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### Modern Writers Set the Stage for Postmodernists

“For last year’s words belong to last year’s language, and next year’s words await another voice,” Modernist writer T.S. Eliot said. Well-known authors have to appeal to their audience using relatable language and content that matches the time period they are in. As society gradually changes, the popular works associated with that time will express new ideals that, quite often, build off of past works. Modernist writers set the stage for Postmodernism by foreshadowing the beliefs that there are no clear, reliable authority figures, and that there is no such thing as an ultimate truth. The Modernist era began in the early 1900s and continued until the early 1940s. Because this era takes place during World War I, many writers describe the destruction, chaos and pain that society was experiencing at the time. People felt lost and were unsure of the future. T.S. Eliot was a very popular author of that time period and was one who built the foundation for the Postmodernists with his descriptions of postwar culture. In Eliot’s poem, “The Hollow Men,” the reader is introduced to these ideas, and it is finally fully delivered in Postmodern stories, such as Nick Hornby’s *NippleJesus*, and Zadie Smith’s “Martha, Martha,” that challenged popular beliefs.

In Eliot’s, “The Hollow Men,” he foreshadows the ideas that there are no true authority figures and no such thing as ultimate truth throughout the entire poem. Before the war, many looked to religion as their guide. God was their leader who helped them make good choices. As Eliot describes in the poem, in postwar society, many had lost their faith in God. Throughout the

poem, the speaker talks about these “eyes [he] dare not meet in dreams” (line 19). His dreams are the only place he is able to find these eyes now, which symbolize morality. Many used religion as a guide to morality, and now, they no longer have faith in God. The “eyes” can only be found in a dream; they are nowhere to be found in the real world. The speaker goes on to talk about the “dead land” (line 39) where “they receive / the supplication of a dead man’s hand / under the twinkle of a fading star.” (lines 42-44). It is in the mass chaos and destruction that prayers are received, but it is too late. The damage to society had been done, millions had been killed and people no longer had faith. Prayers were answered too late, and now, the world is a “dead land.” This foreshadows how the Postmodern authors will challenge the idea of authority because if people have lost their faith in God, who would typically be thought of as the ultimate authority, any authority figure can now be challenged.

The lack of faith in God helps led to their belief that there is a lack of universal truth. It is not as blatant in the poem as it is in the Postmodernist works, as Eliot was just foreshadowing what was to come later. From his poem, however, the reader can gather that the truth is “more distant and solemn / than a fading star” (lines 27-28). As society loses their faith in Christianity, there are no general guidelines of morality for everyone to follow. The people will be “sightless, unless / the eyes reappear” (61-62). Now, with no universal truth, which was God and a moral guide, society will struggle to find its way to the right path. However, the speaker here believes that the hope that God will find his place in society again is “the hope only / of empty men” (66-67). While he believes they will struggle without their universal truth, hoping it will return is unrealistic, so he mocks that hope.

Postmodernists place a great deal of emphasis on how a person’s experiences shapes their views on life as they expand on the ideas that were foreshadowed on by the Modernists. In Nick

Hornby's story, *NippleJesus*, the reader sees the idea of no reliable authority figures throughout the story. The first instance is at a club. The bouncer, Dave, is there trying to keep everyone who is following the rules safe and preventing people who may cause harm from being in the club. When one man in the club starts harassing a girl, Dave grabs him and throws him out. But, as he is throwing the guy out of the club, he pulls out a "spike, about six inches long, sharp... and rusty" (2850). After this incident, he leaves the job. He had a job as an authority figure, a security guard, and when it got too dangerous for himself, he chose to leave, illustrating this idea that there are no reliable authority figures. Shortly after leaving this job, he finds another as a security guard in an art gallery and his job was to protect a controversial work called *NippleJesus* which is just as it sounds: a portrait of Jesus made out of thousands of nipples. Someone came into the gallery to look at the controversial painting, but Dave noticed the man was about to throw eggs at it. He grabs the man and the egg only goes two feet before hitting the ground. However, Dave was so angry, he did not let the man go right after. He used "more violence than needed" because he "hated the fucker so much that [he] got carried away" as he led the man out of the building (2859). While he was escorting this man out, someone else had smashed up the picture by the time he got back. Again, illustrating the idea of an unreliable authority figure.

Hornby also relays the idea that there are no universal truths throughout this story. The entire story is based off of a controversial art piece that people will either love or hate based off their views of the world and their experiences which is a main focus of Postmodern work. There is no way to unanimously decide that the art piece is right or wrong, sinful or not, because people are entitled to their own opinions. They "have to make up their own minds," as the vicar said (2856). There can be no universal truth here.

In Zadie Smith's story, "Martha, Martha," the authority figure would be the realtor, Pam. She has the knowledge of the city her clients need and is their guidance as they try to find a place to live. However, she does not seem able to meet the needs of her newest client, Martha. Martha is desperate for a place to live but does not have a lot of money. Martha does not want to spend more than \$1000 a month on an apartment, but she also has many requirements she wants met of the apartment she chooses. Pam keeps bringing Martha on tours of different places, but Martha does not seem to find anything to her liking. Martha is rude and agitated as she says, "I need space for people. To come. But this is too big, I can't afford it. Don't you have anything I can afford?" (2867). Pam continues to fail Martha on this search for a home as she continues to bring her to places that cost too much or do not have enough space. Eventually, Pam brings Martha to a tour of a house. Martha goes to the bathroom where she reads a note from a loved one and gets emotional. She rushes out of the house, mumbling that she would prefer just a one-bedroom place. Pam had failed Martha on this search.

Smith also demonstrates this idea that there can be no universal truth. Here it seems to be shown through grief. Both women, Pam and Martha, had suffered a great loss, but had completely different ways of getting through it. Pam had gone through a divorce and since people had called her a bit of a "doodlenut" (2865). Throughout the story, Pam was warm and kind, but the reader is able to pick up on her hidden sadness. She "resisted the urge to inspect the curtains, the lawn, the little things he'd changed for somebody else" as she and Martha passed the house she used to live in with her husband, but now he lives there with someone new. Martha has also suffered a great loss but does not try to hide it as Pam does. Martha is irritable, rude and impatient from the moment she encounters Pam. At the end, the reader finds out that she has lost her family, who appeared to be her husband and son. She tries to fool herself throughout the

story that they would be visiting and that is why she needed the extra space. However, after looking at the photo, she decides that she wants a one-bedroom place. There is no universal truth here as they both have completely different ways of dealing with grief, and those were not even all of the possible ways people can deal with it. People are unique and have different ways of doing things based off of their experiences and personalities.

The reader is able to pick up on these ideas vaguely from the work of Modernist writers, but one sees it taken to the next level in Postmodern works. Postmodernists truly value the individual; there is no such thing as universal truth because truth will be determined by each person differently based off of who they are. There can be no true, reliable authority because they are either just an “idea” or another person, who will eventually fall or prove they will not always be there. In Eliot’s case, God was the authority that vanished once people stopped having faith in the idea of God. In Hornby’s and Smith’s case, authority was just another person. Because people are flawed, they will eventually prove to be unreliable when they give up or make a mistake.

### Works Cited

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