

Postmodernism In French Literature In The Second Half Of The 20th Century

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Abstract: This article examines the emergence and development of postmodernism in French literature during the second half of the 20th century. The study identifies the key philosophical and aesthetic premises of postmodernism, analyzes their manifestation in the works of leading French writers, and explores the interplay between postmodernism and the broader socio-cultural context of postwar France. The study highlights the contributions of authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Philippe Sollers, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint, among others, and situates their works within the shifting paradigms of literary creation. Ultimately, the article asserts that postmodernism in French literature represents both a continuation and a rupture with previous traditions, offering new modes of narrative, experimentation, and critique that remain influential in the 21st century.

Keywords: French literature, postmodernism, 20th century, narrative, intertextuality, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Nouveau Roman, textuality.

Introduction: The second half of the 20th century marked a period of profound transformation in French literature, characterized by the emergence of postmodernism as a dominant intellectual and artistic paradigm. Postmodernism, which originated as a reaction against the certainties and universalizing tendencies of modernism, questioned the stability of meaning, the authority of the author, and the very nature of textuality. In France, these concerns resonated powerfully within the broader context of political upheaval, technological innovation, and shifting social structures. The devastation of World War II, the traumas of decolonization, and the rise of mass media provided fertile ground for literary experimentation and philosophical inquiry.

French postmodernism did not arise in isolation; rather, it developed in dialogue with international trends, including American postmodern fiction and the philosophical investigations of the Frankfurt School. However, the specificity of the French context—marked by the legacy of structuralism, the influence of

existentialism, and a longstanding tradition of literary self-reflexivity—shaped a uniquely French articulation of postmodernism. The “Nouveau Roman” (New Novel) movement, alongside the theoretical contributions of figures such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, played a crucial role in redefining the parameters of literary creation.

This article seeks to map the evolution of postmodernism in French literature from the 1950s through the end of the century. By analyzing representative works and exploring their philosophical underpinnings, it aims to elucidate the core features of postmodern French writing, the challenges it posed to established literary norms, and its enduring significance for both national and global literary landscapes.

The methodology adopted for this research is interdisciplinary, combining literary theory, textual analysis, and historical contextualization. The study draws upon primary sources—the literary texts themselves—and an extensive body of secondary literature, including theoretical essays, literary

criticism, and historical accounts. The primary texts include novels, essays, and plays by prominent postmodern French writers published between 1950 and 2000. Among the authors selected for in-depth analysis are Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Philippe Sollers, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Patrick Modiano.

The theoretical framework is informed by the writings of Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, whose philosophical and critical interventions shaped the discourse of postmodernism in France. Concepts such as intertextuality, the “death of the author,” textual plurality, simulation, and the instability of meaning serve as analytical tools for the interpretation of literary texts.

The research process entailed a close reading of selected texts, with attention to narrative structure, language, characterization, and thematic preoccupations. The analysis foregrounds the ways in which French postmodern writers interrogate conventions of genre, authorial authority, and the boundaries between fiction and reality. Secondary sources, including critical essays and monographs, are used to situate individual works within broader intellectual and cultural currents.

Furthermore, the study considers the impact of historical events—such as the Algerian War, May 1968, and the rise of consumer culture—on the evolution of postmodern aesthetics in France. This historical lens enables a nuanced understanding of the reciprocal relationship between literature and society during the period under consideration.

The investigation of postmodernism in French literature during the second half of the 20th century yields several significant findings regarding the thematic and formal innovations introduced by French authors, the theoretical frameworks that informed their work, and the enduring influence of postmodern aesthetics.

First, the *Nouveau Roman*, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, represented a radical departure from traditional narrative forms. Writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, and Claude Simon rejected the conventions of character development, psychological realism, and linear plot in favor of fragmented, non-linear narratives, unreliable narrators, and a focus on the materiality of language. Robbe-Grillet’s “*La Jalousie*” (1957), for example, foregrounds objects and spatial relations over character psychology, subverting the reader’s expectations and destabilizing the boundaries between subject and object.

Marguerite Duras, in works such as “*Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*” (1964) and “*L’Amant*” (1984), explored the limits of memory, desire, and language. Her elliptical prose and ambiguous narrative voices exemplify postmodern strategies of deferral and indeterminacy, inviting the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. Duras’s writing resists closure, presenting stories that are open-ended and permeated by absence and silence.

Intertextuality and the questioning of authorship became central concerns for French postmodernists. Roland Barthes’s proclamation of the “death of the author” in his 1967 essay marked a turning point in literary theory, shifting the focus from authorial intention to the plurality of textual meanings. This perspective is reflected in the works of Philippe Sollers, whose novel “*Drame*” (1965) and the subsequent journal *Tel Quel* promoted the notion of the text as a site of endless play and multiplicity.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, writing in the 1980s and 1990s, further extended postmodern experimentation through minimalist prose, self-referentiality, and the subversion of narrative expectations. In “*La Salle de bain*” (1985), the protagonist’s alienation and obsession with mundane details highlight the dissolution of grand narratives and the erosion of stable identity.

The period also witnessed the emergence of autofiction—a genre that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. Serge Doubrovsky’s coinage of the term in 1977 signaled a new mode of self-representation, one that foregrounds the constructedness of both self and story. Authors such as Annie Ernaux, Hervé Guibert, and Christine Angot developed this form, reflecting broader postmodern concerns with subjectivity, memory, and the unreliability of personal narrative.

French postmodern literature also responded to the changing socio-political landscape. The upheavals of May 1968, the aftermath of colonial conflicts, and the rise of consumer capitalism all found expression in literary works that questioned authority, critiqued institutions, and reflected a pervasive sense of fragmentation and loss. The proliferation of genres—experimental novels, hybrid texts, metafiction, and textual collages—mirrored the pluralism and heterogeneity of postmodern society.

The theoretical contributions of French philosophers, critics, and semioticians provided a rich conceptual vocabulary for understanding and articulating these literary developments. The interplay between literary practice and theoretical innovation became a hallmark of French postmodernism, with writers and theorists

often occupying overlapping roles.

The results of this study demonstrate that postmodernism in French literature is best understood not as a single unified movement, but as a constellation of aesthetic, philosophical, and textual practices that emerged in response to the crises and opportunities of the late 20th century. While the Nouveau Roman is often seen as the emblematic expression of French literary postmodernism, the phenomenon encompasses a broader range of writers, genres, and approaches.

One of the defining features of French postmodern literature is its sustained interrogation of narrative conventions. The abandonment of coherent plots, psychologically motivated characters, and omniscient narrators reflects a deep skepticism toward the possibility of stable meaning and coherent selfhood. Instead, postmodern texts often present fragmented subjectivities, multiple perspectives, and open-ended structures that invite active reader participation. This rejection of unity and closure can be seen as both a response to the historical ruptures of the postwar period and as an assertion of aesthetic autonomy.

Intertextuality emerges as a central strategy in French postmodern writing. The proliferation of references, quotations, and allusions disrupts the notion of the autonomous work and situates each text within a network of other texts, both literary and non-literary. This practice not only reflects the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist theory, but also underscores the instability of meaning and the impossibility of original creation. The works of Philippe Sollers and the Tel Quel group are paradigmatic in this regard, foregrounding the processes of writing, reading, and interpretation as inherently unstable and generative.

The philosophical underpinnings of French postmodernism draw heavily on the ideas of Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. The “death of the author,” the critique of the “metanarrative,” and the deconstruction of binary oppositions all inform the literary production of the period. Derrida’s concept of “différance,” for example, is echoed in the endless deferral of meaning found in the novels of Robbe-Grillet and Duras. Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” provides a framework for understanding the suspicion with which postmodern writers approach totalizing ideologies, whether literary, philosophical, or political.

French postmodern literature also engages critically with the technological and cultural changes of the late 20th century. The rise of mass media, the proliferation of images, and the commodification of culture are

recurrent themes. In this context, literature becomes a site for the negotiation of identity, reality, and desire in an increasingly mediated world. The simulation of experience and the play of surfaces are central motifs, as seen in the works of Jean Baudrillard, whose theories of simulacra and hyperreality find literary expression in the novels of the period.

Autofiction represents a particularly significant development in the context of postmodernism, reflecting the dissolution of boundaries between fact and fiction, self and other. The genre’s emphasis on subjectivity, memory, and the fragmentary nature of experience aligns with broader postmodern concerns. By foregrounding the constructedness of the self and the narrative, autofiction both participates in and extends the postmodern critique of essentialism.

Despite the experimental and often challenging nature of postmodern French literature, it has exerted a lasting influence on subsequent generations of writers both within France and internationally. The pluralism, playfulness, and critical self-reflexivity that characterize postmodern writing continue to inform contemporary literary production, even as new paradigms and concerns have emerged in the 21st century.

Postmodernism in French literature during the second half of the 20th century represents a transformative epoch characterized by innovation, experimentation, and critical reflection. The movement’s emergence was shaped by both international currents and the particular historical and intellectual circumstances of postwar France. French writers responded to the uncertainties of the era by challenging conventional narrative forms, interrogating the nature of authorship and textuality, and exploring the shifting contours of identity and reality.

Through the works of Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Sollers, Toussaint, and others, postmodernism found expression in the rejection of traditional plots, the embrace of intertextuality, the questioning of meaning, and the exploration of the boundaries between fiction and reality. Theoretical contributions from Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault provided a robust intellectual foundation for these literary innovations.

While postmodernism in French literature may be seen as both a continuation and a break with previous traditions, its legacy is unmistakable. It opened new possibilities for narrative, encouraged ongoing dialogue between literature and theory, and remains a vital reference point for contemporary literary practice. As France and the world entered the 21st century, the questions and challenges posed by postmodernism persisted, ensuring its relevance and dynamism within the ongoing evolution of literature.

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