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**Postmodern İngiliz Şiir Edebiyatında Kullanılan
Teknik ve Temaların Kısa İncelemesi**

A Short Review On The Techniques And Themes Used In Postmodern English Poetry

YAZAR

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, postmodern şairlerin şiirsel mesajlarını iletmek için kullandıkları çeşitli teknik ve temaları incelemektedir. Modernizmin bir uzantısı olarak postmodernizm, gerçekçi temaları ve teknikleri bir araya getirirken öncüllerinden unsurları da entegre eder. Postmodernizm, modern ve gerçekçi eğilimlerine rağmen romantizmin izlerini taşıyor ve söylemine çok yönlü bir estetik katıyor. Allan Ginsberg, Robert Lowell ve Charles Bukowski gibi şairler, şiirlerinin zenginliğine ve karmaşıklığına katkıda bulunan parçalanma, üstkurmaca, metinlerarasılık, rastlantısallık ve oyunbazlık dahil olmak üzere postmodernizm alanında bir dizi teknikten yararlanırlar. Bu şairler, bu teknikleri iç içe geçirerek çağdaş varoluşun karmaşıklıklarında geziniyor ve insanlık durumuna dair derin içgörüler sunuyor. Dahası, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath ve Ted Hughes gibi postmodern şairler, postmodern çağın çalkantılı manzarasını yansıtan çeşitli temaları araştırıyorlar. Nesnel gerçekliğin yokluğu, bilime ve tarihsel gerçeklere karşı şüphecilik, küresel çatışmaların sonuçları, psikoloji araştırmaları, materyalizmin eleştirileri ve totaliterlik üzerine düşünceler gibi temalar eserlerine hakimdir. Bu yazarlar şiirleri aracılığıyla varoluşsal ikilemlerle ve sosyo-politik gerçeklerle yüzleşerek okuyucuları çağdaş dünyanın karmaşıklıkları ile eleştirel bir şekilde ilgilenmeye teşvik ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postmodern Şiir, Postmodern Şiir Teknikleri, Postmodern Şiir Temaları

ABSTRACT

This review paper explores the diverse array of techniques and themes employed by postmodern poets to convey their poetic messages. As an extension of modernism, postmodernism integrates elements from its predecessor while incorporating realistic themes and techniques. Despite its modern and realist inclinations, postmodernism retains traces of romanticism, imbuing its discourse with a multifaceted aesthetic. Poets such as Allan Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Charles Bukowski utilize a range of techniques within the realm of postmodernism, including fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, randomness, and playfulness, contributing to the richness and complexity of their poetry. By intertwining these techniques, these poets navigate the intricacies of contemporary existence, offering profound insights into the human condition. Furthermore, postmodern poets like Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes explore a diverse array of themes that mirror the tumultuous landscape of the postmodern era. Themes such as the absence of objective reality, skepticism towards science and historical truths, the aftermath of global conflicts, explorations of psychology, critiques of materialism, and reflections on totalitarianism pervade their works. Through their poetry, these writers confront existential dilemmas and socio-political realities, urging readers to critically engage with the complexities of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Postmodern Poetry, Postmodern Poetic Techniques, Postmodern Poetic Themes

INTRODUCTION

To underline what they are¹ attempting to convey in their poetry, postmodern poets employ a variety of strategies in topics. Postmodernism includes various contemporary features since it is the continuation of modernism. Simultaneously, it incorporates realistic themes and techniques. Apart from possessing modern and realistic qualities, it retains a romantic element. Fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, unpredictability, and playfulness are among the key strategies adopted by postmodern poets such as Allan Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Charles Bukowski. Moreover, postmodern poets such as Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes exploit topics like the absence of objective truth, loss of faith in science and historical facts, global conflicts, psychology, materialism, and authoritarianism in their poetry.

American Beat Generation poet Allan Ginsberg is one of the revolutionary examples of postmodern poetry. His 1955 poem *Howl* is one of the earliest examples of postmodern poetry with revolutionary story shaped writing. Additionally, Ginsberg's other poem *Footnote to Howl*, is an example of intertextuality in a postmodern poem. The 1958 Confessional poem *Waking in the Blue* by Robert Lowell is an example of postmodern metafiction. In the poem, Lowell questions the seriousness of the mental disorder of the patients in a mental hospital. American poet Charles Bukowski's poems such as *The Church*, *Friendly Advice to a lot of Young Men*, and many of his other pomes have a unique style of storytelling where he uses less punctuation and less words in each line.

Postmodern poets like Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes explore a diverse array of themes that mirror the shaking landscape of the postmodern era. Philip Larkin's *Church Going* is a good example of the dilemma and confusion about God and [his?] religion. American poet Sylvia Plath is one of the major figures of the early postmodern movement: Confessional poetry. Her poems show human psychology from a deep and gloomy perspective. Her 1965 poem *Daddy* is one of the best examples of Confessional poetry where she talks about her father and husband. Furthermore, English poet Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* is a fundamental example of 'anti-materialist' genre that started to be used in early postmodern writings.

¹ Since postmodernism continues as of today (assumingly), I use Present Simple in this paper.

Techniques In Postmodern Poetry

Fragmentation is one of the major techniques of the literary period. Starting from modernism, the poets have understood that life is complex and there is not only one single meaning; it has many parts and meanings. Thus, in literature, the poets started to use the technique of fragmentation in order to show the faces and stages of life. In the poetic literary works, plot, characters, theme, images, factual references, and language are broken down. In the middle of the poem, there might be a pause and a new story may start which is going to be stopped after a while, so that the previous story may continue. The usage of Fragmentation helped the readers to understand that life is changing, it does not stop, humans change, and nothing is stable. American Beat Generation² poet Allan Ginsberg is one of the revolutionary examples of postmodern poetry. His 1955 poem *Howl*³ is one of the earliest examples of postmodern poetry with revolutionary story shaped writing. The poem has three parts and in each part of the poem, the poet takes us to different journeys and talks about different issues of his time, giving references to the previous parts of the poem. At first glance, the poem looks like a story, however, slowly the poem takes the shape of a poetic penning style. The poem, as he puts it, is dedicated to his friend Carl Solomon⁴ with whom he had met in a psychiatric institution. Ginsberg writes: “I'm with you in Rockland” (Ginsberg, 1955) to show his solidarity with his friend. Later Solomon claimed that he had never met him in that institution. However, though the poem is dedicated to Carl, he writes about him only in the third part of the poem.

Another technique used by the postmodern poets is intertextuality. Intertextuality is a reference used in the literary work to a previous literary work by a different artist by the help of the allusions. The main purpose of the poets to use such a technique is to show

² The Beat Generation, a literary subculture movement emerging after World War II, was pioneered by authors exploring American culture and politics. Popularized in the 1950s by the Silent Generation, known as Beatniks, their works rejected conventional narratives, pursued spiritual quests, delved into American and Eastern religions, eschewed materialism, depicted raw human experiences, experimented with psychedelics, and embraced sexual liberation.

³ *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg is a seminal work critiquing post-World War II American society. Divided into three parts, it portrays a nightmarish landscape where the best minds are destroyed by societal pressures, including drug addiction and sexual repression. Ginsberg celebrates individuality and challenges societal norms, particularly regarding new emerging gender issues, while condemning the dehumanizing forces of capitalism and industrialization symbolized by Moloch. The poem progresses to a more hopeful tone, offering a vision of transcendence and spiritual enlightenment. *Howl* remains a powerful exploration of human struggle and the quest for authenticity in an oppressive world.

⁴ Carl Solomon (1928 – 1993) was an American writer recognized for his notable work, *Report from the Asylum: Afterthoughts of a Shock Patient*.

the readers the importance of subjectivity of different artists. Alan Ginsberg's another poem, which was written in 1955 right after *Howl* was published, *Footnote to Howl*, is an example of intertextuality in a postmodern poem. The poem was written as a response to *Howl*. This poem is a direct reference to the previous poem while mentioning his friend artist Neal Cassady,⁵ and Everyman,⁶ and several other names, and events. Thus, by writing a response poem to his previous poem, Ginsberg does not only use the concept of intertextuality in his poem, but at the same time he mentions names of artists of his own period and literary works such as *Everyman*, which was written in the 15th century. Though he does not directly mention if he refers to the 15th century allegorical play, or just 'every single man on earth'. However, the expression that he uses: "Everyman is an angel" (Ginsberg, 1956), in our minds awakens the story of *Everyman* that is being judged by the Death Angel because of his good and bad deeds.

Another important stylistic method - metafiction is a very common way of writing technique in postmodern poetry. The word "meta" means "beyond." From this point, it could be said that metafiction is so much different from the usual fiction. The poets use metafiction to show the readers that whatever the readers read is not based on a real story or at least it is not more than a story. This message is given in one part of the literary work. The main purpose of the artist to give this message and use metafiction is to make the readers criticize the situation in the story they read. They do not want the readers to be lost in their emotions. For the postmodern poets, it is important to be able to criticize and question life. That is why they always use metafiction so that their readers could criticize and question life as the artists do. The 1958 Confessional⁷ poem *Waking in the*

⁵ Neal Leon Cassady (1926 – 1968) was a prominent figure in both the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the subsequent psychedelic and counterculture movements of the 1960s. More about the poet:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/18/beat-poets-cassady-kerouac-ginsberg>

⁶ The story revolves around the moral balance of one's actions, which will be assessed by God post-death, akin to entries in a ledger. It allegorically portrays the life of Everyman, symbolizing humanity. Throughout, Everyman endeavors to persuade other characters to join him, hoping to enhance his life's standing. Each character embodies mystical qualities, reflecting the struggle between good and evil. Everyman faces isolation as he struggles to find companions for his journey, realizing ultimately that despite the personified characters, he is fundamentally alone. Through this pilgrimage, he discovers that one's own good deeds are the only possessions when facing death and judgment before God. More about the play: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Everyman-English-morality-play>

⁷ Confessional poetry was one of the major genres from the late 50s until 1980s. Confessional Poetry delves into the genuine life encounters and personal history of the poet, encompassing emotional and psychological turmoil while blurring the boundary between poet and the poem's speaker. The foremost and significant Confessional Poets consist of Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry>

*Blue*⁸ by Robert Lowell is an example of postmodern metafiction. In the poem, Lowell questions the seriousness of the mental disorder of the patients in a mental hospital. We can see metafiction in each part of the poem united with metaphors and surrealistic elements. However, the last line of the poem gives us a significant awakening where the poet writes: “We are all old-timers, each of us holds a locked razor.” (Lowell, 1958). The message that he gives is frightening. He means that all the people in this mental hospital are stuck in time, and they are ready to end each-other’s lives (or their own lives) with a razor.

Apart from fragmentation, intertextuality, and metafiction, the poets use playful language and randomness in their poetry. For them, life has so many random actions, stages, and events. Therefore, the poems are playful with words and use unorthodox way of rhyming. The poets want to tell the reader that they are the masters of their works, and they can do whatever they want with their art and the story in the art. American poet Charles Bukowski’s poems such as *The Church*,⁹ *Friendly Advice to a lot of Young Men*,¹⁰ and many of his pomes have a unique style of storytelling where he uses less punctuation and less words in each line. He jumps from one story to another by showing no traditional poetic signs. For instance, his poem *The Church* is a unique example of randomness in poetry. The title is a good example for randomness. While there is no mentioning of church, the title is ‘church’. In the poem, he jumps from one story to another by telling how bad people are and how rotten the society is. In his other 1957 poem *Friendly Advice to a lot of Young Men*, he gives random advice to young people. Some of the advice he

⁸ The poem delves into the surreal environment of a mental health facility, particularly the McLean Hospital near Boston, where Robert Lowell received treatment for manic attacks stemming from his bipolar disorder diagnosis in 1954. Throughout his adult life, Lowell’s mental and emotional vulnerabilities persisted, leading to numerous hospitalizations between 1949 and 1964, which significantly impacted his interpersonal relationships.

⁹ In this poem, Bukowski expresses a nihilistic perspective, critiquing society’s flaws and the senselessness of life, echoing his themes of alienation, loneliness, and the quest for meaning. While more concise and less overtly cynical compared to his other works, it maintains his trademark bleak outlook, albeit without explicit references to alcohol and debauchery. It’s simple, repetitive structure highlights human paradoxes, shifting from personal to political despair. The language is direct, reflecting the harshness of the world it portrays, offering no easy solutions but hinting at the possibility of change through understanding and connection in the face of despair.

¹⁰ In *Friendly advice to a lot of young men*, the poet’s speaker encourages young men to seek diverse experiences, vividly depicted through the poem’s emotional lines. He combines descriptions like traveling to Tibet, breaking one’s head open with a hatchet, and running for Mayor to portray a life lived to the fullest. While readers may react differently to Bukowski’s suggestions, the overarching message is for men to pursue their desires freely. Interestingly, the poet implies that men should explore all avenues except the one he dedicated his life to—writing poetry. The poem: <https://youtu.be/oovDpLHCrSw?si=EDhAgqdZK-eKgowx>

gives are contradictory to one another. Giving random advice and sending contradictory messages is a perfect example of randomness in postmodern poetry.

Themes İn Postmodern Poetry

The themes of postmodern poetry are as rich as their techniques. However, the main themes that the poet use in their poetry are the lack of objective reality, lack of belief in scientific and historic truth, psychology, world wars, and materialism. Poets such as Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes' poems are relevant examples the prementioned themes above.

The artist believe that reality is subjective. For the postmodern poets, everyone had their own reality of understanding the life and events around them. Thus, from this perspective, the theme of "truth" shows itself in the poetry of postmodern artists. The poets believe that science, religion, and history cannot answer everything. For both modern and postmodern artists, science is the main source of the destructions and wars. Since so many cities were wiped out, people were killed and lost during the world wars, the poets believe that if science had not improved that much, there would not have guns and weapons to destroy cities and kill people. Also, history share the same fate for the poets. They believe that history is written from the perspective of individuals. Thus, history is not trustable for the postmodern poets. Religion shared the same fate too; after the Second World War, people thought that religion did not answer all the questions and almighty God was not able to stop major wars of the last century. People were in a dilemma about God and his(?) religion. Philip Larkin's *Church Going*¹¹ is a good example of this dilemma and confusion about God and religion. In the poem, the speaker talks about the history of religion and its possible collapse in the future. However, though religion is not followed by many, a very few amounts of people still look for the existence of God to cure their diseases. Thus, Larkin gives a message in his poem that even though people of his time have lost their hopes towards God, and will continue doing so, still there will always be

¹¹ *Church Going* begins with the speaker entering a building, later revealed to be a church, without a clear purpose and feeling confused by its contents. Despite encountering familiar sights like altars and bibles, he lacks reverence towards them. After briefly reading from the *Bible*, he exits the church, pondering its significance in the future when believers have passed away. He imagines the last explorer of the church and wonders if they will share his detached curiosity. Ultimately, the speaker concludes that regardless of its meaning, maintaining churches is essential for humanity, as they symbolize unity and acceptance of one's shared humanity with the world.

a need for a greater power like God, since humans will always need to solve certain problems such as deadly diseases like cancer.

Poets also try to show human psychology in their poems as one of the major themes. Mentioning psychology in literature mainly became popular in modernism. However, postmodern artists also try to focus on this topic in order to show the deepness of the human mind. The poets write what they have in their minds and walk the readers through their psychological state of mind. American poet Sylvia Plath is one of the major figures of this early postmodern movement of confessional poetry. Her poems show human psychology from a deep and gloomy perspective. Her 1965 poem *Daddy*¹² is one of the best examples of confessional poetry. In the poem, the speaker (who is Plath herself) talks about her late father who had died when she was around ten years old. She talks about her memories about of her father; she explains how she misses him and how she hates him, as she gradually compares him to a Nazi. Later in the poem she continues with her unsuccessful marriage and talks about her husband Ted Huges. However, she describes both characters from the depths of her mind and walks us through the psychological state of hers.

World Wars and materialism are also prime themes of the poems. Since the first half of the 20th century faced two tremendously dangerous wars that almost wiped-out countless cities on earth, the poets want to show it in their works. They give certain reasons why the wars happened and what people should do in order to stop wars. Furthermore, for them, one of the main reasons for the wars to happen was the greediness of people towards materialism. Since people always wanted more of everything, wars happened. English poet Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting*¹³ is a good example of such 'anti-materialist' genre. In the poem, he describes a hawk that desires for more and sees the world as its property. The hawk is too proud of himself and his natural predatory skills. The bird says: "I kill where I please because it is all mine." (Huges, 1960). One could say that Huges uses the

¹²Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* opens with the speaker portraying her father in various vivid and unsettling images—he's likened to a "black shoe" trapping her, a vampire, a fascist, and a Nazi. Even after his death, she feels confined and controlled by his influence, struggling to break free. To liberate herself, she feels compelled to metaphorically "kill" her father, symbolizing her need to escape his oppressive hold on her life.

¹³ This poem embodies the predatory perspective of a hawk, emphasizing its cold efficiency and lack of empathy in hunting. Through vivid imagery and first-person narration, Hughes immerses readers in the hawk's predatory gaze. This brief yet stark portrayal captures the raw, primal forces of nature and the place of predators in the natural order.

bird as a metaphor to describe the greedy destructions humans made in the last two great wars of the 20th century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that postmodern poets employ a myriad of techniques and themes to underscore their poetic messages. Postmodernism, as an extension of modernism, incorporates various elements from the modernist movement while also integrating realistic themes and techniques. Despite its modern and realist tendencies, postmodernism retains traces of romanticism, infusing its discourse with a multifaceted aesthetic. Poets like Allan Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Charles Bukowski employ a range of techniques within the realm of postmodernism. These techniques include fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, randomness, and playfulness, all of which contribute to the richness and complexity of their poetry. By weaving together these techniques, these poets navigate the complexities of contemporary existence, offering profound insights into the human condition. Moreover, postmodern poets such as Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes delve into a diverse array of themes, reflecting the tumultuous landscape of the postmodern era. Themes such as the lack of objective reality, the erosion of belief in science and historical facts, the aftermath of world wars, explorations of psychology, critiques of materialism, and reflections on totalitarianism permeate their works. Through their poetry, these writers confront the existential dilemmas and socio-political realities of their time, inviting readers to engage critically with the complexities of the contemporary world.

American Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg is a prominent example of postmodern poetry. His 1955 poem *Howl* is one of the earliest examples, featuring a revolutionary narrative style. Additionally, Ginsberg's poem *Footnote to Howl* exemplifies intertextuality within postmodern poetry. Robert Lowell's 1958 confessional poem *Waking in the Blue* showcases postmodern metafiction by questioning the severity of mental disorders among patients in a mental hospital. American poet Charles Bukowski's works, including *The Church* and *Friendly Advice to a Lot of Young Men*, show a distinctive storytelling style with minimal punctuation and concise lines. Postmodern poets like Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes explore various themes that reflect

the turbulent landscape of the postmodern era. Philip Larkin's *Church Going* illustrates the confusion and lostness regarding God and religion. Sylvia Plath, a major figure in the early postmodern Confessional poetry movement, delves into human psychology from a profound and somber perspective. Her 1965 poem *Daddy* is a quintessential example of confessional poetry, addressing her father and husband. Furthermore, Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* is a key example of the 'anti-materialist' genre that emerged in early postmodern writings.

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