

Lecture 11

Postmodernism

1. Postmodernism and its main features
2. Ian McEwan and postmodernism
3. Kurt Vonnegut's biography
4. Postmodernism features in Kurt Vonnegut's works

1 Postmodernism and its main features

Postmodernism literature is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. However, unifying features are as follows:

- 1) Instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author avoids the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest.
- 2) Postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction.
- 3) Postmodern novels deal with an inner reality which is constantly at change according to the experiences of the characters. While in modern novels the relation to reality, the attitudes toward it are seen as an experimental reflexion of the inner reality, in postmodern novels this relation represents a refraction of commodified, mass-reproduced discourse and also a return to pleasure and to plot.

Foreign scholars differentiate modernism from postmodernism in the following way:

-modernist fiction foregrounds questions like: What is there to be known? Who knows it? How can I know this world of which I am a part? What are the limits of the knowable? And so on.

-postmodernism foregrounds questions like: Which world is this? What is to be done? Which of my selves is going to do it?

This is a shift from problems of knowing to problems of being.

Divergent attitudes of modernism and postmodernism

postmodernism ***modernism***

Cultural progress is celebrated

Cultural progress is cynically resisted and radically doubted

The truth is sought

The truth is constructed

History is embraced

History is diversified

The plot is rejected

The plot is foregrounded

Crono-topical contextualization is rejected

Crono-topical contextualization is foregrounded

76

2. Ian McEwan ['iən mək'juən] ***and postmodernism***

McEwan was born in Hampshire in 1948. He was educated at the University of Sussex, receiving his degree in English literature in 1970. Considered as a great innovator of

British literature, McEwan published for the first time in 1975 a collection of short stories entitled *First Love Last Rites*. But his best writing came in 2001. *Atonement* is a novel that was named by the *Times Magazine* the best book of 2002, and which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Atonement is a book written in three major parts, with a final denouement from the author. Part one tells the story of one day and night in 1935 at the Tallis family estate north of London, England. It focuses on Briony Tallis, the thirteen-year-old youngest daughter of three, who aspires to be a writer. Briony witnesses a scene between her older sister Cecilia and the son of the family charwoman Robbie Turner. What is an innocent act is greatly misunderstood by the young imagination, and this sets off a series of events with eternal consequences. Part Two takes place five years later. It follows Robbie Turner as he retreats through France as a soldier during the war. The reader has learned he served three years in prison for his crime and is now able to exonerate himself by serving in the army. Part Three picks up the eighteen-year-old Briony who has signed up as a nurse in London. Suffering from guilt for her crime as girl, Briony hopes nursing will act as a penance for her sin. The final section, London, 1999, is a letter from the author to the reader. It is revealed here that the author of the novel is Briony herself.

In *Atonement* the author decides what really happened. That is what fiction is. Fiction doesn't offer certainty, or absolute answers. It is nothing like factual, literal truth. In other words, the truth in *Atonement* is constructed by Briony with the help of the author. This is a postmodern characteristic by definition.

Another postmodern trait in the novel is the presence of history. If in the modern novels history is embraced and treated as such, in postmodern novels it is diversified; it becomes histories, herstory. In McEwan's novel we are faced with herstory, Briony's. She presents us her life, the crime she committed, but also the story of Cecilia's and Robbie's lives.

The story of Briony's life is full of questions concerning herself and others. She is questioning most of all the validity of what she has seen the night when her cousin was raped. The question she's asking herself is What is to be done? She alone decides that she has to accuse Robbie of raping Lola. This thing is ruining two lives, Cecilia's and Robbie's. Later on in the novel, in order to make the things right she decides she has to do something, so she gets a job as a nurse in a hospital, just like her sister. There she begins to write, what becomes by the end of the novel *Atonement*. But will she be forgiven by her family and by her readers? These are questions that remain unanswered.

3. Kurt Vonnegut's biography

Kurt Vonnegut ['kɜ:t 'vɒnigət] was born in Indianapolis, USA, in 1922. Vonnegut emerged as a novelist and essayist in the 1960s. His classics are *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. He is known for his satirical literary style, as well as the science-fiction elements in much of his work. He blended the absurd with pointed social commentary. Vonnegut created his own unique world in each of his

novels and filled them with unusual characters, such as the alien race known as the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

After studying at Cornell University from 1940 to 1942, Kurt Vonnegut enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was sent by the Army to what is now Carnegie Mellon University to study engineering in 1943. The next year, he served in Europe and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. After this battle, Vonnegut was captured and became a prisoner of war.

Questions on Lecture 11

1. What are main features of postmodernism?
2. Who are its representatives?
3. What do you know about Kurt Vonnegut's life?
4. What characteristics of postmodernism can be found in Kurt Vonnegut's literary works?
5. What is the plot of Ian McEwan's novel "Atonement"?

References

1. Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. Second Edition. London: Sage, 2019.
2. Nealon, Jeffrey, and Susan Searls Giroux. *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.
3. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Who Am I This Time/ Welcome to the Monkey House*. London: UK: Panther Books Limited, 2019.
4. *The Penguin Guide to English Literature. Britain and Ireland*. – London, Penguin Books, 1996.
5. *Английская и американская литература / авт.-сост. Н.Л. Утевская*. – 2-е изд., испр. – СПб. : Антология, 2018. – 400 с.
6. Геккер М., Волосова Т, Дорошевич А. *Английская литература: Учебное пособие для IX класса школ с преподаванием ряда предметов на английском языке*. – М.: Просвещение, 2020. – 175 с.
7. *Зарубежная литература XX в. / Под редакцией Андреева Л.Г.* – М.: Высшая школа, 2021.

Allied firebombing of the city and saw the complete devastation caused by it. Vonnegut himself escaped harm only because he, along with other POWs, was working in an underground meat locker making vitamin supplements.

Soon after his return from the war, Kurt Vonnegut married his high school girlfriend, Jane Marie Cox. The couple had three children. He worked several jobs before his writing career took off, including newspaper reporter, teacher, and public relations employee for General Electric. The Vonneguts also adopted his sister's three children after her death in 1958.

Showing Vonnegut's talent for satire, his first novel, *Player Piano*, took on corporate culture and was published in 1952. More novels followed, war remaining a recurring element in his work. One of his best-known works, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, draws some of its dramatic power from his own experiences. The narrator, Billy Pilgrim, is a young soldier who becomes a prisoner of war and works in an underground meat locker, not unlike Vonnegut.

Emerging as a new literary voice, Kurt Vonnegut became known for his unusual writing style—long sentences and little punctuation—as well as his humanist point of view. He continued writing short stories and novels, including *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Jailbird* (1979) and *Deadeye Dick* (1982).

Despite his success, Kurt Vonnegut wrestled with his own personal demons. Having struggled with depression on and off for years, he attempted to take his own life in 1984. Whatever challenges he faced personally, Vonnegut became a literary icon with a devoted following.

His last novel was *Timequake* (1997), which became a best seller despite receiving mixed reviews. Kurt Vonnegut chose to spend his later years working on nonfiction. His last book was *A Man Without a Country*, a collection of biographical essays. In it, he expressed his views on politics and art, and shed more light on his own life. Kurt Vonnegut died in 2007, at the age of 84, in New York city.

4. Characteristic features of postmodernism in Vonnegut's works

Most Vonnegut's works are brilliant examples of the postmodernism trend in literature and they certainly reflect its particular features.

First of all, the characteristic peculiar to postmodernism is sense of **disjunction and desolation**. It appears to this or that extent in all Vonnegut's stories. For example, members of the Fords' family in the story "A big trip up yonder" are all close relatives. But they are in a constant fight for sleeping places in the flat. They are all rivals in the competition for the fortune.

The second feature is "**cool apathy**". It can be observed throughout most stories. His characters aren't concerned about anything and don't show any enthusiasm in anything. Such as the painter in the story "2BRO2B". He is an aloof observer who doesn't want to interfere with anything. 79

Postmodernism is also marked by **intertextuality**. It implies explicit allusions and references to other sources, works. Intertextuality serves as an aspect of the awareness about history and works of art. We can find in his texts mentioning of various titles of literature works, historical events and the Bible. For example, the very title of the story "2BRO2B" is a reference to the famous Hamlet's monologue by W. Shakespeare. One of the main characters of the same story also mentions "the invisible man" which reminds the reader of Herbert Wells' novel of the same name.

What is also inherent in works of postmodernism is **playfulness**. It deals with meanings, words, signs, quotations etc. The author plays with the text and involves the reader in this "game". Purpose of it is to give the reader an opportunity to take part in understanding of the text, to guess what is going on and to assume the developing events. Thus, in the story "2BRO2B" there are several samples that illustrate the wordplay in the text ("My name is Duncan" "And you dunk people?").

We cannot leave out **irony**. It becomes one of the most important stylistic devices in Vonnegut's stories. Thus Wehling in the mentioned above story "2BRO2B" has to choose only one of his triplets to stay alive. So answering the remark that he doesn't sound very happy he says with sad irony: "What man in my shoes wouldn't be happy? All I have to do is pick out which of the triplets is going to live, then deliver my maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan, and come back here with a receipt".

Postmodernism works coolly and ironically expose the **constructedness**. And K. Vonnegut's stories prove it. Constructedness implies the distinct organization of structures. Postmodernism works refuse it and rather support fragmentation, inconsistency and spontaneity. The author puts here constructedness on the foreground. In the story "2BRO2B" this fact finds its realization in the description of the garden "Never, never never had a garden been more formal, been better tended. Every plant had all the loam, light, water, air and nourishment it could use". The whole story ridicules the perfectly constructed and organized society where there were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars, where all diseases as well as old age were conquered. But in such a society people can't perform their main function - to multiply and replenish.

Excessive organization and preciseness are also shown in the way of the character's life in the story "A big trip up yonder". Their life sticks to the same routine for decades: "At six o'clock, they arose again, for it was time for their generation to eat breakfast in the kitchenette. They had twenty minutes in which to eat, but their reflexes were so dulled by the bad night that they had hardly 80

swallowed two mouthfuls of egg-type processed seaweed before it was time to surrender their places to their son's generation”.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that unlike modernist works, Vonnegut's postmodernist stories are not orderly ended, their denouement is quick and unexpected. Vonnegut's stories combine many characteristics of postmodern literature that appear on the level of content, composition, form, usage of artistic devices and relationship between the author and the reader. They allow us to observe the distinctive features that show the border between postmodernism and earlier movements.

References

- 1- History of English Literature. Vol.1. Iss.2. 1945..
- 2- Михальская Н.П., Аникин Г.В. История английской литературы. Учебник для гуманитарных факультетов вузов. – М.: Академия, 2012. – 516 с.
- 3- Михальская, Н. П. История английской литературы: учеб. Для вузов/ Н.П.Михальская. – 3-е изд. – М. : Академия, 2019. – 480 с.
- 4 - Гиленсон, Б.А. История литературы США : учеб. пособие для студентов филол. фак. ун-тов и высш. пед. учеб. заведений. – М. : Академия, 2019. – 703 с.
- 5-История литературы США / гл. ред. Я. Н. Засурский. – М. : ИМЛИ РАН : Наследие, 1997–.
- 6-Луков, Вл.А. История литературы : зарубежная литература от истоков до наших дней : учеб. пособие для вузов. – 7-е изд. – М. Академия, 2019. – 511с.
- 7-Проскурнин, Б.М. История зарубежной литературы XIX века : западноевропейская реалистическая проза : учеб пособие для вузов / Б.М. Проскурнин, Р. Ф. Яшенькина. – 5-е изд. – М. : Флинта : Наука, 2018. – 413 с.
- 8-Путеводитель по английской литературе : пер. с англ. / под ред. М.Дрэббл, Дж.Стрингер. – М. : Радуга, 2018. – 928с.