

## Metafiction and Postmodernism

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**Abstract.** This essay strives to deal with the origin and definition of metafiction, and then to probe into the relation between the two terms. Though the discussion about the relationship between metafiction and postmodernism is heated, generally, the critics agree on the following: The two terms are closely related in the literary history; metafiction does not just exist in the contemporary period, though it only achieves its designation recently; metafiction belongs to the postmodernist writings, though it's not the only category.

### Introduction

Nowadays, when people talk about the term metafiction, they tend to associate it to the controversial term “postmodernism”, which demonstrates the close relation between the two terms. People always are curious about the origin of metafiction and to what extent it is connected to the seemingly all-inclusive word “postmodernism”. In this essay, we strive to deal with the origin and definition of metafiction, and then to probe into the relation between the two terms.

### Origin and Definition of Metafiction

There is a consensus that the term metafiction has been denominated for the first time in the book titled *Fiction and the Figures of Life* by the American novelist and critic William Gass. When describing the fiction of John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges and Flann O'Brien, he writes, “Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions.”[1]

The American scholar Patricia Waugh who writes the well-known *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*(1984) “is more responsible than any other for the prominence of the term in the Anglo-American critic lexis”[2]. At the beginning of her book, Waugh writes out the quotations from the works by Laurence Sterne, B. S. Johnson, Ronald Sukenick, Donald Barthelme and John Fowles. She also lists the similarities amongst this disconcerting selection of quotations: a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fiction, a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality, a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naive style of writing. Waugh herself says that most of the quotations are fairly contemporary and it is deliberate. According to her, “What connects not only these quotations but also all of the very different writers whom one could refer to as broadly ‘metafictional’, is that they all explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction.” Then, Waugh gives the definition of metafiction:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.[3]

Waugh admits the term “metafiction” originated in an essay by William Gass in 1970, but she believes that terms like “metapolitics”, “metarhetoric” and “metatheatre” remind us of a more general interest in how people reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world since the 1960s. Then she claims that “Metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in the terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory... If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of “reality” itself.” She also declares that the present increased awareness of “meta” levels of discourse and experience seems to be part of the consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness. The awareness foregrounds people’s attention to the function of language in the construction and maintenance of the everyday reality. She further elaborates on the function of “meta” terms:

“Meta” terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world of the fiction and the world outside the fiction.[4]

Going a bit further than the other critics, Waugh insists that metafiction rests on a version of the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle which is aware that “for the smallest building blocks of matter, every process of observation causes a major disturbance”[5]. In other words, it is impossible to describe an objective world for the observer tends to change the observed. Waugh thinks that the concerns of metafiction are even more complicated than this. She believes that “the metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to “represent” the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be “represented”.[6] So, according to her, in literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to “represent” the discourses of that world. But, “if one attempts to analyze a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as the instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a ‘prisonhouse’ from which the possibility of escape is remote. Metafiction sets out to explore this dilemma.” [7]

### Alternative Names of metafiction

Just as there are so many definitions, so are the varied names for metafiction. As to the definite names of the experimental fiction that has been written since the 1960s, there have always been controversies. It has had quite a few alternative names since its debut, namely “the introverted novel”, “anti-novel”, “surfiction”, “fabulation”, “the reflexive fiction”, the “self-begetting novel”, and so forth.

The name of “introverted novel” is first put forward by Malcolm Bradbury and John Fletcher in their discussion about modernism. They distinguish between the eighteenth-century introversion, which draws attention to the narrator, as in the novel *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, and the twentieth-century introversion which pays attention to the autonomy of the fictive structure itself, as the novels by Muriel Spark and Nabokov. This is also the term to designate the works of William Gass and Vladimir Nabokov so as to distinguish them from the works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed which are called “the dissident novel”. The dissident novel holds the enlarged notion of the political within the sphere of language, while the introverted novel only explores language without inviting attention to the political issues. Often, the dissident fiction deals with both the world within the word and the word in the world, but the introverted novel only treats the world within the word.

“Antinovel” is always referred to those works of fiction that show defiance of the current norms of fiction. According to Jean Rousset, “the antinovel occurs whenever the novel loses faith in itself, becomes critical and self-critical, wishes to break with the established norms of the medium.” [8] The term is so broadly defined that it can refer to many original works such as *Ulysses*, *Madame Bovary* and *Don Quixote*. The past few years have seen the increase in the volume of antinovels. As a result, some critics have attempted to work out some categories within the form. William Gass has mentioned

that people tend to attribute any unusual novel as “antinovel”, and many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction. Distinguishing metafiction from antinovel, Larry McCaffery believes that metafiction resembles anti-novels of the past through the attempt to appear experimental and unconventional, except when it depends on familiar conventions for parodic purposes. Both metafiction and “antinovel” are about the art of fiction in some degree, and the major difference between the two is, as McCaffery points out:

By his own choice of forms, the anti-novelist indirectly criticizes past forms and suggests new perspectives on the relationship between fiction, the artist, and reality. When we examine a metafiction, however, we discover that fiction-making is not dealt with in such indirect fashion; instead, it takes as its main subject writers, writing, and anything else which has to do with the way books and stories are written.[9]

“Surfiction” has the major feature of foregrounding the entry of the narrator into the text. The book *Surfiction* by Raymond Federman discusses the narratorial intrusion, concentrating on the ironist himself or herself instead of the overt and covert levels of the ironic text. “Surfiction” always places emphasis on telling as individual invention and spontaneous fabrication at the expense of external reality or literary convention, while metafiction tends to lay stress on the fact that reality is constructed and mediated through linguistic structures and pre-existent texts.

“Fabulation” as a term is invented by Robert Scholes “for a current mode of free-wheeling narrative invention” [10]. According to Abrams, “fabulation” violates “standard novelistic expectation through drastic experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, and fusion of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical and the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic” [11]. As to the discrepancy between “metafiction” and “fabulation”, Patricia Waugh has made it clear: metafiction explores the concept of fictionality through an opposition between the construction and the breaking of illusion, while fabulation reveals instead what Christine Brooke-Rose has referred to as a reduced tension between technique and counter-technique: a ‘stylization’ which enables other voices to be assimilated, rather than presenting a conflict of voices.[12]

“The self-reflexive fiction” seems the surrogate of metafiction for many critics. The term tends to “reveal the critic’s assumption about the category of fiction. The “self” is often connected with a personal, human self, as Michael Boyd has pointed out, “Perhaps the greatest theme of the reflexive novel is provided by the question ‘Who is writing?’”[13] This shows that the role of the novel is very important for “the reflexive fiction”, but the metafiction is a bit different in that it concerns both the issue of the author and a number of linguistic and literary processes. The other difference is that “self” in “the self-reflexive fiction” seems to be restrictive and carry negative connotations while metafiction appears to be critically neutral.

“The self-begetting novel” is most appropriately defined by Kellman as “an account usually first person, of the development of a character to a point at which he is able to take up and compose the novel we have just finished reading”[14]. The entry of narrator into the text in “the self-begetting novel” is its major characteristic and it mainly puts emphasis on the development of the narrator. What distinguishes it from metafiction is that it emphasizes the modernist concern of consciousness rather than the postmodernist involvement of fictionality stressed by metafiction.

There are, of course, numerous other names that hover around the term “metafiction”, such as “the introspective novel”, “the narcissistic novel”, “the self-reflective novel”, “the avant-garde”, “the post-contemporary novel”. As they are either too broad a term to define what we call “metafiction” or too restrictive to include the whole range of “metafiction”, they only exist for a short period and do not attract much attention.

### **Connection between Metafiction and Postmodernism**

As a large proportion of acknowledged metafictionists go under the broad range of postmodernism and the term “metafiction” seems to be closely connected with postmodernism, it is necessary to have a brief discussion about the relationship between “metafiction” and postmodernism.

It seems most suitable to start with William Gass, who is the first denominator of metafiction. Because of the confusion about the definite meanings of postmodernism at his time, he openly denies himself to be a postmodern writer for the reason that he has never been clear about the nature of postmodernism in literature. He only mentions that his fiction can be regarded as late or decayed modern. Another critic Sarah Lauzen’s idea differs from that of Gass. She maintains that metafiction is characterized by the frequent use of metafictional devices or elements and the device or element usually foregrounds either some aspects of writing or the structure of a work. In one word, he proclaims that metafiction uses techniques to emphasize its status as fiction, so “metafiction is therefore more a formal term than a historical one, and is not solely a postmodern (or modern) possession.”[15] The American critic Paul Maltby argues echoingly. He thinks that metafiction has a much wider scope than postmodernism. The reason he supplies is that though a lot of metafictionists certainly belong to the postmodernist circle, the works of Cervantes and Sterne are metafictional whereas their authors are not postmodernists. In other words, Maltby believes that only contemporary metafiction belongs to the category of postmodernism. For Maltby, the difference between metafiction and postmodernism is “While postmodernism may be conceived as relating the fiction to a postmodern culture or postmodernity, metafiction, as a term, altogether lacks sociohistorical reference.”[16]

Larry McCaffery’s opinion is similar to Maltby’s. McCaffery declares that metafictional works are not new because they can be traced back to Miguel de Cervantes and Lawrence Sterne, but in the twentieth century metafictional works appear regularly. According to him, metafiction is a major category of postmodern literature and it is a common tendency in much of the most significant postmodern fiction. He proclaims that the metafiction impulse is one of the defining features of postmodern fiction distinguishing it from the fiction of the thirties, forties and fifties.[17] Patricia Waugh’s viewpoint echoes McCaffery’s. She declares that “metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism.” And “although metafiction is just one form of post-modernism, nearly all contemporary experimental writing displays some explicitly metafictional strategies.”[18] She also writes that metafictional practice has been unusually prominent in the fiction since the 1960s, but it is wrong to attribute the practice only to contemporary fiction for “the term ‘metafiction’ might be new, the practice is as old (if not older than) as the novel itself.” [19]

Linda Hutcheon also makes her own judgment. She admits that she has ever rejected the term “postmodernist” to opt for the more descriptive one of metafiction, but she considers it foolish to disprove that metafiction is today recognized as a manifestation of postmodernism. She argues that “the formal and thematic self-consciousness of metafiction today is paradigmatic of most of the cultural forms of what Jean- François Lyotard calls our “postmodern” world- from television commercials to movies, from comic books to video art.” [20] In her work, she explores “historiographic metafiction”, and argues that the new experimental writing results from the combination of metafiction and historiography and fulfills the poetics of postmodernism.

### **Conclusion**

Though the discussion about the relationship between metafiction and postmodernism is heated, generally, the critics agree on the following: The two terms are closely related in the literary history; metafiction does not just exist in the contemporary period, though it only achieves its designation recently; metafiction belongs to the postmodernist writings, though it’s not the only category.

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