



Theme Essay

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Beginning with Y2K and 9/11, then to global terrorism and unending war, the climate crisis, mass shootings, political upheaval, police shootings and related social unrest, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, the new millennium thus far has been characterized by uncertainty. Meanwhile, enhanced globalization and the quick and easy exchange of ideas via the Internet have brought not only the welcome intersection of cultures but a counter focus on individual identity, which has also served to highlight racial, gender, economic and sexual inequities. The freedom to draw from a mix of philosophies and ways of being has brought us to the point where we question the very concept of the self. This has delivered at the same time widespread acceptance of the right to forge a unique self and to pursue “life, liberty, and happiness,” no matter what that means to the individual. The role of contemporary literature during these first two decades of the 21st century has been to explore the notion of multiple truths and to acknowledge that history is now being filtered through a continuum of human perspective and experience—and, for better or worse, technology.

In the latter decades of the 20th century, the word “postmodern” was coined as a critical label attached to a group of fiction writers in the U.S. who were challenging established literary conventions. The postmodernist view rejected assumptions about plot or characterization, for example, or toyed with point of view, calling into question not only accepted literary practices but also the capacity of language to represent reality in any trustworthy way. As postmodernism expanded itself to define what some argue is a cultural era—and which others refer to as post-postmodernism—novels, memoirs, and poetry became increasingly eccentric, inclined toward fractured traditions and combined forms known as hybrids. Innovation, in other words, took precedent over older modes of expression, which no longer offered the range or depth necessary to convey this brave new world in which we found ourselves. Nor did these older modes convey our new understanding of the fragility of human identity, or, increasingly, the blurring of the line between reality and manufactured representations. The resulting view of the world, if delivered to us as readers in an earlier time, might have been categorized as absurd, farcical, alien, or even comical, but what it does not resemble is anything we once might have recognized as literature.

Meanwhile, the many modes of communication available to us have led us to question how to define the words “story” and “text.” Previously, “text” has meant words on a physical page that people read, but with the many facets of emerging technology the meaning of *text* has been turned inside out. Words on a computer screen, spoken word poetry, screenplays, movies, audio books, text messages, blogs, podcasts, instant messaging, YouTube videos, pictures, and scripts are all now included in our definition of a *text*. So long as a human can read it, analyze it, visualize it, question it, relate it to life, discuss it, experience the emotion of it, and think about it, we now consider it to be text. Creative writers are



manifesting this change by abandoning traditional forms or morphing them, using these modes of text in any combination to interpret the world and their experience of the world and to communicate their interpretations to an audience, leaving the answer to the question of what a story or poem even is completely up for grabs.

New forms emerging from our strange era include illustrated novels, digi-fiction, graphic novels, doodle fiction, flash fiction, spoken poetry, and hypertext (interactive) fiction. Not new but of more widespread appeal are dystopian fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, and transrealism (think Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*), in which events and people from the author's own life experience are intertwined with some form of impossibility, usually drawn from science fiction, fantasy, or horror. Designed to make us uncomfortable, transrealism asserts that current reality is at best constructed, at worst non-existent, and that there is no escaping that realization.

This fragmentation, distortion, parody, and deconstruction of traditional forms implies that literature is a renewable resource, one that will always grow and change to reflect the cultural moment in which it is created. Drawing from the defining moments of the world in which it was created, new millennium writing further imposes the possibility that nothing is absolute. Only radically disruptive techniques can adequately represent the radical disruption of our current reality, where almost everything—including us—is dissolvable and dispensable.