



高等学校英语专业系列教材

# 美国后现代派小说选读

杨仁敬  
陈世丹

主编

*Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction*



外语教学与研究出版社

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS



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# Preface

杨仁敬

This is the ABC of American postmodernist fiction that may be used as a textbook for graduate students at college level.

Almost no selected readings with the variety of American postmodernist fiction appeared in our country before now. Nor can we find a single writer or a work of its kind was included in the anthologies for college students' extensive and intensive readings compiled some years ago. But many teachers and students hope to read and understand them. This book will meet their requirements and help them bridge the gap between the period of the 1950s and the new millennium until the present in contemporary American literature.

About 49 years have passed since the publication of Heller's *Catch-22* that marks the beginning of the new stage of postmodernist fiction in the history of American literature. The American postmodernist authors have made numerous innovations and experiments in their works both in content and form. They have brought great changes in artistic device, style and language. Their successful experiments become a great contribution to the development of American fiction, which eventually came out of the great crisis in the 1960s. Many of them such as Pynchon, Vonnegut, Nabokov, Gass, Gaddis, DeLillo, Doctorow, Didion, Mailer, Sukenick, Morrison, Reed, Maxine Hong Kingston, Vollmann, and Powers are well-known home and abroad. Their novels have been translated into many languages. They have occupied a salient place in the history of American literature.

Attractive to instructors and graduate students at almost all the American universities, American postmodernist fiction has become the hot point for class discussion since the 1990s. Its novels and short stories are often selected as teaching materials for graduates and undergraduates at different levels, and have turned out to be students' favorites both in and out of classroom.

It would be a must for English majors to know the new changes and developments in American literature and the American English since 1961. What this *Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction* aims at is to introduce to readers the major American postmodernist writers and their major works starting from Joseph Heller to the Generation Xers represented by William Vollmann, Richard Powers and Douglas Coupland at the moment, along with some brief biographical sketches and overviews of their themes, ideas, and artistic styles.

In selecting the writers for this version, we had paid great attention to their merits, origins and positions, trying to cover all the mainstream authors, Jewish, African American and Asian American writers, so as to present a panoramic picture of American letters. As for their works, most of their representative novels were selected in parts with only one short story chosen from William Gass. But science fiction postmodernist writers such as Ursula Le Guin and William Gibson were left out for the time being, because of the limited space of the book. The writers and their works were arranged chronologically for the readers' convenience.

*Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction* consists of 25 units. Each unit covers an author and his or her major work beginning from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in 1961 to Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* at the moment. It has five items, including a biographical sketch along with brief comment on the writer's major work and its key ideas. The biographical information provides the author's life and career in brief, while the commentary gives a starting point for consideration of the writer's ideas and values. Some notes to the selected readings are offered to help readers read and understand the text better. In addition, three questions for thinking and discussion follow the selections. In a word, the book provides readers with reading pleasure and comprehensive knowledge of American postmodernist fiction.

The *Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction* will be of great value to university instructors who are teaching graduate students contemporary American literature. They will find here an abundance of American postmodernist novels and short stories collected for the first time in our country. This book offers them an opportunity to get in touch with a new

kind of fiction with a history of almost 50 years. Through reading, they may be familiar with the theme and thought, style and structure expressed in the meticulously wrought language. We have always envisaged the teachers as part of the editors working together with us. They may have their own methods, opinions, interpretations and choices of the readings. Sometimes they may find our downright missings. We hope so. We have given a brief account of our views on the selected authors and their works and have drawn some issues pointedly enough to enable teachers or students more positively to present their own ideas.

As for the MA students, they will also discover here the voices, ideas, and styles of the American postmodernist authors, different from the realistic and modernist writers both thematically and artistically. The *Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction* will serve for them as the first step towards American postmodernist fiction. Though they are much more complicated and difficult for MA students to read, some background knowledge, new words and terms have been noted to help them solve the problems. They may get used to them step by step through careful reading at the very beginning and make progress with each passing day. Due to the limited space, many selected readings cannot keep the consistency of the meaning of the original texts after they are abridged. The reader can read the whole edition according to the page numbers provided after each selection. Class discussions on the basis of close reading of the texts may be one of the best approaches for understanding American postmodernist fiction. Some difficult questions hard to be dealt with by one student can be settled by collective efforts through discussions or debates. For those who want to read more, they could refer to our two other books in Chinese, namely *On American Postmodernist Fiction* and *Selections in American Postmodernist Short Stories* published by Qingdao Press in 2004.

In compiling this book, Prof. Chen Shidan and I acted as co-editors in chief. The participants listed in the Postscript are my graduate students. Most of them have got their Ph.D. degrees and become professors or associate professors. Others are doctoral students at work. All of them are rather familiar with the readings they selected. The selections in the book are typical, popular and representative. They are taken from reliable and authoritative editions by American presses.

When the *Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction* is about to be published, I would like to express my hearty thanks to all the participants for their hardworking, meticulous and cooperative spirit. Without their faithful collaborations, this book won't be finished within half a year.

Thanks will first go to the leaders of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press who have foreseen the importance and significance of the *Selected Readings in American Postmodernist Fiction*. Without their generous support and concern, the book will come out so smoothly. Special thanks will be given to Mr. Zhu Wenjie, who has directly contacted us and rendered good assistance to us in the whole process and also to Miss Cai Yan who kindly introduced us to the Press, and to Miss Ma Xu, who gave us some good suggestions too.

A literary work keeps its vitality by continuing to provoke new explorations and new assessments and to invite new insights. So does a textbook. It will be well accepted by more and more readers through constant enrichment and revisions. Since this book is our first try, there may exist some missings and mistakes. We have done our utmost to compile the book, yet some problems can hardly be avoided due to the pressing of time and the shortage of references. Thus, I sincerely welcome any suggestions and criticism from teachers and students, readers and experts.

New Ruijing Village, Xiamen

February 6, 2009

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# Introduction

杨仁敬

American postmodernist fiction has witnessed nearly 50 years since the publication of *Catch-22* in 1961. It goes through three different stages with several groups of outstanding novelists such as Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and many others. Most of them may stand side by side with the realistic author Mark Twain and the modernist writer William Faulkner in the history of American literature. But different from them both in content and form, particularly in language, the novelty and innovation of their works have evoked wide-ranging explorations and positive assessments. They are new chapters in contemporary American literature.

In dealing with American postmodernist fiction, it is necessary to know the fundamental definition of postmodernism first. Then I shall give a general account of three topics: the rise of American postmodernist fiction, its characteristics, and its strength and weakness, for your reference.

What is postmodernism? It is the cultural logic of late capitalism according to Fredric Jameson, the well-known American Marxist critic. In his opinion, late capitalism means the age of post-industrialization of the Western world. There have appeared three different cultural modes corresponding to the three stages of the Western capitalism:

1) The capitalist stage: The national market was formed through the accumulation of capitals as Karl Marx said in his masterpiece *The Capital*. The literary and cultural mode is critical realism.

2) The monopolistic or imperialist stage as Lenin put it: The literary and cultural mode is modernism.

3) The postmodern stage: Cultural industry and transnational capitalism appear in the Western world. In literature and culture, postmodernism becomes the main current.

Another American critic Ihab Hassan holds that postmodernism is a poetics, a reaction against the early 20th-century modernism, but not some hypothetical writing of the future. In a word, postmodernism means it is the posterity of modernism.

As for the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, there are two major different opinions: One thinks postmodernism is a continuation of modernism, just like the relationship between father and son. Another holds that postmodernism is a break from modernism, a reaction against it. But Hassan moves forward and backward, suggesting a decisive break between modernism and postmodernism, and also suggests more continuity between the two.

Therefore, there appeared a great debate in the late 1980s. Both sides didn't come to an agreement. They could not persuade each other. The controversy between the two opponent ideas have passed down to the present, though not so serious as before.

Obviously, postmodernism is a philosophical trend with the characteristics of being transnational and cross-disciplined. That is to say, postmodernism has come out not only in the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and Australia but also in Russia, New Zealand, Brazil, Israel, etc., covering a great number of countries and regions both in the West and the East. As far as scientific field is concerned, postmodernism has dominated in art and literature, culture and linguistics, education, history, political science, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and other social sciences, and also in architecture, technology, engineering, and other natural sciences. In the 1980s, postmodernism reached its acme by prevailing over many fields simultaneously. It has exerted far-reaching and long-continued influences on many sciences in many countries and regions throughout the world.

However, postmodernism was over as a philosophical trend in the 1990s. But its influence on American literature still exists. It has been flourishing in fiction until present. The theme is many-sided, directed to all walks of life, and the style is more colorful and copious, and the language rich and unique. Therefore, they are worth reading and researching. That is why readers in and out of the United States have been so interested in it all along.

### **I. The Rise of American Postmodernist Fiction**

American postmodernist fiction is the outcome of social changes brought by World War II. It has much to do with the economic conditions as described by Fredric Jameson, "Thus, the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s after the wartime shortage of consumer goods and spare parts have been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered." He held that the commercialization of art and literature and the commodification of literary

works are the chief features of postmodernism.

Soon after the war, a great number of young soldiers came home from battlefields in Asia and Europe. But they could hardly find a job though the reconstruction began. The Cold War caused the international tension. In 1950, the Korean War broke out and the United States was involved in it for three years. Then Senator McCarthy blindly condemned many Communists hidden in the governmental organs. And the government asked every citizen to vow to be loyal to the country. Many intellectuals from primary school teachers to university professors were investigated or persecuted. McCarthyism threw people into trouble. They lived in fear and insecurity. In the 1960s, social conflicts were further sharpened. The Civil Rights movement, Negro movement, and women movement went on one after another. The anti-Vietnam War movement swept every corner of the country. Almost all writers and artists joined it without hesitation. In 1963, John Kennedy, the President at the time, was assassinated in Dallas. The black leader and cleric, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed in Memphis in 1968. Terror and violence filled the society. The young people felt quite at a loss. Some of them became hippies who rejected the status quo by dressing unconventionally with long hair. They launched a countercultural movement against the established culture in values and lifestyles.

The confusing situations irritated the American writers. Some of them criticized the government in their articles that the social crisis had led to spiritual crisis which made the younger generation downcast and despaired. Others deeply considered why the technological innovations such as atom bombs were used to destroy the ordinary people in the war, instead of improving the living conditions of human beings. That should be changed without any delay.

The social crisis soon did lead to the crisis in culture and literature. The traditional patterns of fiction met with serious challenges. Saul Bellow, one of the famous novelists and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, declared that American fiction had got into the dead end and lost its humanity and moral responsibility, while the writers indulged into self-mock. Another novelist Ronald Sukenick held that American novels were already dead and the only way out was nothing but to deconstruct and reconstruct. In 1967, the well-known writer John Barth pointed out in his article "The Literature of Exhaustion," that contemporary American writers were confronting the exhaustedness of literature. The old form of fiction was used up, writers had to reconsider the structure, plot, ending and narrative of the traditional art of fiction and to find a new way in creative writing. Thus, the voices of reform

and change spread all over the country.

It is Joseph Heller who first turned on a new page by publishing *Catch-22* in 1961. Then many writers followed, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), John Hawkes' *Second Skin* (1964), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1968), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and so on. They have broken the old-fashioned frame to experiment with many new artistic devices, e.g. black humor, fragments, collages, parody and word games with the mixture of fact and fiction, history and imagination, literature and science. All those have been highly acclaimed and translated into many languages. They have exerted great influences both at home and abroad. That is called the first stage of American postmodernist fiction.

Since the 1970s, there have appeared more and more postmodernist novelists and novels such as Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), John Barth's *Chimera* (1972), Ronald Sukenick's *Out* (1973), E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* (1976), Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1979), and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978). In 1970, William Gass put forward the theory of metafiction, which was well praised. The 1980s saw more postmodernist novels coming out. They are Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* (1989) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989). Sukenick published a collection of essays to explore the new form and language of fiction. He also practices his theory in his novels successfully.

With the end of the Vietnam War in the late 1970s, the United States got into a comparatively stable period. American postmodernist fiction continued to flourish in the 1990s. Excellent novels came out one by one, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990), Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* (1993), E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* (1994), Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) and Ronald Sukenick's *Mosaic Man* (1999). Both the young and old postmodernist writers did their utmost to produce new works. American postmodernist fiction reached the acme of its development in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The critics name it as the second stage of American postmodernist fiction.

However, as an international philosophical trend, the upsurge of

postmodernism was over in the 1990s. Yet American postmodernist fiction was developing constantly. The remarkable event is the rising of the Generation Xers represented by William Vollmann, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, and Douglas Coupland. They came to the literary arena with some novels and short stories in the 1980s and have soon been well-known throughout the country. Vollmann's *Europe Central* and Powers' *The Echo Maker* won the National Book Award respectively in 2005 and 2006. Critics said their successes mark the coming of a new age—the Post-Pynchon age. Vollmann has been appreciated as a new Pynchon. That is called the third stage of American postmodernist fiction.

Looking back to the past years that postmodernist fiction went through, we can say, so far, so good. As for the future, it is hard to predict. But it will last for a couple of decades. Let us keep our eyes on it.

## II. The Characteristics of American Postmodernist Fiction

In comparison with the American realistic and modernist fiction, some of which we have read, the characteristics of American postmodernist fiction are in the main indeterminacy and intertextuality. It also contains two patterns: deconstruction and reconstruction in novels, namely, the authors deconstruct the social reality on the one hand and reconstruct the artistic world by themselves on the other. It consists of black humor fiction and metafiction. The former prevailed in the 1960s with the publication of *Catch-22* while the latter has been dominating the literary world from the 1970s to the present, yet black humor can be found in metafiction as a kind of artistic device. And there is a growing tendency of the mixture of literary narrative with new science and technology, such as computer science, information, even neurology and ecology, particularly in the novels by authors of the Generation Xers such as Vollmann and Powers.

Black humor is a kind of bitter humor, using the comic device to reflect or depict the tragic events. It is quite different from humor in general sense, though it has something to do with it. Black humor is often combined with parody and irony. It can bring you laughter with bitter feelings.

Metafiction is a kind of fiction about fiction as William Gass put it. It has turned out to be a major form of American postmodernist fiction since the 1970s. As for its characteristics, the British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton outlined it very clearly, "Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art, which blurs the

boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture as well as between art and everyday experience." His words have summed up all the chief traits of American postmodernist fiction.

Different from Mark Twain's realistic novels and William Faulkner's modernist works, American postmodernist fiction often consists of fragments, collage, parody, and wordplay. The famous novelist Barthelme said, "Fragments are the only form I trust." Postmodernist fiction is plotless and heedless of character portrayal, having no complete story in it. The heroes in it are called anti-heroes. Sometimes a character is described in a whole chapter alone and another character in another chapter. All the pictures and vignettes seem to be pieced together as a collection of fragments instead of a coherent story.

In those novels, fictional characters and real historical figures repeatedly appear and they live together in an imaginative world. With the exception of the traditional first-person and the third-person narrative angles, the author sometimes goes into the novel as the protagonist or a major character passing through all events in the work. A dead man in one novel may survive and behave again in another novel by the same author. Sometimes the author even tell readers frankly that the character So-and-So is his mouthpiece and the story is his make-up, and he doesn't know how to go on. That is quite different from realistic or modernist novels, which often prevent the author from intruding into the plot to say this or that. Otherwise, it will spoil the work.

In subject-matter, facts and fiction are always mixed up in the text of postmodernist novels. Facts include interviews, diaries, letters, personal biographies, books, newspapers, government documents, court records, etc. As for fiction, it blurs the boundaries of genre by putting poems, plays, essays and commentaries in the novel. Even typography, photos, color and cartoons, graphic symbols, tape recordings are combined to show the intertextuality of the text. That is why a novel seems to be a disorderly hotchpotch in the eyes of traditional readers.

Time and space are often turned upside down in postmodernist fiction. Time is experienced in a fractured sequence. Past, present and future are mixed up in the narrative. Locations may change in leaps and bounds, from a city at home to other place in another country, or even to other planet in the space. Some elements of science fiction are widely used in a novel in general. The flash-back and other artistic devices often used in movies are employed in fiction by the authors. The infinite time and unlimited space give the author an endless imaginative world to play and bring great entertainment to readers at all levels. A collage of isolated fragments has no hint of a clear linear chronology.

So patience and perseverance are needed in reading American postmodernist fiction.

Wordplay is another feature of postmodernist fiction. The authors like to coin some new words such as "Catch-22," "horsewife," "shootka," "redips," "toilest" to express his or her particular ideas. Sometimes, they can play word golf like "lass-mast-malt-male" to achieve some ironical effects. In their works, the distinctions between written language and the colloquial, standard English and the vulgar or slang are blurred. Technical terms of all kinds of different sciences are getting more and more in the text. Sometimes the narrative covers many pages. Sometimes a paragraph has more than one page but could consist of only one sentence, or leave one or half a page blank and skip over to other paragraphs. Readers are asked to fill in the blank with their own ideas and imagination so as to bring up the gap of the blank. Some authors prefer long sentences without a single punctuation or end the sentence in graphic symbols. The ending of the novel usually is not comic or tragic like the realistic and modernist novels, but keeps open with several possibilities for readers to think and guess. Such an open ending indicates the uncertainty of postmodernist fiction.

### **III. The Strength and Weakness of American Postmodernist Fiction**

All in all, American postmodernist novelists have employed many unique artistic devices, seemingly absurd on the surface, to depict the absurdity of the American society. Many social problems they expose in their works are involved in almost all walks of life in politics, economy, culture, education, government administration, social relations, war, law, slum life, race bias, addiction, twisted family life, etc. Some of their criticisms and attacks are directed to political corruption and bureaucracy, commercial bribery, consumerism, unjust war and the sufferings of ordinary people. For example, in their novels, Heller exposed the bureaucracy of American military forces and government, the selfishness of the officials who made up some rules to trouble the soldiers with no sympathy at all; Pynchon attacked the social corruptions in many fields; DeLillo criticized the academic fakers and their fakements, the inundation of ads in the TV and supermarket, over-spending consumerism on university campus; Vollmann condemned Fascist brutality and violence, and sympathized with the poor people in slums and the miserable prostitutes in Southeast Asia. So did many others, though at different levels and in various ways. In certain sense, they have inherited the critical tradition of American literature and have brought it to a new level.



Some of their critiques are straightforward and quite to-the-point, some mild parody with sharp satire, and some edged irony with bitter laughter. In a sense, it seems absurd and grotesque, very hard to catch for readers, just like the Chinese magic boxes—different critiques in big and small layers put together in a novel or a short story. But in essence, they all show clear-cut views on the seamy side of the American society with disgust and hatred to the evils and deep sympathy to the down-trodden, the bereaved, the oppressed, and the victims. Most of the authors use black humor as a means to criticize or expose social evils and injustice. It is a kind of bitter satire with comic humor, as called by Vonnegut, “the humor under a gallows,” different from the humor in Mark Twain’s novels. It often provokes readers’ deep thinking of the question the authors pose in their works. Sometimes, those works may be very attractive and appealing to readers.

However, some limitations of postmodernist fiction should not be neglected. The authors often exaggerate the function of language to the extreme. To them, language seems to be the source of art and literature instead of life, though language is the first factor to fiction. They have overestimated the importance of artistic skills and presented rather vague pictures, difficult for readers to understand. Sometimes, the plotless fragments and collages, and the mixture of parables and quotations from other books throw the reader into perplexity and misunderstanding. Furthermore, the sexy descriptions are too detailed in some novels, which may lead young guys astray.

Ideologically speaking, the exposes of American postmodernist novelists only touch upon surface phenomena or minor problems in social reality. Some of them over-emphasize the roles of personal morality or character. Some are still fascinated with the American Dream. Some are interested in social reform without changing the system. Most of them are blind to the essence of capitalism and fail to present the ideals of the future. They are full of pessimism, fatalism, and anarchism.

Though limited in both content and form, American postmodernist fiction has played a very important role in contemporary literature. It makes American fiction get out of the crisis in the 1960s and enter into a new era with a great number of established novelists and novels within about five decades. They have won the world fame for the United States again as unique literary heritages and will hold an important place in the history of world literature like the realistic and modernist fiction.