

Germundson, Karen. *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Canadian Novel: The Works of Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Audrey Thomas as Responses to the Postmodern Philosophy of Survival*. Thesis (PhD [English]), University of Ottawa. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1987. (Publication No. NL46773)

Abstract

Irving Howe, one of the pioneers of postmodernist criticism argued in 1959, in *Decline of the New*, that postmodern fiction can be best understood when it is examined although Howe's argument is sound, critics have ignored his proposal, and instead have used very different criteria for evaluation postmodern fiction. It is in the cultural context identified by Howe, and defined in further detail by Graff, that I have proposed to examine the works four Canadian authors considered to be postmodern: Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Audrey Thomas. Their works have been viewed as postmodern from perspectives other than the one defended by Howe and Graff—for instance, some critics have explored their fiction as models of the literature of exhaustion. I am interested, however, in the way all four writers address the postmodern philosophy of survival, a philosophy that has been defined by literary critics such as Howe, Graff, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan and Richard Palmer, and by sociologist such as Shirley Sugerman and Christopher Lasch.

The main premise upon which this philosophy is based asserts that in a world in which the odds are against survival, we must permit ourselves to do anything, however atrocious, to stay alive. As Hassan has rightly argued, this premise has some alarming implications, implications we cannot afford to overlook. In effect, what the philosophy of postmodernism demands of us is that we divest ourselves of our humanity.

Agreeing with Hassan that the implications of postmodernism must be considered, I have evaluated the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas as imaginative responses to the world posited by postmodernists: that is, a world made uninhabitable by violence. I feel that, in many ways, each of the four responses is inadequate. I attribute that inadequacy, in the works of Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas, to the narcissistic perspective the three authors are writing from. Hodgins case is somewhat different: I suspect he has failed to meet the challenge the philosophy of postmodernism presents us with because his naïve concept of the dark self that is in all of us keeps him from appreciating how serious the implications of postmodernism are.

While I regard as inadequate the responses to postmodernism represented by the works of Hodgins, Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas, I conclude nevertheless that all four writers have made an important contribution to Canadian literature a contribution they are able to make because they have been part of the postmodern literary movement. What postmodernism as a literary movement taught these writers have long been struggling to depict in their works, without complete success. This is the accomplishment, then, of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas – to portray our lives as being mundane, yet marvelous. Such a view of existence affords us what the philosophy of postmodernism cannot: not just the possibility of inhabiting once more a world we thought had grown

uninhabitable, but also the possibility of living there without having to forfeit our humanity.