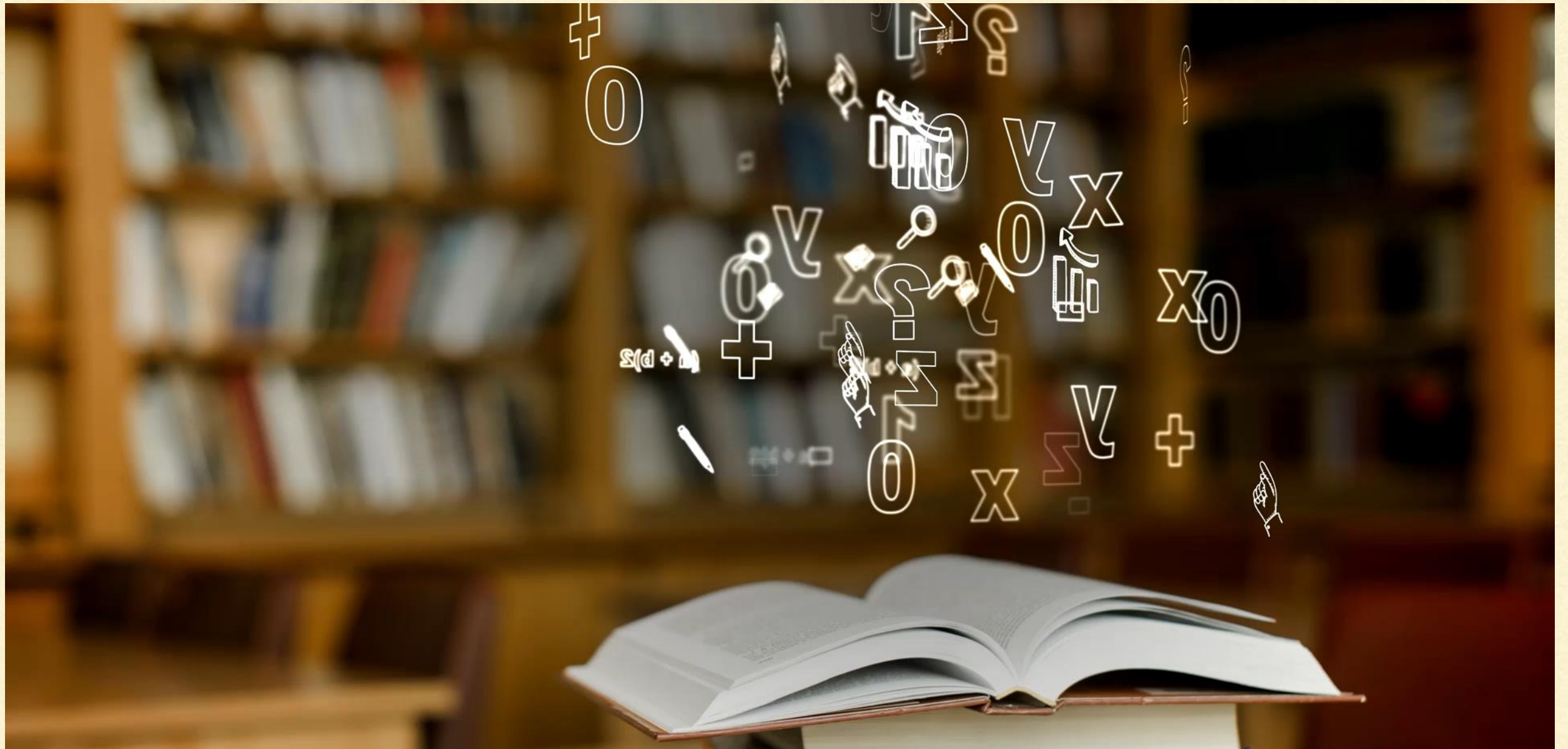




AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTMODERNISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM? WHEN, UNTIL WHEN...APPROACHING THE MAIN QUESTIONS

A DIFFICULT DEFINITION....

- Where *Modern* was a keyword for the first part of the twentieth century, the term *post-Modern* has been widely used to describe the attitudes and creative production which followed the Second World War.
 - ***Post- Modernism almost defies definition.*** Rather, it celebrates ***diversity, eclecticism, and parody*** in all forms of art, from architecture to cinema, from music to literature. All the forms which represent experience are mediated, transformed, and the 'truth' of experience thus becomes even more varied than it has ever been before. (Routledge History of Literature in English)
-

POSTMODERNISM/POSTMODERNITY
A CHALLENGE TO 'REASON'/PROGRESS
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS
CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

a cultural movement which began towards the 1960s and generally questions the basic assumptions of Western philosophy in the modern time, mostly those of the Enlightenment , roughly 17th to 19th century

Notably **the centrality of reason**, “reality”, scientific or historical truth, “progress””

POSTMODERNISM: ITS CHALLENGES

Postmodernism: the cultural movements and authors and general trend that, since the 1960s, have challenged the philosophy and practices of modern arts or literature.

- **In literature: a reaction against** an ordered view of the world and therefore against **fixed ideas about the form and meaning of texts.**
 - breaking down of the distinction between “high” and “low” culture.
 - In its reaction against Modernist ideals such as the autonomy of art and the idea of the canon, postmodern writing and art emphasize devices such as **pastiche and parody and the stylized technique of the antinovel and magic realism.**
 - In criticism: **proliferation of critical theories**, most notably deconstruction (Jacques Derrida, Jonathan Culler)
(Britannica.com)
-

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Post-World War II Era (1945-1960 and after)
 - - Emerged from the trauma and disillusionment of World War II
 - - Reaction to modernist optimism and grand narratives
 - - Skepticism towards universal truths and linear historical progress: Responds to the breakdown of grand narratives (history, religion, faith...) after World War II

POSTMODERNISM/POSTMODERNITY
A CHALLENGE TO 'REASON'/PROGRESS

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS
CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

associated with an **awareness of transitions and transformations in culture and society after World War II** and with the rise of **mass-mediated consumerist popular culture in the 1960s-1970s**

emergence of **cultural hybridity - challenge to the notions of high and low culture** then mixed and contested

- Influenced literature, art, architecture, and social theory worldwide
-

MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

LITERARY CONTINUITIES AND SHIFTS

Postmodernism grew out of and significantly transformed modernist literary approaches.

Contemporary literature and fiction continue to be deeply influenced by postmodernist experimental and self-reflective narrative strategies.

Experimentation with form and narrative structure includes:

fragmentation of narrative,

subjective inner experiences,

multiple perspectives,

rejection of traditional linear narratives,

MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

EXPANDED MODERNIST INNOVATIONS

- - Radical deconstruction of narrative
- - **Extreme fragmentation**
- - **Metafictional awareness**
- - **Explicit questioning of narrative authority**

- **Distinctive Postmodern Elements**
- - Self-reflexive storytelling
- - Blurring of fact and fiction
- - **Irony and playful intertextuality**
- - Rejection of grand narratives

LITERARY POSTMODERNISM

THE KEY ASPECTS

Narrative fragmentation

- - nonlinear storytelling
- - multiple perspectives
- - disruption of traditional narrative coherence

Metafiction: self-conscious storytelling that draws attention to its own artificiality

- - Blurs lines between fiction and reality
- - Often includes narrators who comment on the act of writing

POSTMODERNISM: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS



Postmodern philosophy:

Skepticism and/or relativism and general suspicion of “reason”

Postmodernism is hard to define. Is it a period term, a social diagnosis, a cultural dominant, an anti-aesthetic posture, a philosophical endgame, a hollowing out of time and a new substantiation of space, a sign of political defeat? Postmodernism is all of those, its vagueness as a concept matched by its voracity as a category (A.Gaziorek)

POSTMODERNISM AND THE END OF THE GRANDS RÉCITS /GRAND NARRATIVES

Notable Postmodern Theorists and Writers

- Jean-François Lyotard (*La Condition Postmoderne*, 1979)
 - Jacques Derrida
 - Jean Baudrillard
 - Thomas Pynchon
 - Italo Calvino
 - Jorge Luis Borges
 - Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism or The cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1992
-

POSTMODERNISM: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS



Unsettled question: **postmodernism as both heir to modernism influences** and an open - ended cultural phenomenon/climate/movement which remained **problematically related to Modernism**

Main emphasis on *fiction*

Main critical studies are on fiction (Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale)

POSTMODERN FICTION:

defamiliarises what we take for granted in social and literary convention by means of

- METAFICTION
- PARODY
- PASTICHE
- FANTASY
- MAGIC REALISM
- IT FOCUSES ON TECHNOLOGY/COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS, DOMINANT COMMUNICATIVE SYSTEMS

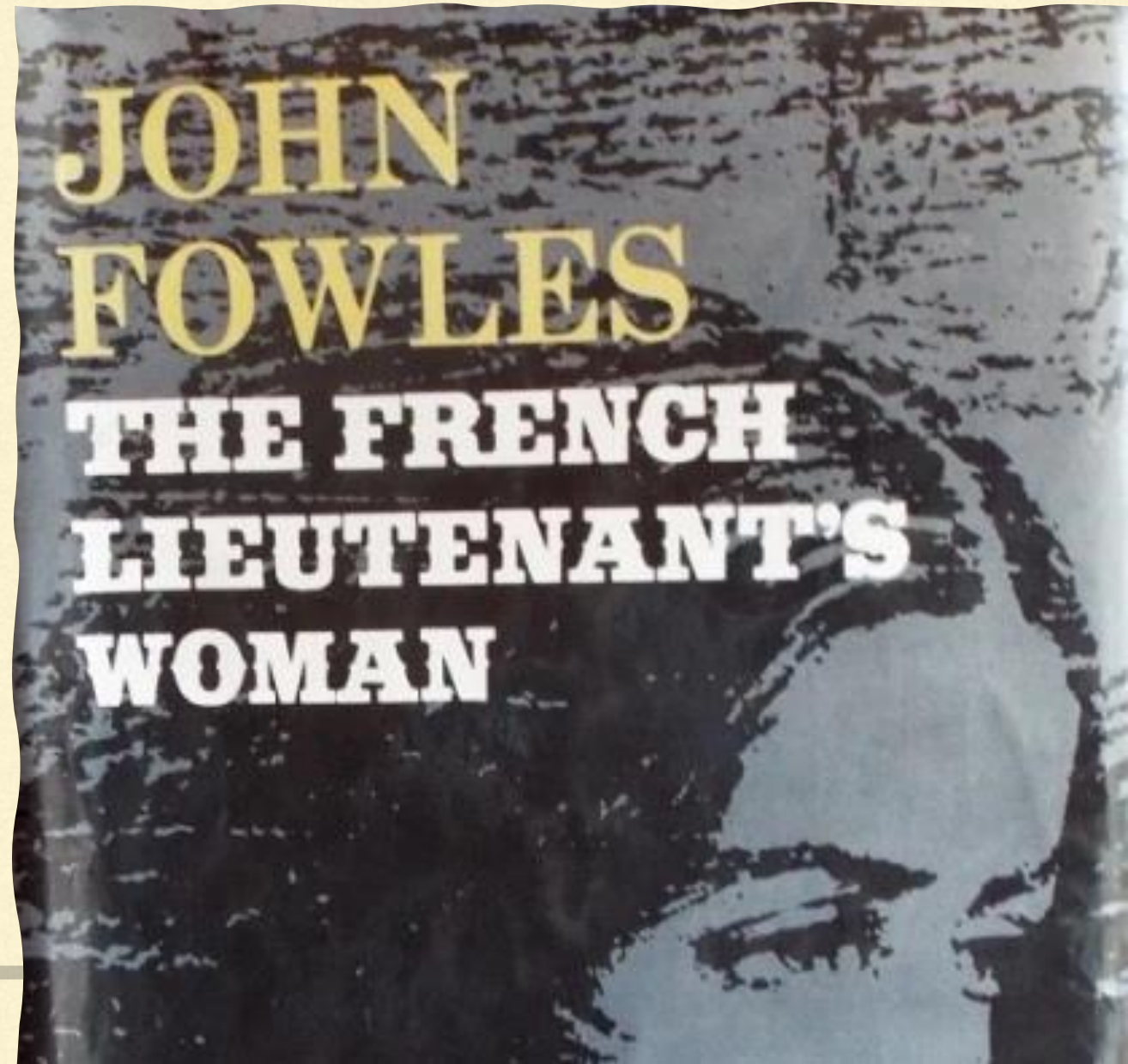
METAFICTION (ATONEMENT !!!)

- *Meta-fiction means, literally, fiction about fiction. It is generally used to indicate fiction, which includes any self-referential element. It makes the structure and creation of the novel as important a feature as its storytelling by calling attention to itself.*
-

THE INTRUSIVE NARRATOR: JOHN FOWLES' THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (1969)

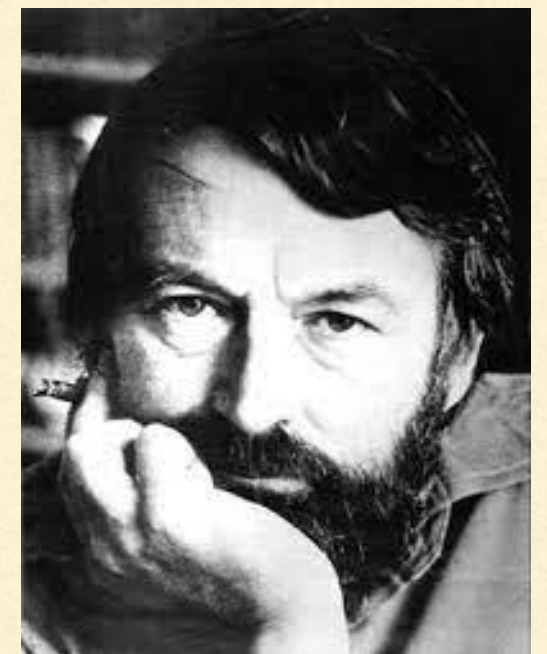


“The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters’ minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (...) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story; that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the world” (ch XIII *TFLT*)

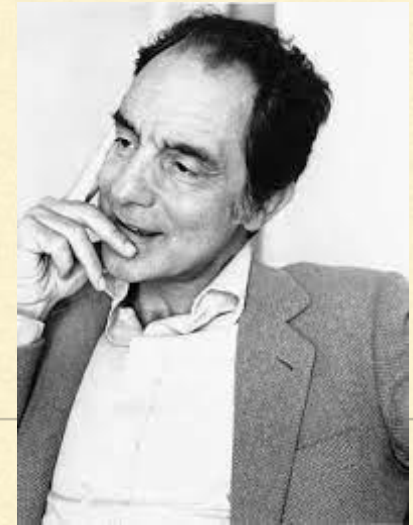


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- The beginning of English Postmodernism: John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)
 - *"The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (...) a convention universally accepted at the time of*

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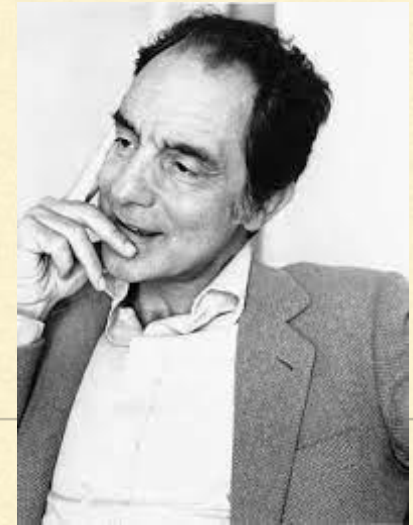


A PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLE: ITALO CALVINO: *SE UNA NOTTE D'INVERNO UN VIAGGIATORE* (1979)

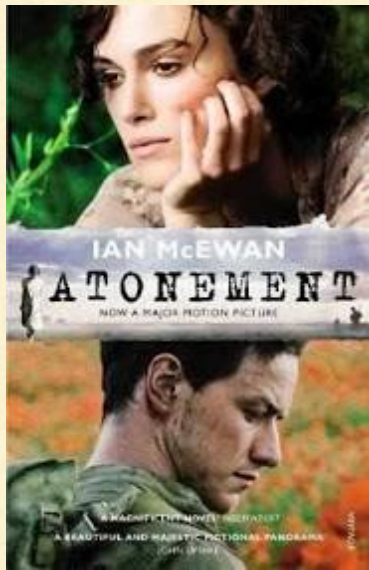


- Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino. Rilassati. Raccogliti. Allontana da te ogni altro pensiero. Lascia che il mondo che ti circonda sfumi nell'indistinto. La porta è meglio chiuderla; di là c'è sempre la televisione accesa. Dillo subito, agli altri: «No, non voglio vedere la televisione!» Alza la voce, se no non ti sentono: «Sto leggendo! Non voglio essere disturbato!» Forse non ti hanno sentito, con tutto quel chiasso; dillo più forte, grida: «Sto cominciando a leggere il nuovo romanzo di Italo Calvino! » O se non vuoi non dirlo; speriamo che ti lascino in pace. Prendi la posizione più comoda: seduto, sdraiato, raggomitolato, coricato. Coricato sulla schiena, su un fianco, sulla pancia. In poltrona, sul divano, sulla sedia a dondolo, sulla sedia a sdraio, sul pouf. Sull'amaca, se hai un'amaca. Sul letto, naturalmente, o dentro il letto. Puoi anche metterti a testa in giù, in posizione yoga. Col libro capovolto, si capisce. Certo, la posizione ideale per leggere non si riesce a trovarla. Una volta si leggeva in piedi, di fronte a un leggio. Si era abituati a stare fermi in piedi. Ci si riposava così quando si era stanchi d'andare a cavallo. A cavallo nessuno ha mai pensato di leggere; eppure ora l'idea di leggere stando in arcioni, il libro posato sulla criniera del cavallo, magari appeso alle orecchie del cavallo con un finimento speciale, ti sembra attraente. Coi piedi nelle staffe si dovrebbe stare molto comodi per leggere; tenere i piedi sollevati è la prima condizione per godere della lettura.
-

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ATONEMENT AS A POSTMODERNIST MASTERPIECE



McEwan's novel perfectly embodies postmodern principles

- - Briony as a metafictional narrator
 - - Multiple narrative perspectives
 - - Blurring of fiction and reality
 - - Self-reflective examination of storytelling and "truth"
-

POSTMODERN FICTION

- Uses METAFICTION* (Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two Birds*, 1939)
 - SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND SELF-REFLEXIVENESS
 - FOREGROUNDS LITERARY CONVENTIONS AND CODES
 - EMPHASIZES INDETERMINACY, OPENNESS, LACK OF CLOSURE, CIRCULARITY
 - As a way of showing the complexity and opacity of contemporary society
-

METAFICTION,: PLAYFULNESS, SELF-REFERENTIALITY, METALITERARINESS

- “Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One Beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.”
- Flann O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 1939



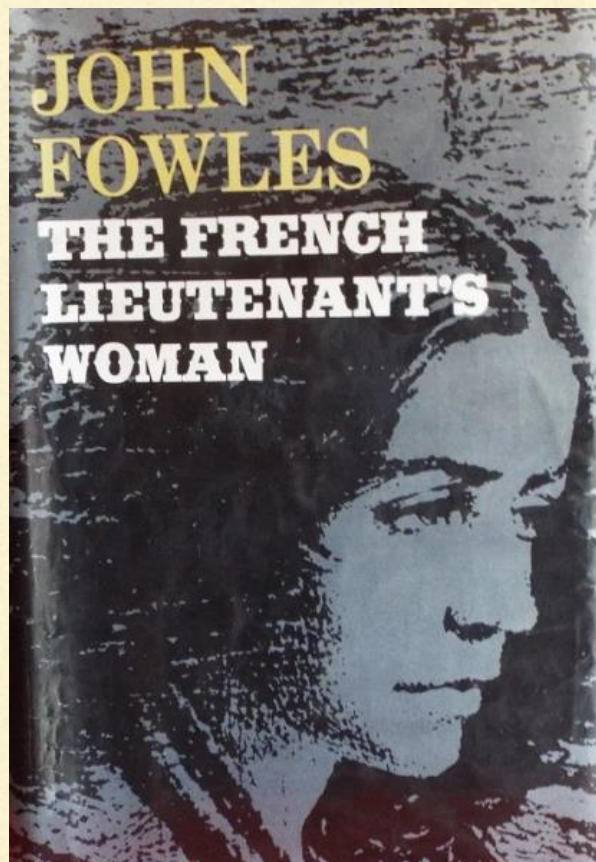
POSTMODERNISM AND “TRADITION”



TS. Eliot: *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: a most influential essay about the importance of tradition: ***iconoclasm, continuity, rewriting***

- Playfulness and inventiveness are not a prerogative of Postmod: see the tradition of playful Modernist inventiveness... Joyce, Beckett
 - Why *Tradition*? Because the whole century engages with a problematization of tradition
-

- John Fowles *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is a meta-fictional novel
- attempt to combine the scope and solidity of Victorian fiction with experimental narrative devices
- technique of recreating the Victorian novel with a critical perspective and a sense of parody.
- the overall impression is the recreation of a Victorian novel through the conventions of realism and the use of a style, language and narrative structure that replicates the great mid- and late-Victorian novels



TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

- The Sixties and the revival of self-conscious literary literary fiction:
 - John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as a seminal novel:
 - Writing as artifice, the fictiveness of fiction is foregrounded: the novel incorporates its own creative process
 - the (Victorian) literary tradition as a canon that invites both challenging and reviving: how the novel revives and plays with the conventions of Victorian fiction
 - And....the Neo-Victorian novel is inaugurated
 - The author's consciousness dominates the narrative: metafiction as a strategy of seduction
-

-
- The critical distance of the present which reappraises the Victorian past:
 - epigraph on the head of each chapter. To make readers skeptically aware of multiplicity of Victorian voices, John Fowles has made use of the technique of adding epigraphs
 - The intrusive narrator!



-
- **THE NOVEL'S EXPERIMENTALISM:**
 - **METAFICTION**
 - **AUTHORIAL INTRUSIVENESS (THE AUTHOR) - NARRATOR BECOMES A CHARACTER:**
The novelist enters into the structure of the narrative and talks to other characters, discusses their problem and settles the course of their actions)
 - *The narrator himself says that he is narrating; he himself is author in the fiction. His technique of giving his own identity being inside the whole fiction is one of the most important aspects of the quality of meta-fiction.*
 - **USE OF EPIGRAPHS (CRITICAL DISTANCE, INTERTEXTUAL ALLUSIVENESS, PARODY...)**
 - These citations in epigraphs are suggestive of different Victorian contradictory voices, which are historically important
 - **MULTIPLE ENDINGS**
-

-
- **ABANDONMENT OF LITERARY OMNISCIENCE**
 - **SUBVERSION OF LITERARY CONVENTIONS THROUGH:**
 - **PARODY, IRONY, DISCONTINUITY, ANACHRONISM
(DISTORTIONS OF NARRATIVE TIME)**
 - **BLURRING OF LITERARY GENRES,**
 - **PASTICHE**
 - **(AUTHORIAL) AMBIVALENCE.**
-

-
- The novel engages with **Victorian concerns** such as
 - - **evolution** combining the protagonist's amateurish interest for Darwin's evolutionary theories and Sarah's courageous existential evolution and choice of freedom
 - - **social injustice** drawing our attention to the gulf between the rich and the poor, to the lot of women and to the male chauvinism that ensured the law, of patriarchal society.
 - The distortion of narrative time, Fowles' intrusions and overt interventions create a **sense of anachronism, discontinuity, shift from past to present**:
 - Challenge to Victorian conventions of the well-made novel: point of and structure is challenged, the trend of happy ending
-

- Multiple endings:
-
- Fowles intrudes into the narrative structure and offers a set of endings. He says his novel has two endings. One ending satisfies the expectations of Victorian readers (Sarah accepts Charles as her husband)
 - another ending, which is shocking to Victorian readers, but fits postmodern readers (Sarah does not accept him and leaves him so that he could evolve and find his existential goal)
 - *Open endings allow to discuss the nature of ending in fiction*
 - the role of the author-narrator is clearly influenced by the two seminal studies by R. Barthes (The Death of the Author) and Michel Foucault (What is an author?)
-

FOWLES'THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN FROM PAGE TO SCREEN



The 1981 film directed by Karel Reisz with Harold Pinter's screenplay adds to the relevance of the intertextual/transtextual dimension: the myse en abyme expands to the fiction of filmmaking!

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS:

FOWLES, METAFICTION AND THE THEME OF FREEDOM

The narrator:

- God-like author, deus ex-machina, a creator of (fictive) harmony and unity or A subversive presence
 - A stronger and closer relationship with the reader is established
 - Fowles plays with his reader; how the reader learns to expect and cope with Postmodernist narrative playfulness
 - *The French Lieutenant's woman* as an exploration of freedom and agency: cultural, social, aesthetic
-

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS:

FOWLES, METAFICTION AND THE THEME OF FREEDOM

- The famous device of the alternative endings (**) dramatizes the fictiveness of the artist's quest for authenticity
- "The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (...) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story; that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the world" (*TFLT*)