

The Importance of Understanding Meta-narratives in Critical Reading

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Symposium 2019

Jean Francois Lyotard, the famous proponent of postmodernism said of postmodernism, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives.” Postmodernists in other words are highly resistant to metanarratives. They feel that there are no grand, life-explaining stories which give meaning to all of life and which define what is true. They reject the moral foundation of the Bible and religion; they reject the idea that history is able to teach us anything; and they typically identify traditional metanarratives with political oppression. Freedom, they say, comes from being free of any belief in a metanarrative.

Whether you subscribe to the realist or postmodernist view however, understanding the function of the metanarrative in critical reading is essential. Metanarratives not only play a part in literature, but in news, journals, commentary, and general discourse. Even Lyotard tends to admit that the rejection of metanarratives--the rejection of meaning in general--is, in a certain sense, *also* a kind of metanarrative.

Anytime an author sits down to write something, they will do so from a particular vantage point. Every author views the world from a particular philosophy, and so will interpret human behaviour and world events from that vantage point. Often, an author (or reader) will not be consciously aware of the world-view from which they write. But whether or not we are aware of our starting point, that initial world-view will shape how we tackle and respond to the world around us.

Below is a series of statements that respondents were asked to identify as part of their world-view. The results of such surveys indicate that there is a significant split in contemporary world views.

Common Elements of a World View

Based on a number of surveys, the following have been identified as key features of various (and conflicting) world-views currently competing in the west today.

Skeptical and distrustful of government and mainstream media	Pessimistic about human progress in the world today	Optimistic about human progress in the world today
Trusting of the government and mainstream media	Easily offended by others and what others say on social media	Belief in dialogue and thoughtful communication in solving the world's problems
Believe that inequality and climate change are the biggest threats to humanity	Rarely offended by others and what others say on social media	Belief in radical action, including violence, in solving the world's problems
Believe that lack of education and wisdom is the biggest threat to humanity	Belief that traditional culture and norms are under attack and should be defended	Belief that traditional culture and norms need to change to give way to a new world order