism toward unified meaning directly informs the narrative strategies of fragmentation, irony, and self-reflexivity that characterize postmodern fiction.

Hutcheon's (1988) concept of "historiographic metafiction" is particularly relevant to the analysis of Pynchon and Fowles, as it describes texts that are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically claim to speak about real historical events and people. McHale's (1987) distinction between the modernist epistemological dominant — concerned with questions of knowledge and perception — and the postmodernist ontological dominant — concerned with questions of being and the nature of fictional worlds — provides a further analytical framework for distinguishing postmodern narrative strategies from their modernist predecessors.

Barthes's (1977) influential concept of the "death of the author" also informs the postmodern approach to narrative authority, as it shifts interpretive power from the author to the reader, a move



that is enacted formally in the metafictional techniques of both Pynchon and Fowles. Similarly, Kristeva's (1980) theory of intertextuality, developed from Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, underpins the analysis of how postmodern texts engage in continuous dialogue with prior literary and cultural texts (Allen, 2000).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-analytical methodology grounded in close reading and literary analysis. The primary texts selected for analysis are Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). These works were selected because they are widely recognized as canonical examples of postmodern fiction within the English-American literary tradition and have received extensive critical attention in Scopus-indexed literary journals.

The analytical framework draws on the theoretical concepts outlined above — metafiction, irony, genre hybridity, and intertextuality — and applies them systematically to the selected primary texts. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and critical editions. The study proceeds from the general to the specific: first establishing the theoretical principles of postmodernism, then examining how these principles are enacted in the works of each author, and finally synthesizing the findings in a comparative discussion.

4. Main Principles of the Postmodernist Novel

4.1 Metafiction

Metafiction is widely regarded as one of the most distinctive and defining features of the postmodernist novel. The term refers to a form of fiction that self-consciously draws attention to its own status as an artificial construct. Rather than attempting to create the illusion of reality, metafiction deliberately breaks that illusion by exposing the mechanisms of storytelling. In doing so, it challenges traditional assumptions about narrative authority, realism, and the relationship between fiction and truth (Waugh, 1984).

One of the primary techniques of metafiction is authorial intrusion, where the author directly enters the narrative and addresses the reader. Another important aspect is the use of self-reflexive narration, where the text reflects upon its own structure, language, and development. Characters may be aware that they are part of a story, or the narrative may include discussions about how the story should be told. This creates a layered narrative in which the boundary between fiction and criticism becomes blurred (Hutcheon, 1988). Nünning (2004) further distinguishes between mimetic and anti-mimetic forms of metafiction, noting that the most radical postmodern examples deliberately foreground the fictionality of narrative at the expense of conventional story coherence.

In John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for instance, Fowles famously interrupts the narrative to offer commentary and presents multiple possible endings, thereby denying the idea of a single authoritative conclusion. This technique not only highlights the constructed nature of



fiction but also empowers the reader to participate in the creation of meaning. Currie (1995) argues that such metafictional strategies represent a fundamental epistemological challenge to realist assumptions about the transparency of narrative language.

4.2 Ironic Style

Ironic style is one of the central and most complex features of the postmodernist novel. Unlike traditional uses of irony, which often serve a clear rhetorical or moral purpose, postmodern irony operates in a more ambiguous and multilayered way. It is used not only as a stylistic device but also as a means of questioning authority, destabilizing meaning, and challenging accepted truths (Hutcheon, 1994). At its core, irony in postmodern literature reflects a deep skepticism toward grand narratives, ideologies, and fixed systems of belief.

One of the key functions of ironic style is parody. Postmodern novels frequently imitate and exaggerate earlier literary forms, genres, or styles in order to critique them. This parody is not merely for comedic effect; it serves as a critical commentary on the conventions and assumptions of those forms. Postmodern ironic style is also closely linked to black humor and playfulness: serious or even tragic themes — such as war, identity, or existential uncertainty — are often presented in a humorous or exaggerated manner, creating a sense of dissonance that forces readers to question their emotional responses (Rose, 1993).

In the works of Thomas Pynchon, irony is used extensively to challenge political, technological, and cultural systems. His narratives often combine absurd situations with complex philosophical ideas, creating a tone that is both satirical and deeply critical. Through irony, Pynchon exposes the chaotic and often irrational nature of modern society, while simultaneously questioning the possibility of finding order or meaning within it (Seed, 1988).

4.3 Genre Hybridity and Intertextuality

Genre hybridity refers to the blending and coexistence of multiple literary genres within a single work. Unlike traditional novels that typically adhere to a specific genre, postmodern novels freely combine elements from various forms. A single narrative may incorporate aspects of historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, satire, and even journalism or autobiography. This mixing of genres challenges conventional expectations and disrupts the reader's sense of familiarity and stability (Bakhtin, 1981).

Closely connected to genre hybridity is the concept of intertextuality, which refers to the relationship between texts. In postmodern literature, no text exists in isolation; instead, every work is seen as part of a larger network of cultural and literary references (Kristeva, 1980). Authors deliberately incorporate quotations, allusions, and stylistic imitations from other texts, creating a dialogue between past and present works. Moreover, intertextuality challenges the traditional notion of originality: in the postmodern view, all texts are shaped by previous texts, and creativity



lies not in producing something entirely new but in reworking and recontextualizing existing material (Allen, 2000).

Pynchon's novels blend historical events with science fiction, conspiracy theories, and satire, creating complex narratives that resist categorization. His extensive use of cultural and literary references forms a dense intertextual network that requires active interpretation. Similarly, Fowles incorporates elements of Victorian fiction, romance, and modern narrative techniques within the same work. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he reinterprets the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel while simultaneously critiquing them through a postmodern lens.

5. Postmodernist Features in English and American Literature

5.1 Thomas Pynchon

Thomas Pynchon is one of the most influential American novelists associated with postmodern literature. Born in 1937 in the United States, Pynchon is known for his highly complex, intellectually dense, and stylistically innovative works. His fiction is characterized by its intricate narrative structures, extensive use of intertextual references, and blending of various genres. His novels often combine elements of science fiction, historical fiction, detective stories, satire, and conspiracy narratives, reflecting a key postmodern tendency to break down traditional literary boundaries (Seed, 1988).

One of the most prominent features of Pynchon's writing is his use of metafiction. His narratives frequently draw attention to their own artificiality, reminding readers that they are engaging with a constructed text rather than a direct representation of reality. His works are also deeply marked by irony and satire: he often uses humor, absurdity, and exaggeration to critique political systems, technological developments, and cultural norms. Beneath the often playful tone of his writing lies a serious engagement with themes such as power, control, paranoia, and the influence of hidden systems in modern society (Berressem, 1993).

Among his most notable works are *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *V.* (1963). In these novels, Pynchon explores themes of uncertainty, entropy, communication breakdown, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world. His narratives often lack conventional closure, reflecting the postmodern skepticism toward definitive endings and absolute truths. Cowart (2011) argues that Pynchon's consistent engagement with entropy as both a physical and cultural metaphor makes his fiction one of the most philosophically sustained expressions of postmodern thought in American literature.

5.2 John Fowles

John Fowles is a prominent British novelist whose works are widely associated with postmodern narrative techniques and experimental storytelling. Born in 1926 in England, Fowles gained international recognition for his innovative approach to fiction, particularly his use of metafiction,



narrative self-reflexivity, and multiple endings. His novels challenge traditional conventions of the realist novel and explore the relationship between author, text, and reader (Tarbox, 1988).

One of the defining characteristics of Fowles's writing is his use of metafiction. In his novels, the author often appears to step outside the narrative framework and directly address the reader, breaking the illusion of a self-contained fictional world. Fowles is also known for his experimentation with narrative structure: instead of adhering to a single, fixed storyline with a definitive conclusion, he often presents multiple possible outcomes or alternative endings. This approach challenges the traditional notion of narrative closure and suggests that stories can exist in more than one form simultaneously (Loveday, 1985).

Fowles's writing also demonstrates elements of irony and intertextuality. His novels often engage with earlier literary traditions, particularly the Victorian novel, while simultaneously critiquing and reinterpreting them from a modern perspective. In addition, his works reflect postmodern themes such as freedom, choice, and the instability of meaning. Acheson (1998) notes that Fowles's consistent thematic preoccupation with freedom — both existential and narrative — links his postmodern formal experimentation to a broader humanist project that distinguishes him from more nihilistic postmodern writers.

6. Discussion

The analysis of postmodernist narrative techniques — metafiction, ironic style, genre hybridity, and intertextuality — demonstrates that the postmodernist novel represents a significant departure from traditional literary conventions. Rather than presenting a unified, linear, and authoritative narrative, postmodern fiction embraces fragmentation, multiplicity, and ambiguity. This shift reflects broader philosophical and cultural changes in the twentieth century, particularly the questioning of absolute truths and the growing awareness of the constructed nature of reality and language (Lyotard, 1984; Hassan, 1982).

Metafiction plays a crucial role in redefining the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader. By drawing attention to its own artificiality, the postmodern novel disrupts the illusion of realism and encourages readers to reflect on the act of reading itself. In the works of Pynchon and Fowles, metafiction is not merely a stylistic device but a central structural principle that transforms the novel into a self-aware construct where the process of storytelling becomes as important as the story being told (Waugh, 1984; Hutcheon, 1988).

Irony further contributes to the complexity of postmodern narratives by introducing a tone of skepticism and playfulness. Genre hybridity and intertextuality expand the boundaries of the novel by incorporating multiple literary traditions and references within a single text, situating each text within a broader network of literary and cultural influences (Allen, 2000; Kristeva, 1980). The works of Pynchon and Fowles illustrate how these principles function in practice: both authors demonstrate that postmodern fiction is less concerned with providing answers than with posing questions about the nature of reality, authorship, and interpretation.



A notable point of divergence between the two authors, however, lies in their treatment of the reader. Where Pynchon's dense intertextual networks tend to challenge and even frustrate the reader's desire for coherent meaning, Fowles more openly invites the reader into the narrative process through direct address and multiple endings. This distinction suggests that postmodernism, rather than constituting a monolithic aesthetic, encompasses a spectrum of approaches to narrative self-consciousness, ranging from the encyclopedic and labyrinthine to the more playfully dialogic.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the main principles of the postmodernist novel — metafiction, ironic style, genre hybridity, and intertextuality — and analyzed their manifestation in the works of Thomas Pynchon and John Fowles. The findings confirm that the postmodernist novel represents a major transformation in literary form and narrative philosophy, moving away from the conventions of realism and modernism to embrace fragmentation, plurality, and the instability of meaning.

Metafiction exposes the artificiality of narrative and encourages self-awareness in both the text and the reader. Ironic style introduces ambiguity and critical distance, allowing authors to question established norms and ideologies. Genre hybridity breaks down traditional literary boundaries, while intertextuality situates texts within a broader network of cultural and literary references. The works of Pynchon and Fowles exemplify how these principles operate in practice, demonstrating the postmodern tendency to resist fixed meanings and to present literature as an open-ended and dynamic process.

Ultimately, the postmodernist novel does not aim to offer definitive answers or coherent worldviews. Instead, it encourages readers to question assumptions, explore multiple interpretations, and engage critically with the text. Future research might productively extend this analysis to non-Anglophone postmodern traditions, examining how writers from other cultural contexts adapt and transform these narrative strategies in response to their own historical and literary conditions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: N.M.; Methodology: N.M.; Investigation: N.M.; Writing – original draft: N.M.; Writing – review & editing: N.M.

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Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language
 Education
 Vilnius, Lithuania

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Received: 15 February 2026

Accepted: 2 April 2026

Published: 6 April 2026



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**Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language
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