

# Trout Fishing in America as a Postmodern Parody

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**How to cite this paper:** Gökçek, A. (2021). *Trout Fishing in America as a Postmodern Parody*. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 9, 401-410.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2021.99028>

**Received:** July 16, 2021

**Accepted:** September 13, 2021

**Published:** September 16, 2021

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyse Richard Brautigan's novel *Trout Fishing in America* as a parody of realistic novel writing convention with an eye on the qualities of postmodern literature. With this study, the qualities of postmodern literature and criticism of postmodern consumer society will be scrutinized. This paper also discloses different ways of postmodern technique of parody. Initially, general qualities of modernism and postmodernism will be pointed out and then *Trout Fishing in America* will be handled as a postmodern parody. How Brautigan deconstructs realistic novel writing with the use of postmodern tools is examined. The author's criticism of consumerism of postmodern society is also studied. In the end, it has been concluded that Richard Brautigan manages to achieve his purpose to react against society out of order through literature by using the exceptional technique of parody and absurd.

## Keywords

Postmodern Literature, Parody, Consumerism, Deconstruction of Realistic Novel, Inconsistency

## 1. Introduction

Modernism is a prevailing movement in literature, art and music that started towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Estrangement, perspectivism, impressionism, allusive presentation of experience, multiple and complex language were the major themes of modern literature. The concept of reality became subjective with modernism; then, people started to question nature of reality and postmodernism came into existence towards the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Postmodernism is a western movement in art and literature that came into existence as a reaction against prin-

ciples of post-industrial society, concept of reality and truth. The name postmodernism is given to the movement because it emphasizes exhaustion of modernism and post-industrial society. While modernism argues that since reality is subjective, there is a multiplicity of reality, postmodernism claims that there is no reality. Postmodernism argues that there is no right or wrong because what is right is only an illusion. Id became more important than superego; 17<sup>th</sup> century thought *carpe diem* prevailed and people started to live as they wish.

In postmodern society in which non-existence of reality and order as well as meaninglessness of life are common issues, authors tried to denaturalize concepts of truth and forms in literature. They believed in constant change of reality and stressed that postmodern people live in a universe that is devoid of firm foundation. According to postmodern authors, society was degenerate and they wanted to raise their voice against the way of living through writing. In order to reflect their criticism, they used unique interpretation of language system and instead of realistic and conventional novel writing tradition, they brought novelty to novel writing in form and in content. In a way, they tried to make reader contemplate on the way of writing and living. Their writing was very far from realistic writing which is generally mimetic. They did not write to teach; their purpose was to raise their voice against society which they believed degenerate. By writing works out of order, they wanted to show how out of order society is. They claimed that language does not have secure connection with truth and believed that human mind cannot access reality that is structured by language and denaturalized concepts of truth in all fields. Because of this reason, postmodern literature departs from mimetic form which stresses realistic writing and values meaning rather than form. Postmodern novels are no longer called as fiction, but “texts” because they are only texts made up language that do not reflect reality and postmodern writers are known as players playing with language. In terms of plot structure, postmodern novels are like labyrinths without any ending or exit. In the modes of modern writing, David Lodge (1977) defines postmodern literature as follows:

There is ... a certain kind of contemporary *avant-garde* art which is said to be neither modernist nor antimodernist, but postmodernist; it continues the modernist critique of traditional mimetic art, and shares the modernist commitment to innovation, but pursues these aims by methods of its own. It tries to go beyond modernism, or around it, and is often as critical of modernism as it is of antimodernism (pp. 220-221).

As Lodge points out postmodernism maintains modernism’s criticism of mimetic art but does it with its own “methods” which carry it beyond modernism. For instance, while modernist literature turned objective reality of realism into subjective, postmodern literature devalued the significance of reality by presenting multiplicity of reality. The gap between reality and postmodern literature was so high that in order to emphasize its difference from tradition of realism, some critics preferred to use the term “postrealist” instead of “postmodern” while referring to postmodern genre after Frédéric Regard’s *Histoire de la littérature*

*anglaise* (Williams-Wanquet, 2006: p. 389).

Postmodern writers use postmodern methods such as “parody”, “pastiche” (Imitating a work of art without any purpose of criticism or ridicule.), irony, absurd humour, intertextuality (borrowing a part or a character from a master narrative purposefully and putting it one’s own text to destabilize.) and historiographical metafiction (fictionalizing, rewriting and imitating certain history with the purpose of destabilizing it). Parody, imitating a work of art or anything else with the purpose of satirizing it in a humorous and ironic way, is an important writing genre of postmodern literature that is used to denaturalize the nature of what is parodied. Parody is also used to destabilize the prestige of an avant-garde literature.

Richard Brautigan was one of the most prominent 20th century postmodern American authors who used parody as a tool to denaturalize realistic novel writing convention. He believed that there is no order and exact reality in life and parodied realistic novels. His well-known novel *Trout Fishing in America* deconstructs meaning and serves as an example to the parody of realistic novel convention as will be scrutinized in this paper.

*Trout Fishing in America* will also be handled as a parody of capitalist society. Postmodern society is a consumer society in which capitalism prevails. As David B. Clarke (2003) points out in his book *The Consumer Society and The Postmodern City*, “the consumer society is still a very much a capitalist society; whilst at the same time insisting that it involves a form of capitalism that departs significantly from its earlier incarnations. ...In one guise or another, the notion of the ‘postmodern city’ has effectively sought to capture this situation” (3). Since postmodern city and society is associated with capitalism, it is impossible not to refer to capitalism in the examination of a postmodern work. Like many postmodern literary works, *Trout Fishing in America* is a humorous criticism of consumerism of postmodern society as will be examined in this paper.

## 2. *Trout Fishing in America* as a Postmodern Novel

This part is dedicated to examine *Trout Fishing in America* (Brautigan, 1967) as a parody. With the observation of the Brautigan’s use his exceptional and multiple use of postmodern “method” of parody, postmodernist “commitment to innovation” will be revealed. With this purpose, the realistic novel genre, activities, avant-garde texts in American fiction, sentimental novels, scientific research methods, materialism of capitalism which the work parodies is handled one by one in this chapter.

As a postmodern writer, Richard Brautigan was against realistic writing convention, so he wrote *Trout Fishing in America* which is a parody of realistic novel. The novel consists of short stories without a meaningful link between them. There is no coherence within a chapter itself too. Each story begins like a realistic one, but ends meaningless. The author deliberately refrains from being mimetic and deconstructs realistic language. He breaks the relationship between reality and imaginary and does not fulfil reader’s expectation for a meaning. In each story,

the narrator uses realistic language, but his intensive narration filled with excessive details makes it impossible for the reader to understand what the novel is about. That is the way Brautigan follows to deconstruct concept of realistic novel writing.

Throughout the book, Brautigan plays with the phrase “Trout Fishing” by using it in multiple ways. The phrase means something else in each chapter. For instance, in the first chapter entitled “Knock on the Wood”, it is used as an “old drunk” whereas in the second part of the same chapter, it stands for “trout fishing”. In the chapter named “Another Method of Making Walnut Catsup”, it corresponds to a character who invites his girlfriend to a diner. In the chapter named “Trout Fishing on the Bevel”, it equals to a graveyard whereas in the chapter named “The Autopsy of Trout Fishing in America”, it symbolizes a corpse. In chapter named “Room 208, Hotel Trout Fishing in America”, it corresponds to a hotel. In other stories, it stands for an old rascal, a lover, a cloth of a murderer, a signature and so on. As seen, the phrase acts as an only tie that brings chapters together.

The novel opens with the chapter named “The Cover for Trout Fishing in America” in which Brautigan describes the photograph on the cover of the book. In this chapter, Brautigan parodies traditional openings. This chapter begins like a traditional cover chapter with the description of Benjamin Franklin statue, but towards the end of the chapter, subject moves from the statue to people gathering around the statue to eat their sandwiches. Brautigan gives excessive details about the people and the trees in the park. He ends this chapter with the words of Kafka who says “I like Americans because they are healthy and optimistic” (3). Here, Brautigan’s message is ambiguous, meaning either what Kafka says or other way round.

The novel is an abstract book without a clear and central story line. Instead, the book contains a series of characters, anecdotes broken into chapters, sometimes with the same characters often reappearing from story to story. For instance, the narrator talks about a character named “Trout Fishing in America” in several chapters. The first mentioning of the character is in chapter named “The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren”. Here, the character is described as a “legless middle-aged wino” whom the children escape from. The narrator expresses his wish to send him in a big shipping crate to Nelson Algren, but he cannot realize his aim since the character disappears. The same character also appears in the chapter named “Footnote Chapter to ‘The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America to Nelson Algren’”. In this chapter, the character is described as a famous person because the movies discovered him. So, again the narrator cannot send him to Nelson Algren. The character also appears in the chapter named “The Last Time I saw Trout Fishing in America”. In this chapter, the narrator talks to the character as if he is a close friend of him. Finally, the same character appears in the chapter named “The Last Mention of Trout Fishing in America Shorty”. In this chapter, the character is described as a man sitting under the trees by Benjamin Franklin statue who is playing with the

daughter of Brautigan. As it is seen, the character is described differently in each chapter. By the portrayal of an inconsistent character, Brautigan parodies realistic novel writing convention in which general qualities of a character is consistent throughout the book. In addition, he reflects constant change of reality and knowledge which is a prevailing idea in postmodern literature.

Inconsistency is seen not only in character portrayal, but also in the narration of “Knock on the Wood” chapter that is divided as part I and part II. Here, Brautigan once again plays with the reader’s expectation of a meaningful link between chapters. The second part of the chapter is expected to follow the same story line of the first part, but it is not. In the first part, the phrase “Trout Fishing in America” stands for an old rascal whereas in the second part, it stands for trout fishing.

Postmodern tool of absurd humour is another postmodern tool used in the novel. For instance, in the second part of the chapter named “Knock on the Wood”, Brautigan moves from reality to meaninglessness. At the beginning of the chapter, the narrator describes a stream which seems to attract him. Then, he tells the reader that when he goes closer to the stream, he realizes that the stream he describes is actually not a stream, but “a flight of wooden stairs leading up to a house in trees.” What is funnier is that the narrator does not make any fluctuation in narration while moving from reality to dream as well as from dream to absurdity as if mistaking “a flight of wooden stairs leading up to a house in trees” with a stream is quite normal:

There was nothing I could do. I couldn’t change a flight of stairs into a creek. The boy walked back to where he came from. The same thing once happened to me. I remember mistaken an old woman to a trout stream in Vermont, and I had to beg her pardon. “Excuse me” I said, “I thought you were a trout stream.” “I’m not she said” (7).

For the narrator, not only mistaking “a flight of stairs” with a stream, but also mistaking an old woman to a trout stream is something quite normal. The woman who sees being mistaken by a trout stream as if something normal by merely saying “I’m not” is another element of humour. Absurd humour is also seen in the fourth chapter titled as “Red Lip” in which the narrator is hitchhiking, but nobody puts him up. Then, he sees a house whose door is open. He resembles inside the house to a human face and he believes the house seems to say it did not want anyone else to touch it. Later, he leaves the house with anger by saying “All I want is a ride down the river” (10). As seen, the author makes use of postmodern technique of absurd humour not only to bring humour to his narration, but also to deconstruct the idea of reality. He implies that reality is what we believe, so there is no firm reality.

Brautigan’s parody of realistic novel writing convention is also seen in his prelude, prologue and footnote chapters. There is neither a coherence nor a logical connection between them and the chapters they are supposed to serve as footnote prologue or prelude. For instance, there is a chapter titled as “Footnote

Chapter to Red Lip” nearly ninety pages after “Red Lip” chapter. Moreover, they are completely unrelated to one another. The only tie between them is the house, but even the house is different in each story. It is because there is one house mentioned in the chapter titled “Red Lip” whereas in the chapter titled as “Footnote Chapter to Red Lip”, there are three abandoned houses in a row.

Similarly, there is no connection between the chapter titled as “Prelude to Mayonnaise Chapter” and “The Mayonnaise chapter”. While the first chapter consists of quotations about language, the other chapter consists of a letter written for the consolation of the death of Mr. Good. The only tie between them is the word “mayonnaise”. The reason Brautigan makes use of footnote, prologue and prelude chapters is to mock with traditional realistic novel writing and to deconstruct conventional novel writing. How Brautigan mocks with traditional way of writing can also be understood from the fact that there is nearly nineteen pages between the “Red Lip” chapter and its footnote chapter.

As seen, there is a discontinuity both between and within chapters. Incoherence is a self-conscious postmodern process used by Brautigan in order to write a novel that is far away from meaning. In the novel, he collected extremely short, unrelated and even contradictory (just like “Red Lip” Chapter and “Footnote Chapter to Red Lip) chapters together. He also makes use of distracting and unrelated details. Excessive details in narration distract reader’s attention to achieve a meaning. There are so many details that sometimes these details become a new main subject on their own. For instance, the chapter titled as “Prologue to Gridler Creek” begins like a realistic story just like other chapters of the book. At the beginning, reader assumes to be told about the town named “Mooresville” or the character named John Dillinger, but unexpectedly, the narrator begins to give excessive details about attempts to kill the rats. Initially, this seems as if just a detail, but later the attempts to kill the rats turn into a main subject of the chapter. After giving even the slightest details about killing the rats, the narrator ends this chapter by returning to the character named John Dillinger and the town Mooresville: “There is always a single feature, a double feature and an eternal feature playing at the Great Theatre in Mooresville Indian a: John Dillinger capital of America”. However, since the reader is not mentioned about the character and the town despite being given excessive details about killing rats, these final words become meaningless. Thus, with such a chapter that is far from being mimetic, the author achieves his aim to deconstruct novel writing.

*Trout Fishing in America* refers to common American activities in a humorous manner as well. For instance, in the second part of the chapter titled as “Knock on the Wood”, Brautigan parodies trout fishing which is a common activity for the second-class American guys. He also parodies trivial conversation between American guys in the chapter titled as “A Waldon Pond for Winos” which includes absurd humour. The narrator talks about a conversation with his friends when he gathered in the park near the Benjamin Franklin Statue for drink. The narrator tells that his friends talk about opening a flea circus and discuss how to make little clothes for the fleas. The narrator tells that although

his friends do not have the fleas yet, they can easily obtain fleas from a white cat. Humour reaches its peak when he says his friends thought that the fleas that live on Siamese cats are more intelligent than those who live on the ordinary cats because drinking intelligent blood makes intelligent fleas.

Another object of parody of the novel is avant-garde texts in American fiction. For instance, the chapter named “Red Lip” is a parody of William Faulkner’s story “The Bear”. In his story, Faulkner deals with a symbolic bear story in which hunting of bear symbolizes the transience from adolescence to manhood. In Faulkner’s story the protagonist Isaac (Ike) Mc. Caslin goes to hunt a bear who has become infamous in the forest and has earned himself a human name called “Old Ben”. Actually, Ike’s real purpose is not merely to hunt the bear, but to be able to fight against the power of nature on his own. Therefore, all his attempts to kill the bear become futile in the story. Brautigan parodies Faulkner’s story in “Red Lip” chapter. Instead of a bear, Brautigan prefers to use a trout. In Brautigan’s chapter, an unknown protagonist wants to pay a visit to the place where he went trout fishing for the first time, but gives up to do so he could not find a car which will pick him up there while hitchhiking. As seen, in both stories, the protagonists cannot realize their aim for hunting. With a similar story line, Brautigan makes a parallelism between both stories and parodies Faulkner’s story and implies that human cannot beat nature.

Brautigan also parodies sentimental novels about poor immigrants such as Steinbeck’s novels in the chapter titled as “The Kool-Aid Wino”. In this chapter, Brautigan mentions a friend of him who became a “kool-aid wino”. The narrator says that his friend was a member of a very large and poor German family in which everyone except for his friend works. The reason why his friend cannot work is the fact that he has a rapture. The family is so poor that they cannot even buy him a truss. However, different from sentimental novels, poor condition of the family is reflected in a humorous way. For instance, narrator’s poor friend does not take his clothes off when he goes to bed and he says: “Why bother, he had said, you are only going to get up anyway. Be prepared for it. You aren’t fooling anyone by taking your clothes off when you go to bed” (11). Furthermore, the narrator resembles the birth mark of the grocer to “an old car parked on his head” (12). Narrator also resembles his friend’s making “kool-aid” to a ceremony and narrator thinks for his friend making “kool aid” is a romance. His friend cannot put sugar to “kool-aid” because there is no sugar.

Brautigan’s novel can also be regarded as a parody of Hemmingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises* because the chapter entitled “Trout Death by Port Wine” reminds a chapter in Hemmingway’s novel in which Jake and his friend go fishing. Just like the speeches of Hemmingway’s characters, Brautigan’s characters have extremely short speeches. As Brautigan’s chapter unfolds, the dialogue between characters become meaningless. For instance, in the course of the fishing, one character expresses his feelings by shouting as “Giraffe Races in Kilimanjaro” whereas the other character does it by shouting as “Bee Races at Mount Everest”. Thus, by making parallelism and making use of absurd humour, Brautigan pa-

rodies Hemmingway's novel.

"Trout Death by Port Wine" chapter can also be regarded as a parody of scientific research methods which is generally preferred in mimetic works. The narrator asserts that he has made a research on the fishes that die out of port wine. The narrator says that he has collected all researches on the subject in a bibliography and gives the names of the books along with their writers' names with their publication dates in order to convince reader for the real existence of his research. He adds that the bibliography he presents includes all the names of the books written on the subject beginning with the year 1496 to the year 1957. The narrator uses the word "boke" for the title of the book he gives us written in 1496, which can be seen in the title "Boke of St. Albans" self-consciously (Self-consciousness is also a technique used by postmodern writers in order to write distinctively.)

The reason why he prefers to use the word "boke" is to convince reader to the existence of such a book because in 15<sup>th</sup> century the word "boke" was used for the word "book". By using such a plausible word for the century, Brautigan parodies scientific research methods of mimetic works. The author's parody of scientific methods of mimetic works can also be observed in the humorous titles of the books such as "Truth is Stranger than Fishing", "Northern Memories", "I go A fishing", "Trout Fishing and Trout Flies", "Certain Experiments Concerning Fish and Fruit", "Till Fish Us Do Apart", "The Fly fisher & The Trout's Point of View" and "The Fly fisher's Guide." As seen, here the author parodies mimetic works by presenting humorous bibliography and titles.

Another object of satire of Brautigan reflected by parody is materialism and consumerism of postmodern society. For instance, in the chapter named "Cleveland Wrecking Yard", the author satirizes people who try to replace everything with money:

Until recently my knowledge about the Cleveland Wrecking Yard had come from a couple of friends who'd bought things there. One of them brought a huge window: the frame, glass and everything for just a few dollars. It was a fire-looking window. Then he chopped a hole in the side of his house up on Potrero Hill and put window in. Now, he has a panoramic view of San Francisco Country Hospital. He can practically look right down into the wards and see the patients thinking about breakfast "I hate milk", and thinking about diner: "I hate peas" and then can watch the hospital slowly drown at night, hopelessly entangled in huge bunches of brick seaweed (154).

As seen, the passage is concerned with a hill on which a house is eradicated and shows how people exploit nature in the name of urbanization. Here, Brautigan also implies that due to industrialization and urbanization people can no longer see the beauty of nature. With the reluctance of patients in the hospital to eat peas and drink milk, the author draws attention to the fact that people living in an environment deprived of beauty of nature are bound to be unhappy and unsatisfied.



In “Cleveland Wrecking Yard” chapter, Brautigan implies that society is so degenerate that people try to replace everything with money. For instance, the narrator goes to “Cleveland Wrecking Yard” when he hears about a used trout stream is sold by foot length. The salesman says the narrator that they are selling waterfalls, the trees, birds, flowers and grass. The salesman adds that since the birds are used, he cannot guarantee them. It is also ironic that when the narrator asks whether the stream is clear or not, the salesman answers him as if he treated stream with “loving care” and says: “We moved it with loving care. We’ve never damaged a trout stream yet. We treat them all as if they were china” (160) Here irony is that although it is clear that the salesman exploits the nature for his materialistic purpose, he asserts that he has never damaged the stream. The salesman treats the stream as if it is a commodity which can be sold and he even advertises the stream he sells with these words: “I wouldn’t want you to think that we would ever sell a murky trout stream here. We always make sure that they’re running crystal clear before we even think about moving them” (160). In the chapter, the salesman also says that he is selling not only waterfalls and streams, but also wild animals such as deer, mice and insects. With all of these things for sale, Brautigan aims at making people contemplate on their attempts to replace everything with money. This criticism of Brautigan supports David Clarke’s observation on the relationship between “the postmodern city” and “the refiguration of capitalist society as consumer society” (4). It is because Brautigan draws attention to the fact that people of postmodern society regards everything as a commodity which can be replaced and consumed with money. With the presentation of the people who attempt to purchase the components of the environment such as streams, waterfalls, wild animals, insects, etc., the author implies that people of postmodern society believe that they have the right to buy and consume everything. Here, the object of author’s satire is materialism and greed of capitalist society.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Trout Fishing in America* is a parody realistic novel writing convention, scientific research method, avant-garde texts of American Fiction, and sentimental novels about poor immigrants as well as consumerism and materialism of postmodern society. The author makes use of postmodern techniques of absurd humour, incoherence and discontinuity while parodying. The author criticizes postmodern society which is out of order. He reflects his reaction to post-industrialist society because he thought industrialism and urbanization have negative effects on people causing a gap between humanity and nature and make people more and more materialistic. Therefore, it is proper to say that the Brautigan manages to achieve his purpose to react against society out of order through literature by using the exceptional technique of the absurd. This study also reveals postmodernism’s “commitment to innovation” with the use of its “method” of parody. Hereby, this study may provide an inspiration for further analysis of

postmodern works for their contribution to innovation to literature with post-modern method of parody.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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