Engaging with Postmodernism: An Examination of Literature and the Canon

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Engaging with Postmodernism

An Examination of Literature and the Canon

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Abstract

The pedagogical usage of canons wouldn’t seem to be problematic or paradoxical, except in the context of a canon systematizing and categorizing a movement and set of texts that deliberately and inherently positioned themselves against such structures. In examining the relationship between literature and Postmodernism, and texts and readers, the convention of a canon of postmodern literature revealed itself to be highly contradictory, but nevertheless functional in its facilitation of dialogues between highly ambiguous and incongruous areas of Postmodernity. This implies that although the modes of engagement are intrinsically conflicting, one must accept the problematic aspects of a framework in order to retain the ability to critique and analyze texts.
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INTRODUCTION

In the course of one’s education, especially at institutions of higher learning, the concepts of critical thinking and engagement are repeatedly emphasized as being integral to success in academia. However, this inevitably leads to questioning not only what one is learning but also how one is learning. Postmodernism¹ is one such subject where it seems that the way in which it is being taught is innately contrary to its foundational principles. This in turn poses the question: how can one engage with Postmodernism, as manifested in the canon of postmodern literature, when the modes of this engagement are inherently contradictory? The postmodern condition has been examined and critiqued by theorists, whereas writers of literature have sought to represent and fictionalize these conditions while at the same time engaging in dialogue with postmodern theory.

One of the primary limitations to engagement is that postmodern theory is fundamentally contrary to attempts to represent and analyze it. The resistance to depiction is due in large part to the theoretical emphasis on the crisis of representation and the gap between signified and signifier, which will be discussed in detail later. This contradiction is evident in the mere idea of a postmodern canon; even though this canon has been expanded into various categories, the necessary inclusion and exclusion and value judgments involved in the existence of a canon place it in the disconcerting realm of hypocrisy. These created categories are evidence of the reality of various manifestations of postmodern literature, and show how uncontainable and indefinable an umbrella term such as Postmodernism is. Although the canon and these categories provide a space to be able to critique and analyze the texts, they do so in a way that is incongruent with postmodernist theories, by constructing hierarchies where postmodern theories had previously

¹ For the sake of clarification, I will be capitalizing “Postmodernism” when referring to the movement but will be using lowercase when it is used in the form of an adjective, such as “postmodern literature”.
deconstructed former ones. The wide acceptance of this compromise allows scholars and students to say meaningful things about Postmodernism, but there still remains the question: is it acceptable to operate within a blatant contradiction?

Although there are problematic aspects of the canon, there are also questions to be raised with postmodern literature itself. Postmodernism seems to have manifested into two distinct categories of literature: one where works are exemplary of Postmodernism but are basically inaccessible and unreadable to the average reader, and another which retains a surface level reading that is easier for readers to understand while it also has a depth of meaning that can be delved into, critiqued, and analyzed. The former category is where postmodern theory seems logically to have led, while the latter appears to be an attempt to reconcile theory with accessibility. Nevertheless, it is impossible to state that one is better or more legitimate than the other; not only because of the theoretical predominance of equal validity and relativism, but also because of Postmodernity’s resistance to metanarratives and ultimate truths.

Rather than passing judgment, one must examine what characteristics of Postmodernism necessarily led to these disparate modes of literature. This in turn will be reflective of the compulsory categorization of said literature and the ways in which the changing state of literature is representative of the wider implications of postmodern theory. I will begin by framing these questions with a brief description of how and why Postmodernism as a movement emerged, before presenting a brief description of the theories of Postmodernism that are relevant to a discussion of literature. Then the literature itself will be examined in its interactions with Postmodernism and the major, but not exhaustive, categories and characteristics the texts display. These categories will subsequently lead into an examination of the canonization of literature and the implications of a
canon. Ultimately these issues will raise larger questions of how a movement treats its own ideas and how discrepancy between theory and practice can or cannot be functional.
POSTMODERNISM

The general sentiment in academic and artistic circles in the mid-twentieth century was that Modernism had run its course and reached its logical conclusion. Though modernist works had pushed the boundaries of cultural conventions and were highly controversial in their time, their novelty quickly wore off and they soon became seen as relatively tame. The cause of the shift in perception can be traced to the academic institutionalization and canonization of Modernism. The act of categorization and confinement was the final nail in the coffin for the Modernist movement. Therefore, as Fredric Jameson claims, the origins of Postmodernism are found in the confrontation of “the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics” (4). In effect, modernist practices were no longer applicable to the contemporaneous situation.

Postmodernism did not emerge as a cohesive movement in the same manner that Modernism did, but is rather an umbrella term to denote the various and diverse modes of engaging with the changing condition. Within its very name, Postmodernism situated itself in contrast to Modernism. That isn’t to say there weren’t aspects and tendencies of Modernism that persisted into Postmodernity, but emphasis was placed in different areas. Generally speaking, Modernism was preoccupied by a desire to portray subjective consciousness as more unstable and disorderly than previously thought. Postmodernism, on the other hand, preferred to concentrate its efforts on revealing fictionality, that is, the condition of being fictional: constructed, narrated, and mediated. The disparity in emphases can be attributed to the differing circumstances of Modernity and Postmodernity and what kinds of responses those conditions instigated. Modernity can be briefly summarized as being progressively more mechanized, industrialized, and urbanized while Postmodernity was more consumer driven and inundated by technology. Thus, according to Bran
Nicol, modernist artistic production generally privileged form, realism, and innovation while postmodernist art “favors bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of ‘low’ with high culture. Where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic” (2). Though these are generalized statements, and both of these periods are highly nuanced, the general move in Postmodernity was towards a more deconstructed understanding of knowledge. To summarize Brian McHale’s short essay “What Was Postmodernism?”, Modernism asked how we know what we know, but Postmodernism asked what we can know.

The contemporaneous conditions that led to Postmodernity are by and large centered on the rapid changes in technology and science. The rapid speed of change fundamentally altered the psyche of those living in the postindustrial, media-driven, pop-culture-flooded world. Individuals are no longer able to differentiate between virtual-reality and authentic reality because the virtual world is in effect the one now inhabited. Jean Baudrillard described this confusion between the real and the imitation as “no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (92). This distorted hyper-reality of Postmodernity led some individuals to despair at the idea that “the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination” (94). The simulation doesn’t just replace the real; it effectively creates it in its own image. This produces a profound sense of distrust, skepticism, and alienation in individual consciousness.
The mélange of intertextuality, simulacrum, and relativism within Postmodernity resulted in a profound perplexity on the part of individuals. To paraphrase theorist Jean-François Lyotard’s section on narrative knowledge, within his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, postmodern subjects do not and cannot believe in metanarratives, a general and universal structure with which to understand the world, because they are conditioned in a world self-aware of the imperfect nature of language and narrative, and are attentive to the notion that the same event can, and will, create multiple, valid experiences. Thus, rather than subscribing to a metanarrative, Postmodernity prefers ‘little narratives’ that offer limited, qualified truths particular to a specific situation. Consequently, art transforms into a tool designed to arrange new modes of receptivity and alter perception. Meaning derived from these artistic works is no longer focused on the subject of the work, but rather on its function and how it instigates audience response.

However, the temporal experience of art, and temporal sense in general was heavily disrupted by Postmodernity. Time dominated and subjected by the infinite and undefined rhythms of new media resulted in what Frederic Jameson calls ‘a perpetual present’. That is to say, a postmodern subject’s conception of either a past or future is seriously destabilized by the simulated sense of reality that is always in the present. Yet at the same time, the conception of time with the simulacrum is so far removed from a sense of reality or presence that one could also describe the postmodern individual’s existence as dominated by a profound sense of a-temporality.
POSTMODERN THEORY

Postmodern theorists attempted to explain, or at least examine, the changing conditions of Postmodernity. Though they drew upon previous theories, in many ways postmodern theorists rebelled directly against earlier, modernist perceptions and criticism. Numerous schools of thought emerged in Postmodernity but not all are pertinent to a discussion of literature, which is why they have been either omitted or summarized very briefly here. For the purposes of this examination, this section is more interested in the cultural theories already in place, rather than later theories, which developed alongside and in direct analysis of postmodern literature. The theories and writings of Ferdinand de Saussure gave birth to linguistic relativism, which is directly related to the postmodern understanding and embraceme of the relativism of linguistics as well as conceptual schemes. Jacques Derrida and the theory of Deconstruction then expanded upon the ideas of relativism. Because of the far-reaching implications of Deconstruction it is one of the most widely known modes of criticism. The ideas of this theory presented a basis for others to build upon and broaden in such a way as to describe the so-called crisis of representation. Post-structuralism, though working in a separate vein than Postmodernism but reacting to the same concerns, greatly influenced the theoretical exploration of the deconstruction of binaries, the discovery of the myth of historicity, and Roland Barthes’ idea of the death of the author.

The normalization of cultural hierarchies and crystallization of binary oppositions manifested into artistic productions that were highly abstract and inaccessible, and critical reception of these creations solidified a desire for not only challenging works, but also ones that were seemingly demanding purely for the sake of being so. Postmodernist theory resisted this culture and called for a democratization of artistic creation. This aspiration was hypothetically achievable via the
new theories of equal validity and relativism. Saussure’s theories of linguistic relativism laid the foundation for an understanding of language’s independence from the world. The idea of a perfect sign, one where the signifier and signified are intrinsically referentially joined, collapsed with the hypothesis that there is an unbridgeable gap between word and referent. Rather, words do not have any innate meaning, but are defined and given meaning in their relation to other words, which in turn are also defined in a self-enclosed system. The implication of linguistic relativism is that when one uses language to denote a ‘real’ object, the speaker is only understood in connotations of the codes between signifier to signifier.

The idea of a self-enclosed, relational system could then be extrapolated to the manner in which individuals inhabit the world. Postmodernity saw a burgeoning awareness of personal biases, frameworks, and lenses which color an individual’s view of the world. In becoming aware of the systems in which one operates, it was thought that one could then acknowledge other’s systems as equally legitimate, because everything is subjectively relative. The ideas of Constructivism, explained by Paul Boghossian as where “all facts are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests”, are attractive to many scholars as a validation of “the doctrine of equal validity” (23-24). Lyotard states that it is impossible to pass judgment on the validity of a certain individual’s framework of understanding, but rather, “all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species” (Condition 26). This notion then led to resistance against passing value judgments, a desire to mix ‘high and low’ culture, and the idea of moral relativity. Jacques Derrida commented in his lecture, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, “I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing – in the first place because here we are in a region (let’s say,
provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial…”

(241). The idea of limitations of choice in Postmodernity simply doesn’t hold true in an atmosphere dominated by the notions of equal validity of all choices. Postmodern theory created an environment where cultural allusion was no longer limited to classical or biblical tropes, but where one could reference equally from any cultural text. Derrida is stating that even the idea of choice is no longer applicable in an environment where one doesn’t have to choose.

Linguistic relativism played an important role in raising questions of how one can represent ‘reality’, when language itself is no longer referential and doesn’t have meaning outside of language. The relationship between signified and signifier can be extrapolated to the relationship between subject and object. If there is a ruptured bond between subject and object, where the object can never be reached or represented by the subject, then how can representation at large exist? The expansion of cultural production that, ideally, imperatively includes all things equally, also created a crisis in the practice of representation. There is no possible way in which to include or reference all things equally, but the other option of silence is not viable. Instead, artistic works have to, in order to function, be selective and partial. “This means that cultural production is unable to mount a critique of postmodernism because it inevitably conforms to its logic itself” (10 Nicol). Theoretically, the idea of representation can no longer exist according to the traditional norms, in that there is no way to ‘realistically’ portray reality. But in practice, compromises necessarily had to be made in order for the arts to continue to exist. Although representation is irreparably divorced from the real, distinctively postmodern productions are aware of the situation. The revolt against realistic representation is the manifestation of a concern in Postmodernity for the corruption and dissolution of anything deemed or portrayed as natural, innocent, or pure. There
seemed to be a sense of urgency in bringing about awareness of the reshaping, manufacturing, and illusion of reality.

Not only is postmodern theory concerned with awareness of the underlying constructedness of reality, but it also focused itself on the deconstruction of the manufactured and arbitrary designation of ‘real’. The most prominent theoretical camp waging this war is Deconstruction. Conceived and enacted by the theories of Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction placed itself in express resistance to the theories of Structuralism and the idea that there is an innate narrative and structure that provides meaning to experience. Motivated by a desire to abolish these systems, Derrida states that there are two distinct ways in which the disparity between the signified and signifier can be dissolved. The usual, traditional way involves reducing and/or deriving the signifier: identifying the signifier as such. The other, more novel way is to question the entire paradigm in which the sign is operating, thereby problematizing the constructed opposition (227). The latter, in its reveal of the cultural framework in which subjects operate, opens up to the idea and practice of liberated, indiscriminate intertextual references and allusions, and the embracement of mass, pop culture, seen in postmodern literature.

The various theories surrounding the idea of subjectivity and relativity in turn complicate the idea of history. The Modernist understanding of an individual’s perception of present events as inherently complex and specific to that individual’s system of lenses, in turn is exacerbated by memory. Memory is removed both temporally and spatially from the moment of remembrance, adding yet another subjective lens. Then this too can be taken one step further to collective memory, aka History. If memory is understood as being fictionalized, narrativized, and created for the needs and motives of the present, then where does that leave the supposed objectivity of
history? Not only is there the saying ‘history is written by the victors’ but also there is an accepted overarching metanarrative of progress, linearity, and knowledge gained from the past. In postmodern theory, there was a move to redefine history as the collective memory of certain individuals, and their subjective understanding of events, thereby shedding light on the myth of historicity, the idea that fact and history are one-in-the-same. These postmodern theories draw attention to the marginalized, or omitted, alternative narratives that don’t conform to the linear, dominant metanarrative.

The dissolution of history in turn influenced and prompted an investigation into the role of the author. In Postmodernity, the aura of the author was pressured on three fronts: artwork now readily and rapidly technologically or mechanically reproducible; a general consensus that though there is still a desire to create, the overwhelming intertextual and media-driven nature of the contemporaneous environment forces an awareness that all things have been said by others already; and a relativistic understanding of the world, and the simulacral confusion between virtual and authentic. Therefore the cultural mythology of author-genius is no longer valid or viable. The theoretical exploration of this new condition heavily influenced literature and literary criticism, in that traditionally one would read texts and if the author had indicated their own interpretation of their work that was given precedence; because the author was thought to necessarily know the meaning of their own work. But with postmodern theories leading the charge, questions were raised as to why the author has the final say, when their work is not actually completed until there is an audience. Roland Barthes states that by definition literature cannot have an author because, “as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this
disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Author 142). Rather than clinging to the idea of an author that predates, and therefore creates, a text, Barthes’ idea of a “scriptor” is someone who “is born simultaneously with the text” and that “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now” (145). Theorists also realized that by adhering to the idea that the author is the final authority, it implies that there is a final, correct meaning to a work; which in turn strengthens the idea of a grand narrative, which Postmodernism is firmly against. Rather, theorists and critics argued that the reader should always be able to gain more insight and meaning the more they read, that the search for meaning is never-ending. That isn’t to say that the author isn’t important at all, but rather it implies that they can no longer have the final statement or that their interpretation is any more valid than that of anyone else.

Postmodern theories reflected upon and analyzed the conditions and characteristics of Postmodernity and how this new environment affected individuals, as well as art production. Though many new modes of criticism and theory emerged, those most pertinent to literature are that of relativism, deconstruction, and the dissolution of both the myth of history and the author. These theories significantly transformed how one engages with literature; the implications of postmodern theory irreparably changed both the production and reception of texts. With an understanding of relativism and the subjective lenses through which individuals perceive reality, postmodernity opened itself to a veritable deluge of intertextuality and equally valid selections and choices. However, this in turn created an imperative for new modes of representation that would be able to reflect the new conditions. Relativism also pushed for a move to deconstruct cultural and societal structures and hierarchies. With this deconstruction came the demystification of history
and the author. History now needed to acknowledge the suppression and omission of alternate narratives, and literature had to grapple with the equalization of the roles of reader and writer, in the idea that the death of the author is the birth of the reader as co-creator. The form and function of literature changed with the desire to express these new theories; however these new literary techniques and characteristics in turn posed a dilemma as to the contradictory and disparate ways in which to put a theory into practice.
POSTMODERN LITERATURE

Literature has often been considered as easily distinguishable from theory in that readers could rely on one fictionalizing while the other analyzed. Postmodernism irreversibly altered this distinction. Postmodern literature not only fictionalized the contemporary situation and surroundings but also incorporated contemporaneous theories into itself. The texts are undoubtedly aesthetic objects, but they also engage in modes of theory. That is, the texts themselves put aspects of theory into practice, as well as invite the reader to consider the theoretical questions raised. Thus, identifying postmodern literature as such is more than just focusing on related themes of texts. One must look at the form of the texts and evaluate how a change in the role, function, and practice of literature is symptomatic of the contemporaneous social and cultural conditions. The effects of this transformation are seen not only in the role of fiction but also in the reader’s engagement with the text. This change is manifested in three literary techniques: the self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text’s status as a constructed, aesthetic artifact; the implicit, or sometimes explicit, critique of realism in relation to both narrative and the representation of a fictional world; and the tendency to draw readers’ attention to their own process of interpretation though the act of reading. Though these techniques are addressing separate issues, there is overlap between them because the expression of these techniques produces similar characteristics.

The first technique, self-reflexivity, is arguably the most defining characteristic of postmodern literature, and what designates texts as such. A work of fiction’s knowledge and acknowledgement as a created fictionality has been termed ‘metafiction’. One of the categories within the postmodern canon of literature is metafiction, and while those specific texts demonstrate
this technique in a more blatant and amplified way than others, the traits of metafiction are collectively Postmodern. In general, postmodern fiction draws attention to its status as fiction by presenting and problematizing the reality presented within the framework of the story, and forces the reader to acknowledge the fictionality of literature. Though postmodern literature critiques realism, one thing the texts strive to do is present a realistic portrayal of the constructedness of fiction. That is, literature is an invented production that has certain rules, processes, and procedures. Rather than asking the reader to accept these, and suspend disbelief for the duration of reading, postmodern literature recognizes and reveals its inner workings.

The realist tradition and its techniques are regarded as fundamentally deceitful in a postmodern context. The main objection to realism, as stated by Bran Nicol, is that it relies on the assumptions that the created fictional world is verisimilar and analogous to the real world, and story itself is natural and particular, so that writing is simply mediating an already existing story (24). Because of the theoretical problem of referentiality, postmodern literature is innately and definitively incredulous towards realist methods. The issue is not that realistic representation isn’t desirable, but rather it cannot be enacted unselfconsciously and sincerely. This skepticism is also due to the advancement of the theory of linguistic relativity and the recognition of an unbridgeable gap between language and the world. With the acceptance of this theory, literature has to necessarily grapple with the idea that language does not have any grounding in reality outside of language.

Due to the need to distinguish itself from any former attempts at a sincere approach to fiction, postmodern literature inevitably became more and more experimental and interactive. The texts themselves stress the reader’s own self-awareness of his or her status as a reader, in the same
way that fiction calls attention to its status as fiction. However, this leads to a desire, a demand, on the part of the author and text for an ideal reader. Jorge Luis Borges commented on this by saying, “Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers…. Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual” (qtd. in Nicol xiii). That is, an ideal reader is someone who is willing to change roles from being a passive consumer of literature to being an active co-creator of meaning of texts.

Postmodern literature challenges the reader to examine the cultural assumptions of the role and function of literature. Reading these texts is no longer merely reception of narrative, but rather requires active reading, response to the text, and reflection on the act of reading itself. Barthes coins the terms “writerly” and “readerly” to describe two types of literature, the first is more focused on the author, or writer, of the work and their role as such. However, “opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text” (S/Z 4). The readerly text is one that forces the reader to assume a new role, between author and reader. Yet, Postmodern readerly texts are characterized by the frequent absence of an accessible, initial surface reading of the text and the exclusive presence of a highly theoretical critical depth. Postmodern literature invites the reader to interpret, but then often deliberately upsets and foils attempts to do so, and rather demonstrates that any final meaning, or meanings, are infinitely more complex than at first glance.

Though these three techniques are the general characteristics of postmodern fiction, the texts themselves are so varied and diverse in approach that the canon of postmodern literature necessarily was subdivided into categories so as to better describe and differentiate the texts. These
categories separate texts on the basis of technique as well as genre, many of which are parodied or mimicked in order to deconstruct and upset cultural constructions of literary conventions. The texts examined here are in the categories of Metafictional, Historical and Detective. Within the postmodern canon there is also a subcategory of Minority Voices, in order to acknowledge the emphasis within postmodern theory on relativism and the idea of multiple, little narratives. More traditional canons were blind to questions of race, class, and gender, whereas now there is a move to include previously unrepresented voices, a kind of affirmative action within the canon. With these new categories in mind, a reader of postmodern texts is required to have an awareness of the parodic, fictionalized, and constructed qualities of literature. Umberto Eco explains that the difference between a well-crafted text and one that is not, as where the latter merely presents and fulfills the already held desires and needs of the reader, the former seeks to produce a new reader (Postscript 48-49). He goes on to state that an ideal reader of his work would be “an accomplice, to be sure, one who would play my game” (50). Within texts of all of the various categories and genres of Postmodern literature the reader is constantly challenged and forced to question what the role and function of fiction is, and how the practice of literature reflects and engages with postmodern theory.

**METAFIGICTIONAL**

The term “metafiction” could easily replace “postmodern literature” as a description of the texts in question. However this may be, certain texts exemplify and amplify this category’s technique more blatantly than others. This category is defined by texts that force the reader to attend to problems of fictionality and the fictitious nature of literature. Metafiction constantly reminds the reader that the work of fiction is fiction. It is not a representation or reflection of the
world, but rather words on a page that make sense only by relating them to other words and texts, not the external world. The function and goal of the texts within this category is to expose fiction as being fictional, but no more so than what we think of as reality. In other words, as Bran Nicol states, Postmodernity is effectively constructed, mediated, and discursive, both in the fictional world as well as the real (16). The defining characteristics of this category of fiction are self-awareness, lack of a grand narrative, multiple plausible endings, intertextuality, experimentation, a deluge of signs and meanings, and a direct engagement with the crisis of representation.

A certain amount of self-awareness on the part of the text as a text is a definitional necessity to be considered a part of this category. The paratextual subtitle for Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing* is “A Real Fictitious Discourse”, alerting the reader immediately to the fact that this is a work of fiction and highlighting its status as such. John Barth also blatantly emphasizes the fictionality of his work throughout *Lost in the Funhouse*. In “Lost in the Funhouse” the narrative flow is interrupted by presentation diagrams of Freitag’s Triangle (see Figure 1 of the appendix) to describe conventional dramatic narrative structure and comment on where the story is in relation to this. These interruptions also take the form of commentary on the processes and techniques of creating fiction, for example, “description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction” (73-74). Federman uses the same method of interruption in *Double or Nothing*, but much more frequently so that the narrative plot is all but a constant series of these interruptions. Because the text is about the writing process, there is a certain obsession and repetition of the different points of view. In the beginning it is stated,

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2 The text *Lost in the Funhouse* could be called a collection of short stories of which “Lost in the Funhouse” is a part, but this would be dismissive of the nature of the text. Though the ‘stories’ could stand alone, they are meant to be and are greatly enhanced by reading them collectively, as though each were a chapter in a novel.
“obviously there has to be a fourth person … The second person is the inventor nor like a recorder. That function belongs to the first person. And of course not like a protagonist. The third person will fit into that role eventually…” (000000000.0). The end page of the book (see Figure 2) mimics the listing of possible points of view, or roles, in its warning that the author is responsible for any mistakes or errors found in the book. The references to different points of views and persons makes it impossible to ignore the fact that one is reading a constructed artifact customarily designed to lull readers into a sense that the artifact is fact, within the confines of the fictional world. Instead of abiding by this custom, metafiction challenges the framing of literature by emphasizing the frame.

The lack of a façade of fictional reality makes it essentially impossible to have a grand narrative. There can be no overarching meaning or satisfying ending to the text. Postmodern literature often creates the allusion of signs and meanings that seem to point towards a grand narrative, but in reality are depicting the impossibility of such singular explanatory models. In “Lost in the Funhouse” the plot is interrupted to state, “At this rate out hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever. Narrative ordinarily consists of alternating dramatization and summarization” (Barth 78). Drawing attention to the procedure of creating narrative renders a conclusion or singular meaning infeasible because both reader and text are aware that the story is created. The formal qualities of narrative are determined by culturally constructed norms, which, therefore, don’t innately necessitate linearity or satisfaction in conclusions or themes. In Double or Nothing, the constant revisions and rewritings of the story being written, even the names of the characters and the events’ chronology, make the chance of walking away with any sense of finality

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3 Due to the experimental nature of Double or Nothing it is basically impossible to accurately portray the text as both a work of fiction and as a work of art. Therefore, pages of the text are presented in the Appendix.
unattainable. The text itself acknowledges this by referencing the approaching end of the novel, which will inevitably leave more to be said (see Figure 3) (246). The ‘plot’ is centered on the issue of eating noodles, but then at the very end of the text even this is disrupted, when it is suggested that the narrator doesn’t have to eat noodles at all. This particular revision calls into question the validity and meaning of the entire text. If the driving plot line is so easily changeable then the reader inherently cannot draw any definitive conclusions about the text as a whole without being subject to derision.

The absence of a grand narrative implies that any definitive ending to the text is also nonexistent. In lieu of this, postmodern literature valorizes temporal, localized interpretations of multiple, equally plausible endings to the narrative. In “Echo”, Barth demonstrates this notion by asserting, “Our story’s finished before it starts” (103). This utterance indicates that there is no end or beginning to a story. Yet still the story is told, implying that though there are neither, it is still imperative to continue with the narrative. This sentiment is echoed in “Title” when it is stated, “No climax. There’s the story. Finished? Not quite. Story of our lives. The last word in fiction, in fact” (110). Paralleled in both fiction and reality, any singular meaning or telos is nonexistent. The search for such definitiveness is futile, as ambiguity is often deliberately built into the text without any sense of dispelling it.

Rather, readers are challenged to accept this ambiguity. In Thomas Pynchon’s novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist’s quest to uncover an alleged conspiracy is repeatedly questioned. At various points throughout the narrative, either the existence or nonexistence of this conspiracy is doubtful. One of the other characters asks if it is all an elaborate hoax created by her now dead ex-boyfriend. The reaction to this proposition is that “It had occurred to her. But like the thought
that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possibility directly, or in any but the most accidental of lights” (138). The search to uncover the conspiracy gives meaning to her life, even though it is probable that none of it is real. However, the reader never finds out whether or not it is a genuine conspiracy or hoax, or if Oedipa is crazy. The end of the text leaves all possibilities open and gives no indication of how the narrative will continue. *The Crying of Lot 49* challenges set expectations of endings in general when in one scene, Oedipa and Metzger are watching an old movie, in which Metzger starred as a child. Metzger bets with Oedipa about the ending of the movie, stating that it is possible that it could differ from her expectations, to which she replies, “All those movies had happy endings” (22). Soon after this assertion, the movie proves to be a tragic one in which the protagonists die gruesome deaths. This incident illustrates the distrust in Postmodernity of expected or definitive endings, of metanarratives, and the desire to deconstruct and parody our accepted cultural norms of genre.

Postmodern literature engaged with theoretical interests in relativity by intertextually alluding to both traditional and unconventional sources, thereby deconstructing the hierarchy of accepted source material. This mélange of ‘high’ with ‘low’ art typifies the notion of equal validity and Jameson’s idea of pastiche. In Barth’s “Anonymiad”, there is an allusion to Grecian epics and the Homeric tropes mixed with hypersexual rhetoric more befitting to a harlequin romance: “When Dawn rose, pink as peerless Helen’s teat, which in fact swung wineskinlike between her hind legs and was piebald as her pelt…” (168). The result of this amalgam is a playful irony that chooses to abstain from value judgments and confronts the reader’s own preconceived notions of acceptable literary allusions. In the *Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon too plays with the institution of Ancient Grecian texts by naming the main character Oedipa. This is an obvious reference to Oedipus, but where he
Lindas was able to solve the Riddle of the Sphinx and his story emphasizes uncovering the truth, she is unable to even figure out whether or not her riddles are real. Pynchon more directly comments on the effects of intertextuality on a postmodern psyche in a scene where Oedipa encounters Mr. Thoth in front of a TV, waking from a dream about his grandfather. Oedipa asks, “‘What were you dreaming about him?’ ‘Oh, that,’ perhaps embarrassed. ‘It was all mixed in with a Porky Pig cartoon.’ He waved at the tube. ‘It comes into your dreams, you know. Filthy machine’” (73). This exchange shows a preoccupation with how various images infiltrate one’s psyche. The characteristic of intertextuality explores the theory that postmodern beings cannot relate to anything or anyone without that relationship being mediated by texts and images. Rather, individuals inhabit in a world inundated by virtual reality and simulacrum.

The experimental quality of metafiction is the result of the questions raised about the role and function of literature. The texts became not only hyperaware of their fictionality and constructedness, but also drew attention to the physicality of books. Barth’s “Frame-Tale” is an impeccable example of the text’s engagement with theoretical concerns as well as the unique conditions of literature. This text comes with instructions to cut out the page from the book and twist it into a Möbius strip that reads on one side “ONCE UPON A TIME” and the other reads, “THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN” (1-2) (see Figures 4 and 5). This text engages with the technique of frame narrative, the physicality of a printed book, and the infinite ambiguity characteristic of postmodern literature. Double or Nothing is a work of literature, but the way in which the text is formatted renders each individual page in the book a singular piece of textual artwork (see Figures 6 and 7). Some pages are divided into columns but the sentences are read across them, challenging the cultural construction of formatting and forcing the reader to
uncomfortably bridge the gap of white space in order to read (see Figure 8). Federman more
directly comments on challenging the normative relationship between the reader, writer, and text
when the narrator writes, “We had hardly spoken to each other lots of silence between them
shown with white spaces or blank spaces or better yet with two or three blank pages
in the middle of the scene to indicate the silences since the moment we kissed each other
on the pier” (121). There is no innate reason for the traditional format of a novel, and this absence
leads to the desire to experiment and play with normative construction. Federman directly
challenges these constructions, and makes reading extremely difficult and uncomfortable on two
pages of discourse in particular. The top of page 182 instructs the reader to “go to the bottom of
the page” then at the bottom of the page states “start here and work your way up”. The text on this
page only makes sense when read moving up line by line. As if this wasn’t disruptive enough to
norms, page 183 instructs the reader to “continue at the bottom of the page” then at the bottom
“work your way up from right to left this time” (see Figures 9 and 10). Thus the text on this page is
written with normal letters but the words and sentences are written from right to left, challenging
the Western norm of reading and making it astonishingly physically difficult to read.

Metafiction’s experimental endeavors can, at times, be heavy-handed and the steady deluge
of signs and meaning makes reading not only difficult but also overwhelming. These texts place
attention on the nature of language, the relationship between signifier and signified, as well as the
traditional formal qualities of written narrative. In “Lost in the Funhouse” there are italics
throughout the narrative, which under normal circumstances might be overlooked by a casual
reader. However, it is interjected that “Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for
‘outside.’ intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements…. They should be used
sparingly. If the passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it is customary to acknowledge the fact. *Italics mine*” (72). Not only is Barth problematizing the narrative flow by interrupting it with a self-aware outburst, but also the issue at stake here is the normalization of certain literary formatting choices that are in fact hollow and constructed.

Federman presents a similar critique of formatting with the role of boldface. In the introduction of the written story the interruptions are demarcated by boldface, such as: “Once upon a time **two or three weeks ago**…” and also “…came to America from Europe **Poland it seems, though this was not clearly established**…” (0). Though there is no blatant commentary on the employment of certain typographical forms, Federman uses formatting that is normally reserved for specific occasions, thus implying that type format is interchangeable and has no intrinsic meaning unto itself. The exchangeable usage of French and English throughout the novel exemplifies this interchangeability as well. Written for an English-speaking audience, one would presume that French is unlikely to be fully understood by the majority of readers. However, using both languages calls into question the meaning, if any, of words in general and what the function of language is if not to communicate.

An emphasis on language’s inability to referentially communicate is a fundamental aspect of metafiction. The texts in this category engage directly with the crisis of representation by exposing language to be arbitrary, discourse to be constructed, and the meaning of words only to be available via other words. *Double or Nothing* begins with the paratextual statement “This is not the beginning” (see Figure 11). Though technically it is the beginning of the book, the beginning of the text begins later. On the other hand, there is no beginning, in that both text and conceptions of reality are all fictional. This proclamation is reminiscent of Rene Magritte’s painting *The Treachery of Images*
(1928) (Fig 12) in which it too denies what it is representing, whilst representing it. In a scene in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa makes the mistake of inquiring after the “historical Wharfinger” to which she receives the chastising response, “The historical Shakespeare, ’ growled one of the grad students through a full beard, uncapping another bottle. ‘The historical Marx. The historical Jesus.’ ‘He’s right,’ shrugged Bortz, ‘they’re dead. What’s left?’ ‘Words.’ ‘Pick some words,’ said Bortz. ‘Them, we can talk about.’” (124). This single casual exchange portrays multiple postmodern theoretical problems: the myth of historicity, the death of the author, and the interest in linguistics. However, these questions are raised and momentarily examined, as non-sequiturs, and then the plot line continues. In Barth’s “Title” the narrator poses the query: “The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful? Isn’t that the final question? If not, the end is at hand. Literally, as it were” (105). Here the directness of the inquiry correlates to the directness of the examination of theoretical questions. “Title” is perhaps the most academic section of *Lost in the Funhouse* in its desire to engage with postmodern theory and experiment in how those theories would take a literary form.

The category of metafiction within the canon of postmodern literature is by far the most broad and encompassing subgenre. The definitional characteristics metafiction displays most directly engage in dialogue with postmodern theory. An imperative for self-awareness of the fictionality of fiction manifests into various forms, but the texts described here place special attention on the process and construction of narrative. The overarching desire in Postmodernity to valorize multiple, equally valid perspectives in lieu of any grand narrative or final ending produced texts that indiscriminately mixed intertextual allusions. One way in which these texts put the theory of Deconstruction into practice was to experiment with the physicality of printed texts, the
accepted formalization of formatting, and the cultural norm of the act of reading. In disrupting these, the texts emphasized the pervasiveness of cultural dominates and hierarchies, even within the seemingly innocent act of producing a book. Metafiction constantly, though at times more subtly, reminds the reader of the impossibility of referential communication, both in the fictional as well as outside world.

**HISTORICAL**

Though the experience of time by an individual in Postmodernity resulted in a disrupted sense of reality and a-temporality, postmodernist theory was focused resolutely in the past and history. This can be explained, in part, by the wide influences of The Frankfurt School, and their obsession with Nazi fascism, which rooted their theories firmly in a historical context, described by Linda Hutcheon as “the presence of the past” (302). The importance of the past in postmodern theory is contrasted by the postmodern condition of the disorientation of an individual’s sense of time created by what Jameson calls a ‘perpetual present’. Postmodern literature, inspired by both the desire to represent this condition as well as engage with theories, turned to recreate and rewrite the genre of historical fiction. Postmodern historical fiction questions the concept of history and historiography via the parody and ironic usage of points-of-view, didactic rhetoric, and linear narrative, while also accurately portraying the disorientation and false sense of reality experienced in the postmodern condition.

The usage of irony in postmodern historical texts is essential to their engagement with postmodern theories and contemporaneous conditions. The Postmodernist rebuttal of modernist practices was to recognize the past, since it cannot be forgotten or destroyed and silence on the issue is not an option. But rather than innocently and naively take what it presented as facts to be
true, it questioned the entire system. Drawing on the long tradition of historical novels, postmodern historical literature manifested as parodies of these texts and drew upon their sincerity with irony bordering on scorn. Irony reached its full potential in Postmodernity thanks in large part to linguistic relativism and an individual’s conscious awareness of the fluidity of language’s meaning. The existence of multiple connotations and meanings of words is at the foundation for all word-play. Bran Nicol states that, “Irony is therefore not just cynical, not just a way of making fun of the world. It demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed” (13). Postmodern artistic production was fully aware that sincerity is simply not an option, which is why ironic interaction and portrayal of the past became the norm.

The demystification of the objectivity of history and representation of the past seems to have taken two separate paths in this category. The more traditional approach of setting the scene in the past is achieved by using realist techniques of positing historically accurate facts, events and persons into the narrative. Where this approach differs from non-postmodernist historical fiction, is that although the setting is historically accurate, the dialogues and actions of the characters draw attention to their function as constructions made in the present, for the needs and motives of the present. The second, more blatantly postmodernist technique is to deconstruct historical figures and events by fictionalizing them. This approach reconstructs the past in a highly fictional way so as to express the impossibility to accurately represent the past, referencing the idea of a crisis of representation and myth of historicity.

*The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco is an example of the first approach, in its ironical mixing of religious history with a detective novel. Set in the fourteenth century, this text includes historically accurate facts of the emperor and papacy, and contemporaneous debates about poverty.
The inclusion of these facts and the extensive research conducted frees the text from accusations of falsifying the past, but is highly Postmodern in its intertextuality and encyclopedic knowledge of anecdotal references. In the Postscript to The Name of the Rose, Eco explains that the role and function of a historical novel is “to make clearer to us contemporaries what happened then and how what happened then matters to us as well” (36). In fulfilling this role, the texts are not limited to simple presentation of events, but are rather more effective in their fictionalization of events and characters. Narrative and storytelling provide more insight and meaning into the past than any history book, by explicitly making the past pertinent to the present and relatable.

E.L. Doctorow’s masterpiece, Ragtime, presents the other approach in its expression of the impossibility to represent a past that is only accessible through abstractions, generalizations, and present motives which taint history. This text is more concerned with an engaging and impactful story than with researching historical facts. The relations between characters are heavily informed by Doctorow’s progressive desire to deconstruct class and race relations. Fredric Jameson declared Doctorow “one of the few serious and innovative leftist novelists at work in the United States today” (23). The relationships portrayed in Ragtime challenge the set historical narrative of the time and complicate a simple understanding of roles and relations. The opening lines of the novel set an idyllic scene of upper-middle class wealth and comfort and declare, “There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants” (3-4) only to be disrupted shortly after with descriptions of prostitution, activism, and murders and the revised statements: “Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants” (5). This revision is mirrored with the eventual entrances into the family of individuals from both groups. Rather than simply providing a descriptive historical setting of the
novel, *Ragtime* disrupts any of the reader’s previously held understanding of the historical period, or nostalgic remembrance of the past, by making the text a mirror of the convoluted present.

The historical authenticity of texts in this category is called into question and attention is given to the deconstruction of the myth of history by the ironic use of narrative techniques. The story of *The Name of the Rose* is framed by a nameless narrator in contemporary times discovering a seventeenth century reproduction by Mabillon of a fourteenth century manuscript by Abbé Vallet of the memoirs of Adso of Melk written in his old age about events from his youth. Even though the three-fold, four if you count from the text to reader, removal is supposedly mediated only by philologists, the complicated, almost ridiculous, frame forces the reader to question their own access to history. Linda Hutcheon, in her assessment of what she terms ‘historiographic metafiction’, states that in Postmodernity “parodic self-reflexiveness paradoxically leads here to the possibility of a literature which, while asserting its modernist autonomy as art, also manages simultaneously to investigate its intricate and intimate relations with the social world in which it is written and read” (308). The characteristics and functions specific to historical postmodern literature are to examine the parallels between the past and present. The playfulness of parody seeks to awaken the academic reader to the present as well as to period social and aesthetic concerns.

The parodic approach to postmodern theories is also seen in the use of didactic, and at times allegorical, rhetoric. Great attention and deliberation is paid to the construction of an overall mood of the text, so as to at times overwhelm the reader with symbolism and eloquence. Eco describes the experience of reading a novel as “going on a climb in the mountains: you have to learn the rhythm of respiration, acquire the pace; otherwise you stop right away” (*Postscript* 41). He
continues in this description by stating that “some novels breathe like gazelles, others like whales or elephants” (42). *The Name of the Rose* was constructed in a manner to mimic the period style, of intertextual, parable-like prose. Medieval chroniclers characteristically wrote with a didactic tone, enthusiastically alluding to other texts. One particular character in *The Name of the Rose*, Salvatore, exemplifies the idea of indiscriminate intertextuality, and the postmodern theoretical emphasis on the arbitrary nature of languages’ meaning. Adso describes the manner of his speech: “Salvatore spoke all languages, and no language. Or, rather, he had invented for himself a language which used the sinews of the languages to which he had been exposed.... And yet, one way or another, I did understand what Salvatore meant, and so did the others” (*Rose* 46-47). Salvatore embodies linguistic relativism and through his very mode of communication deconstructs the cultural construct of language.

*Ragtime* also directly engages with, and questions, the function of language, but does so not by the actions of his characters but via their names, or rather lack thereof. Having the main characters unnamed is a common literary technique to create a sense of ambiguity and allows the reader to more readily empathize with the characters, in that they are more universal and general. Instead of names they are simply referred to by their relations to each other. There are five family members: Mother, Father, Grandfather, Mother’s Younger Brother (who is sometimes referred to just as Younger Brother) and the unnamed son (occasionally referred to as the little boy). This technique is interesting in a Postmodern context; in that semiotics first proposed that terms, words, don’t have any innate meaning or refer to anything outside of language, but that they rather are defined by their relations to other terms. Lyotard, among other thinkers, took this a step further and declared that an individual is defined by his or her relation to others, “A self does not
amount to much, but ... exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits…” (15). By defining the main characters in terms of relations, Doctorow is attempting to create a more truthful, though unsatisfying, representation of interpersonal relations.

The texts within this category directly challenge the reader’s conception of historical fiction by playing with the norms of the genre, and disrupting them by having ambiguous and unsatisfying endings. *The Name of the Rose*, as described before, has a very complex narrative framework, yet the story itself follows a very orderly and set structure. The book is divided by day, then each day by the canonical hours. Yet even this clear organization is complicated by the nonlinear nature of memory. In the beginning pages Adso writes, “I prepare to leave on this parchment my testimony as to the wondrous and terrible events that I happened to observe in my youth, now repeating verbatim all I saw and heard, without venturing to seek a design, as if to leave to those who will come after (if the Antichrist has not come first) signs of signs, so that the prayer of deciphering may be exercised on them” (11). However, the idea that anyone, regardless of how good his or her memory is, could record verbatim any past event is simply ridiculous. Rather, the reader must take this declaration with a grain of salt and realize that Eco is in fact criticizing the genre of memoir and autobiography. By nature humans are storytellers, but this includes the falsification of memory and elaboration of events, generally not for malicious purposes, but to enhance the story.

Historical fiction in Postmodernity evolved from its previous status as attempts to realistically portray a certain time period, to works of literature that marry the past with the present via parody and intertextuality. The texts’ playfulness with the genre’s conventional forms
and structures are evidence of the need to portray the disparity between the kind of history taught in textbooks, and found in more traditional historical fiction, and that of the lived human experience. The engagement between theory and literature manifested into the underlying irony that colors the category. The lack of historical accuracy and usage of intertextual references out of place from the period setting exemplifies the category’s preoccupation with the desire to demystify historicity. However, these texts’ skepticism and fictionalization of history don’t deter from the resonant, figural truths found within the stories; as all history is in fact written for the needs and purposes of the present time.

**DETECTIVE**

The shift in theoretical emphasis from an essentially epistemic question in Modernity to questions of the ontic in Postmodernity was greatly influential in the renewed interest and interpretation of detective fiction. Detective fiction presented a set genre that, with its inherent interest in questions of truth and meaning, easily lent itself to an exploration of postmodern theories. However, as with other genres of postmodern fiction, these new texts ironically presented the formal structure and accepted plot development and playfully deconstructed them. Bran Nicol argues that the appeal of detective fiction for postmodern subjects is not because of some voyeuristic, macabre obsession with death or even because the subgenre is an expression of order’s triumph over chaos. Rather, the category appeals to readers because of “conjecture: a hypothesis formed through speculation (usually without hard evidence) that, moreover, works through narrative” (47). The exploration of a hypothesis or series of conjectures in the texts gives the reader a sense of purpose. The story’s exploration of investigation and theory reflects the endless search for meaning and correspondences within our own chaotic lives. However,
postmodern detective fiction doesn’t fully satisfy the reader or ultimately decipher and resolve the mystery in the same manner of more traditional mystery novels. Umberto Eco comments that a successful postmodern detective novel deceives even the most ingenuous of readers to the very end, to the extent that the reader may not even be aware that the mystery is one in which there is no answer, no eureka moment, and the traditionally infallible detective is ultimately defeated by illogic and chaos (Postscript 53). In carrying out not only a deception of the reader but also exemplifying postmodernist concerns, the texts within this category are defined by their characteristic hyper-paranoid characters, the parody of an epistemological dominance, and the deconstruction of ontological bounds.

The unstable and random nature of the postmodern condition created a profound destabilization of an individual’s psyche, which is reflected and portrayed in postmodern detective texts as hyper-paranoid characters. Detached from any sense of what is real, true, or factual, these characters search for any sense of correlation between events. In Paul Auster’s novel, City of Glass, the plot is initially driven by a deeply disturbed Peter Stillman Jr. who believes that his father, Stillman Sr. is coming to kill him. This paranoia drives Peter Jr. to hire a detective, Quinn⁴, to protect him. Peter Jr.’s paranoia ends up being paralleled in Quinn’s eventual fall into psychotic despair, a not so subtle hint that searching for an end meaning or Truth is ultimately a mortal quest. The characters in The Name of the Rose don’t succumb to the chaos to the same extent, but are still just as disturbed. By the end of the novel, and near the culmination of the mystery, both Adso and

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⁴ Real-world author Paul Auster wrote City of Glass. In the novel, Peter Jr. wants to hire a detective named Paul Auster (who may or may not exist), but ends up calling Daniel Quinn (who is a detective novelist), who subsequently pretends to be detective Paul Auster. Quinn tries to find the real detective Paul Auster, but ends up meeting author Paul Auster (who is writing about frame narratives). This Paul Auster is a friend of a nameless narrator (who one would traditionally associate with the real-world author) who is the chronicler of the story.
William yield to hopelessness and question the entire endeavor. Adso exclaims: “‘But it is a story of theft and vengeance among monks of scant virtue!’ I cried, dubiously. ‘Because of a forbidden book, Adso. A forbidden book!’ William replied” (Eco Rose 394). Throughout the story, both characters assumed that there was some logical, causal relation to the murders, but at this point both realize that all the bloodshed was because of something so petty and banal as a book. However, in constructing an elaborate mystery and killing multiple characters because of a text, Eco is pointing to the importance in Postmodernity of texts, as well as reflecting the randomness of the postmodern condition.

The previously dominant mode of understanding the world was via epistemic inquiry. However, in Postmodernity this mode no longer provided a satisfying explanation of the contemporaneous conditions. This shift took on many forms, including that of parody in the category of detective fiction. As stated previously, irony and parody are not simply empty, pastiche, or cynical gestures of dismissal but rather truer and more realistic representations of the obligatory negotiations of the overwhelming intertextuality in Postmodernity. Bran Nicol reflects on The Name of the Rose and states that, “behind the incessant irony there is surely a serious point about how postmodernity imprisons us in a frame of cultural references” (14). The manner in which the detective-friar William goes about trying to solve the murders is directly referencing and parodying the trope of a highly logical and rational detective. Adso comments, “I understood at that moment my master’s method of reasoning…. when he didn’t have an answer, William proposed many to himself, very different one from another. I remained puzzled” (Eco Rose 305). The comment here is not just on the puzzlement of William’s method, but also on the specious and presumptuous nature of an epistemological understanding of the world. There is an immediate and
perceptible distrust in Postmodernity for any end meaning, or grand narrative, such as implied in a more traditional epistemic viewpoint.

A parodic commentary of epistemic dominance is also seen in *City of Glass* with the inclusion of meta-interruptions by the narrator. From the very start of the text, it is clear that there is not going to be an ultimate answer or acceptable mode of knowing the mystery. It is stated, “the question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell” (3). Later on in the story, the text more directly challenges epistemology and reflects a more ontic interest in Postmodernity. When two, identical men who resemble Stillman Sr. appear on the train platform, Quinn must choose which one to follow; this incident is accompanied by the comment, “there was no way to know: not this, not anything” (56). This is a highly ironic statement, seemingly out of place in a detective novel. Yet Auster is reflecting the postmodern push away from questions of knowing to those of the existence of an answer to any question.

The turn away from a focus on the modes of knowledge towards a greater interest in the study of being is reflected in a challenge to the detective novel’s traditional role and form. The reader comes with an expectation of the genre that a mystery will be presented, complicated, but ultimately solved. However, the postmodernist detective texts of this category deny this linear, logical plot progression and instead intensify and dilate the mystery, and reject any ending or answer. Umberto’s model for detective fiction is that of a labyrinth. He defines three separate types of labyrinths: a classical labyrinth that has one path, one exit; a ‘mannerist’ labyrinth that has one exit but various paths that could be dead-ends; and a ‘rhizomatic’ labyrinth that has a conceivable structure but not one that has a definitive path, exit, or end (*Postscript* 57-58). The library in the story is a mannerist labyrinth, but what is more important is that the labyrinthine structure of the
mystery is that of a rhizome; which in turn is a commentary and reflection of the structure and conditions of Postmodernity.

The postmodern individual inhabits a rhizomatic labyrinth where one cannot perceive or superimpose an overarching form or grand narrative. *The Crying of Lot 49*, by Thomas Pynchon, is interested in postmodern theoretical inquiry of this structure, by questioning not only a conclusion to the mystery but the existence of the mystery itself. The main character repeatedly questions what is real and what is fiction,

> With her own eyes she verified a WASTE system…. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area. Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy – some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so.

(Pynchon 107)

What is at stake for Oedipa, and for the narrative, is the lack of certainty one way or another of the existence or absence of reality within the framework of the story. The pervasive ambiguity is what is so challenging to the postmodern individual’s psyche. The concern and motive in postmodern detective fiction is to disrupt the hierarchical dominance of epistemology, but through the practice of deepening the mystery, these texts also destabilize an ontological understanding of both the fictional and ‘real’ world. Thus, as in the existential dilemma posed in Oedipa’s situation, the search for knowledge turns into a search for reality itself.

The texts’ undermining of ontological bounds produces a profound sense of irresolvable ambiguity in the psyches of both the fictional characters as well as of the reader, which is ultimately
reflective of their own unstable understanding of existence in Postmodernity. The description of
the setting of *City of Glass* is greatly influenced by a Jamesonian understanding of the postmodern
c condition. Jameson states that attempts to explore and express the new space of Postmodernity
have resulted in “peculiar new forms of realism (or at least the mimesis of reality)” (49). The
disorienting and obscure manner in which postmodern subjects perceive space is dutifully
portrayed in the description of New York City as “an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless
steps, and no matter how far [Quinn] walked, no matter how well he came to know its
neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost” (Auster 4). The physical
surroundings of the fictional world are constructed in such a manner that immediately alerts the
reader to the idea that there is nothing certain or stable in Postmodernity, when even the city itself
overwhelms the individual. This deterioration of settings and normally stable aspects of a narrative
point to an understanding that neither ontology nor epistemology are fully representative or
descriptive of this new condition, but rather reinforce Jameson’s call for new modes of depiction.
The reflection of Adso in the beginning of *The Name of the Rose* states that, “In time I realized that
what seemed a lack of confidence was only curiosity, but at the beginning I knew little of this
virtue, which I thought, rather, a passion of the covetous spirit. I believed instead that the rational
spirit should not indulges such passion, but feed only on the Truth, which (I thought) one knows
from the outset” (Eco *Rose* 15). Adso realizes and revises his understanding of both detective
William and of how one can and should examine the world. William is slowly revealed to be
different from the traditional trope of a detective, and while he epitomizes logic and order, he does
so via misguided thought experiments and false correlations of events and evidence to fit his already
constructed narrative of the mystery. In the end, the perpetrator reveals that it was William’s false
sense of confidence in an ultimately fake apocalyptic pattern that facilitated the perpetrator’s
deception and enabled him to carry out further murders.

The category of detective fiction is well established and has traditional forms and tropes,
which aided in the parodic postmodern interpretation of this genre. The texts in this category
question and deconstruct the dominance of epistemology but also disrupt a purely ontological
understanding of existence, in order to show that neither, nor any, totalizing theory can exist in
Postmodernity. This was achieved via the ironic intertextual references of the genre’s conventions,
the creation of hyper-paranoid characters detached from any sense of reality or metanarrative, and
the portrayal of the fictional world as a mirror of the rhizomatic labyrinth known as the
postmodern condition.

MINORITY

With the institutionalization of postmodern literature came a subsequent move to expand
the canon in order to include previously excluded and ignored texts. This change in the mindset of
academia is due in large part to the repercussions of an emphasis in postmodern theory on
relativism and equality. Thus, feminist, post-colonial, and ethnic texts were incorporated into the
accepted canon. Though these texts are taught as postmodern literature, the formal qualities and
areas of emphasis differ greatly. Barbara Creed is quick to warn that assimilation between separate
movements “may well result in a confusion over terms… such confusion only serves to undermine
the specificities of the positions of both feminism and postmodernism” (415). Where more typical
postmodern texts focused on creating a dialogue with postmodern theory and on portraying of
postmodern conditions, these ‘minority’ texts were occupied with the legitimization of their
respective movements. Yet, despite the differing agendas, postmodern techniques are found in the
texts, mainly because their engagement with contemporaneous conditions created similar characteristics. These include a complex non-linear structure and the presentation of alternative, legitimate forms of history and narrative. However, there are also characteristics found only in this category that reveal their difference from other postmodern texts. These consist in the more intimate, interpersonal atmosphere that exemplifies socially minded fiction, and the demand for cultural remembrance of certain past events.

The traditional, typical linear narrative structure is no longer a descriptive representation of the reality experienced by an individual in Postmodernity. Rather, a complex non-linear construction of story is more in sync with the random, irrational chaos of the postmodern condition. The interwoven, web-like structure of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a prime example of the intermarriage between the motives of minority writing and Postmodernism. In this seminal work, the details of a family’s struggle in postbellum America are slowly revealed by repeating, re-telling, and circulating over the same events; with each pass more details are uncovered until every facet of the story exposed. This text presents a representation of a common cultural experience, and the collective perspectives of a people. The dedication page reads “Sixty Million and more”, referencing the countless untold stories of the victims of slavery. In an attempt to represent the collective, there are multiple perspectives throughout the story, even going so far as to include the perspectives of perpetrators of oppression, as well as the victims. The discrepancies between varying perspectives produce shifts in the points of views of the narration. The bulk of the novel is narrated in the third person, but a hand-full of chapters shift to the first person perspectives of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. In Beloved’s chapters there are variations in formatting, with more experimental word spacing that slowly transforms into poetic lines. Though this is more exemplary
of postmodern literary techniques, it is utilized in this narrative to reflect the complicated nature of
the first person perspective of a manifested ghost.

The repetition and retelling of events is also utilized in feminist texts so as to write
alternative, legitimate forms of narrative. Angela Carter’s collection of short stories, *The Bloody
Chamber*, retells well-known fairy tales, as well as creates new ones. These stories, though, are not
to be read as simple reversals of patriarchal hierarchy, but rather are deconstructing the tropes of
fairy-tales as well as complicating a binary understanding of gender roles. Carter not only retells
particular fairy tales, but also presents multiple retellings of a single fairy tale. The juxtaposition
and contrast between “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride” reveals the complex
and nuanced nature of narrative. “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” is much more similar to the original
Beauty and the Beast tale: a classic, superficial story that has a straightforward ending. However,
“The Tiger’s Bride” challenges the trope of an innocent, virginal girl by presenting a character that
is willing to strip for the beast, and be “gobbled up”. In this euphemistic act, she is turned into a
tiger herself: “And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a
life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water
and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur” (67). Rather than the
uncomplicated understanding of a girl so pure and innocent that she can see inner beauty of a
monster, in this story she is turned into a beast herself. Yet, rather than this being a tragic ending,
the transformation and exit from reality is presented as preferable to the alternative of having the
beast re-enter the world.

Despite the presence of postmodernist techniques, texts in this category are by definition
dissimilar to other texts in the canon due to their ulterior motives of legitimizing and portraying
minority voices. Many prominent advocates of these movements are, in fact, apprehensive of the inclusion of these texts in the postmodern canon. Dr. Cornel West contextualizes this trepidation in saying, “the precursor term ‘modern’ itself has not simply been used to devalue the cultures of oppressed and exploited peoples, but also has failed to deeply illumine the internal complexities of these cultures. Under the circumstances, there is little reason to hold out hope for the new term ‘postmodernism’ as applied to the practices of oppressed peoples” (393). He goes on to question the inclusion of these texts in the canon and its effect on minorities, by suggesting that rather than legitimizing alternative voices, it is instead highlighting preconceived notions of otherness and difference, and further marginalizing these communities (394). In this context, it could be argued that the culturally specific history and modes of articulating that past are lost on an audience outside of that population. 

*Beloved*, though not written in vernacular like many minority texts, uses particular phrases to articulate the unimaginable horrific cultural past. The phrase “make tracks” (43) is used multiple times throughout the story to mean run away, and the phrase “took my milk” (17) is used as a synecdoche for Sethe’s rape while pregnant. However, if the reader is an outsider to a specific community, the full significance of particular phrases in that community’s dialect is, at times, incomprehensible.

The debate around the categorization and canonization of these texts as Postmodern is one that has no definitive answer. However, it is important to note that these texts in this category, while having postmodern literary techniques, are addressing separate theoretical issues to other texts in the canon. The utilization of postmodernist literary techniques can at times aid in furthering their agenda; with a theoretical foundation of equal validity and relativism, minority texts don’t have to focus so much on legitimizing themselves and can focus more on portraying events and
characters to progress their respective movements. However, as Creed suggests, “perhaps Lyotard is ‘correct’ to recommend at least the provisional abandonment of all ‘Truths’ in favor of the short narratives which the master discourses have attempted to suppress in order to validate their own positions” (416). The inclusion of these texts, which are supposedly representative of a particular societal history, in the canon of postmodern literature creates a debate as to whether the richness and uniqueness of minority voices are lost, or overly generalized, in order to appeal to an audience outside of that population. Therefore, one must be wary of any attempts to explain anything with a totalizing theory, whether it be by the designation of umbrella terms like feminism or postmodernism, or by the grand narrative created by a canon of literature.
THE CANON

One’s access to postmodern literature is often mediated and dictated by the canon of postmodern literature and the categories to which texts are identified. A canon, and the institution of canons, is an ideological construct with which to designate the standard, or conventional. In relation to literature, it denotes the most influential or significant works, though these qualifiers are vague and leave much room for interpretation. Postmodernism can be seen, as West states, as “a product of significant First World reflections upon the decentering of Europe that take such forms as the demystification of European cultural predominance and the deconstruction of European philosophical edifices” (391). With this disintegration of traditional structures, one would think that the institution of canons would too come under scrutiny. However, for pragmatic as well as scholarly reasons, canons seem to be unavoidably necessary. Raymond Mazurek, who conducted a study of canons of post-WWII novels, states that “the limits of anthologies and other constraints on teaching as well as...the need for narratives and representations, including literary representations, of social experiences and cultural history...” are all valid reasons for the existence and persistence of canons (145). Therefore, because Postmodernism and the institution of canons seems to be necessarily, if still uneasily, reconciled, one must examine why, by answering who dictates and chooses the canon, how postmodern literature has been institutionalized, and if calls for either expansion or destruction of the canon are viable.

Though there is not some smoky-filled room where a clandestine society of academics deliberately and knowingly dictates which texts are admitted into the canon, the role of universities, critics, and academic journals in the formation of the canon is of pivotal importance. Many readers are exposed to postmodern literature only at institutions of higher learning, which is
why the university’s role in canonization is so important to understand. Therefore the act of formulating a syllabus for a college course is just as, if not more, central to the making of a canon as the publication of articles by critics in academic journals (146). Yet most professors choose which texts to teach based not just on the exemplary and influential qualities and characteristics of a text, but also on their own agendas and limitations of time. For the latter reason, works like Thomas Pynchon’s seminal masterpiece *Gravity’s Rainbow* are often replaced with significantly shorter, but less exemplary, works, like *The Crying of Lot 49*, in order to talk about the author’s style and importance within the constrained timeframe of a semester. Therefore, a student’s access to literature, unless the individual is motivated enough to search out texts on their own, is colored and shaped within the particular framework of the classroom and syllabus.

The effect of the institutionalization of literature is that the access to and engagement with texts by both students and readers is irreparably altered. The vast majority of students accepts the norms of academia and abides by doctrines of their professors without giving much consideration to pedagogy. Michael Martin, in his critique of postmodern theory, notes “in literature departments over the last thirty years, these postmodern schools have had the day and have increasingly secured their powerbase by transmitting their doctrines to their students and protégés” (75). Postmodern theory has quickly moved past the initial stages of legitimization and is now highly institutionalized, systematized, and canonized, and is presently the dominant mode of criticism and analysis in academia. This hegemony of postmodern discourse remains largely unchallenged and the foundational principles of deconstructing hierarchy and structure now seem to be forgotten. Martin sardonically points out that “Postmodernism has maintained the Structuralist enthusiasm for pseudo-scientific smugness while avoiding anything approximating scientific method. Though
holding science in disrepute, postmodernism nevertheless assumes the sciences’ mantel of certainty— even if that certainty is a certainty of uncertainty” (82). Postmodernism has inexorably married with the very institutions and subjects of its criticism, and the experimental and challenging texts produced in Postmodernity are now confined to the framework of the canon.

The confines of the canon of postmodern literature limit readers’ exposure to texts, in their promotion of certain texts over others, and build a framework of engagement around those texts by providing a narrative in which to understand them. Postmodernist theory had very noble ideals of equal validity and relativism, but these have shown themselves to be impractical when it comes to critique and discussion. It is simply an impossibility to talk about everything equally. Therefore, a framework of discussion, and set rules of engagement, facilitate the conversation; but at the expense of the very ideas of the text being discussed. Derrida states, “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself” (224). Coming from the father of Deconstruction, a favorable statement of structure would seem highly hypocritical, yet even Derrida acknowledges the freeing nature of having a framework in which to be free. This notion can easily be extrapolated to explain the merits of a framework provided by a canon. Therefore, the theoretical idea of equal validity should necessarily be qualified by the statement that equal validity is provided to texts in the confines of the postmodern canon of literature.

The reconciliation between theory and practice in the idea of a framework in which to operate freely then in turn sparks a debate as to how to construct this framework. As seen in the inclusion of minority voices in the canon of postmodern literature, an expansion of the canon is
seen as sensible and a comprehensive way to address the incongruity of creating a structure for texts that test and bend socially constructed forms. Though the very existence of a canon is dependent on choosing, thereby passing value judgments and creating contradictions with theories of Postmodernism, an expansion to include previously underrepresented or omitted texts attends to the ideas of relativity and equal validity. These ‘minority’ texts, however, are still chosen by the dominant majority. West points out that Postmodernism is a highly Eurocentric, First World movement and “for too long, the postmodern debate has remained inscribed within narrow disciplinary boundaries, insulated artistic practices, and vague formulations of men and women of letters” (392). He goes on to call for new more socially and politically minded modes of engaging with contemporaneous conditions; however, for practical reasons it is uncertain that significant change will come to such a strong academic tradition such as the canon. Mazurek argues the counterpoint that “to throw out the canon in the name of liberation might only make the understanding of history more difficult for the very social groups the progressive critic wishes to advance” (145). This is due to the idea that if one writes in too many feminine and minority voices it will seem that these groups are well represented, and therefore the struggle for their equal rights is not a pertinent issue. A too wide expansion of the canon can misrepresent minority voices in the same distorted manner of a too narrow cannon. Rather, the postmodern canon of literature attempts to strike a delicate balance of representation and inclusion of minority writers, in the same approach of their attempt at a delicate balance between hierarchy and relativity.

Therefore, the institution of a canon of postmodern literature is one that, though highly problematic and contradictory by nature, necessarily has to exist. Though in the future there might be a new mode of engagement with texts that doesn’t come into conflict with the theories of the
texts themselves, for now the canon is the only viable method of critical examination. Rather than despair, or destroy it, one must accept that although it is contradictory, it is still functional. An awareness and teaching of the incongruity must suffice, so that the reader can continue to analyze and examine the texts.
CONCLUSION

An examination of the modes of engagement with postmodern literature brings about a necessary awareness of the multiple contradictory aspects of the relationships between Postmodernity, postmodern theory, postmodern literature, and the conditions in which a text is read. Each of these areas has its own respective frameworks and approaches, which in turn come into conflict with each other and lead to paradoxical interactions. Rather than denying these innately contradictory liaisons, they are instead accepted as necessary, or are in some cases reconciled. Postmodern artistic production necessarily had to acknowledge the simulacral, technology-ridden, media-driven bricolage of Postmodernity and focus its efforts on the portrayal and representation of little narratives in lieu of grand narratives. These productions also engaged with the experience of time by an individual living in Postmodernity, paradoxically characterized by a-temporality, eternal present, and presence of a haunted past. In the theories of Postmodernism, the deconstruction of cultural hierarchies and binary oppositions led to the ideas of relativism, equal validity, and impossibility of value judgments. Manifestations of these theories are seen in the rampant intertextuality and desire for experimentation in postmodern literature. However, literature also had to contend with the theoretical emphasis on a crisis of representation, created by linguistic relativism as well as the demystification of both history and author.

In attempts to accurately portray this crisis, literature became highly self-reflexive, parodic of realist techniques, and demanded an ideal reader that could actively co-create meaning. The various categories of the postmodern canon of literature denote texts’ diverse approaches in their engagement with both the conditions of Postmodernity as well as postmodern theories. The texts portray the lack of telos, objectivity, and linearity, as well as destabilize tropes, genres, and forms,
in order to describe the rhizomatic labyrinth known as the postmodern condition. The canonization of these texts institutionalizes and systematizes in a necessary move to limit the exceptionally wide array of manifestations of postmodern literature into a more accessible frame.

The canon of postmodern literature is composed of “works which depend upon the reader’s prior knowledge of the narrative conventions which they exploit, parody, and subvert. Whether or not these works sell well, they speak, first and foremost, to the minority sensibility of the college educated” (Maltby 523). Postmodern texts are often characterized as highly intellectually demanding and inaccessible to average readers, and therefore remain insulated objects of academia. However, one must diligently bear in mind that the framing and teaching of the texts greatly determines how a reader engages with the text. Postmodern criticism’s “suspicious attitude toward language and its demand for the repudiation of authorship” significantly colors the environment in which texts are received, which in turn influences the production of texts themselves (Martin 89). The role and function of a canon is to create a metanarratival framework for texts; however, as Barthes states, “literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law” (147). Postmodern literature’s rebellion against and emancipation from a totalizing narrative is contradicted by the canonization of its texts. For practical as well as academic reasons the tradition of the canon is inevitable and the structure it provides facilitates criticism and analysis. However, the conclusiveness in a dominant overarching narrative of the canon of postmodern literature is in
direct conflict with the nature of well-crafted and impactful literature: that stories never finish; new insight and meanings can always be gained.

Subsequently, it becomes the responsibility of a reader of postmodern texts to successfully identify and navigate the numerous contradictions and interwoven relationships that are created by and define a critical examination of literature. The disparity between the theories of Postmodernism and the practice of literature exhibited in the canonization of texts is, though highly incongruous, necessarily functional. Though literature strives to reach an ever-wider community, and convey the experiences of that population, through experimentation and new forms of representation, postmodern literature doesn’t just provide a temporary fictional diversion from reality but is a representation of contemporaneous conditions that challenge and haunt the reader. Postmodernism, as an umbrella term, seems by nature to problematize and contradict any attempts at a totalizing understanding of itself or its various manifestations. Yet this inherent contradictory quality doesn’t denote disfunctionality or an inability to critically examine; rather, it forces a recognition and acceptance of ambiguity.
Appendix
Figure 1  Barth, John. Lost in the Funhouse. New York: Anchor Books, 1988. Print.

Figure 2  Federman, Raymond. Double or Nothing. Normal: Fiction Collective Two, 1998. Print.
And now we are near the end.

Much more remains to be said

Much more remains to be prepared

And no doubt much of it will never be said

will never be prepared except perhaps

in some other version of our lives.

Yes! Poor Boris it had to be

Everything must be plausible

And Dominique! I don’t like Dominique.

I’ve never liked Dominique

Too effeminate not Jewish enough you can’t avoid the facts

But we must forget that about the Jews the Camps and about the Lamp

s

h

a

d

never again

c

s

It’s a rare thing.

So therefore back with Boris back in the subway scene. He only follows her in his mind:
mentally — ideally — abstractly — dreamily.

Happens all the time. Meanwhile Uncle David woke up in his seat.

He

gets

up

They must have arrived. That’s possible. Must be 249th Street.

If there is such a stop. It was a long and exciting ride.

And now the afternoon with the Jacobsses is about to begin:

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Figure 3  Federman, Raymond. *Double or Nothing*. Normal: Fiction Collective Two, 1998. Print.


Figure 6  Federman, Raymond. *Double or Nothing*. Normal: Fiction Collective Two, 1998. Print.
It's easier to go out and buy yourself a new one But not him Must have been in Los Angeles before the poker game that's the only possibility

laughed like hell. But that guy I told him out and bought him one. Suddenly red eyes say not a word. While I held him in my arms. And also for it in the first garbage can, so lucky for times In the toilet he had

the rest. So much he had Or course he had something

rush and the poker game is a normal kind of toothbrush way I whole business immediately asked Trying to control my of munny basement could a guy do That's later approximately I beside me suddenly

guy didn't how it happened! I though I am some

DOUBLE OR NOTHING. In thinking with it all hell with it all hell with it all

This is much more OBVIOUS and all thing but that's when anything just

in Los Angeles this guy told him to wash with a strong detergent. But I immediately while I was you imagine something. Finally I held that I held him brush just like that. But it was a real hard time so I cleaned him street making certain toothbrush otherwise could have a bit of rash instead of for a beginning. For the game this way it's much easier to re describe how it's

downstream past the much before when. I play with them I know what was happening bunch of guys who game Winning a hit even more to 150 the yellow tooth

This is much more OBVIOUS and all thing but that's when anything just.
THIS IS NOT THE BEGINNING


Works Cited


