According to the Oxford Dictionary, literature is a mass noun originating from Middle English (in the sense ‘knowledge of books’): via French from Latin litteratura and referring to

1. written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit: a great work of literature
2. books and writings published on a particular subject: the literature on environmental epidemiology
3. leaflets and other printed matter used to advertise products or give advice: advertising and promotional literature

In the context of this course on Automated Alice, we will obviously only be focusing on the first meaning of the word and it is sister-discipline, literary criticism:

the art or practice of judging and commenting on the qualities and character of literary works.

Even though the art of telling stories is probably as ancient as language, the oldest known literary work is the Epic of Gilgamesh that dates back to at least the 18th century BC.

Although there are many different ways to shed a light on literature, depending on the literary criticism current to which one might refer, it is important to keep in mind that literature is both a personal (subjective) and universal experience.

In order to bring order to chaos, this introduction comes with a general overview of the main literary movements of the 20th century (next page).

Automated Alice was first published in 1996 by Doubleday. It is “supposed to be” a trequel to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1866) and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (1872) by British author Lewis Carroll. In the introduction, or in the inner cover (depending on the edition), it is written:

In the last years of his life, the fantasist Charles Dodgson wrote a third Alice book. This mysterious work was never published or shown to anybody. It has only recently been discovered. Now, at last, the world can read of Automated Alice and her fabulous adventures in the
future. That's not quite true. Automated Alice was written by Lewis Caroll, Lewis Caroll was the nom de plume of Charles Dodgson. No, that's not even slightly true either. Automated Alice was written by Zenith O’Clock, the Writer of Wrongs. [...] Oh dear that's not at all right. This book was written by Jeff Noon. Zenith O’Clock is only a character invented by Jeff Noon. (Noon, 1996)

The book is divided into twelve chapters, just like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: (1) Through the Clock’s Workings, (2) The Wriggling of a Worm, (3) Alice’s Twin Twister, (4) Adventures in a Garden Shed, (5) The Long Paw of the Law, (6) Languishing in Gaol, (7) The Stroke of Noon, (8) Alice Looks up Herself, (9) The Hunting of the Quark, (10) Snakes and Leaders, (11) Dorothy, Dorothy and Dorothy, (12) ‘What Time Do You Call This, Alice?’ Most of those titles are wordplays, most of which are references to other works or cultural items. In the context of a postmodern work of literature, this phenomenon is called intertextuality.

In order to understand what Automated Alice is all about, we need to go deeper into the field of theory of literature and take a closer look at the concept of Postmodernism. 

[Postmodernism is the] rejection of traditional mimetic fiction in favour of a heightened sense of artifice, a delight in games and verbal pyrotechnics; a suspicion of absolute truth and a resulting inclination to stress the fictionality of fiction³.

While many literary critics claim that the beginning of the postmodern literary movement dates to the murder of John F. Kennedy (1963) or even the early days of the American involvement in the Vietnam War (1962), placing de development of the movement in the 60’s, some other argue that it might have been born earlier than that – at the end of World War II. While being essentially a post-war movement, 1941 is also often taken as the date of birth of Postmodernism, being the year during which both Irish novelist James Joyce and English authoress Virginia Woolf passed away.

Anyhow, Postmodernism – regardless of the suffix “-post” that generally implies a chronology – did not really appear at the end of the modernist period. The suffix has to be understood as a reaction and not as a new sequence of time. Hence the next question, “What is Modernism?”

DEFINITIONS

Mimesis: imitation of reality

Pyrotechnics: a show of great skill, especially by a musician or someone giving a speech

Virginia Woolf

Timeline of literature in English in the 20th century

1Literary criticism, The Oxford Dictionaries Online [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/literary-criticism?q=literary+criticism, last accessed 06/12/2013]
2Penname of mathematician and Oxford don Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898)
Modernism

1. Definition

Modernism was distinguished by its opposition to traditional forms and to the aesthetic perceptions associated with those forms. It was persistently experimental. A common quality was the highly self-conscious manipulation of form, together with an awareness of pioneering studies which were contemporaneous in other disciplines.

2. Characteristics

The main characteristics of Modernism are (1) impressionism, (2) subjectivity of the narration, (3) blurring of the distinction between genres, (4) fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives, (5) reflexivity of the work of art, (6) blurred boundaries between "low" and "high" culture.

2.1. Impressionism

Because they were widely influenced by the contemporary discoveries in psychology and by the invention of psychoanalysis, the modernist authors were interested in the way their characters perceived the situations instead of the factual way things could happen. This vision of literature is interdependent with the Impressionist movement in painting. The process through which these authors expressed such perception is called the stream of consciousness.

The stream of consciousness is a technique used by novelists to represent a character’s thoughts and sense impressions without syntax or logical sequence.

Here is an example from one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, Ulysses by the Irish novelist James Joyce:

A quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose theyre just getting up in China now combing out their pigtails for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus theyve nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office or the alarmlock next door at cockshout clattering gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so that I can get up early.

(Joyce, 1922)

2.2. Subjectivity of the narration

Instead of using a so-called objective narration with a fixed point of view and an omniscient third-person narrator, the modernists move away from all consideration of objectivity and give their texts a subjective dimension by writing in the first person or by having an insight in one or more characters’ feelings and impressions:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since. “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.” He didn’t say any more but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. [...] And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit.

(Woolf, 1931, p. 1)

2.3. Blurring of distinctions between genres

With the modernist authors, the genres of literature collapse. What was clearly separated now melts together. Poetry seems more documentary, more realistic, while novels seem more poetic.

The sun had not yet risen. The sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

(Joyce, 1939, p. 1)

2.4. Fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives

As Modernism basically is the deconstruction of all literary boundaries, one of its main features is fragmentation, not only in the form (one style to another) or in the narrative (flash-backs, alternative realities), but also in the language, as in the excerpt from Joyce’s Finnegans Wake:

Sir Tristram, violer d’amores, fr’over the short sea, had passen-core rearrowed from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer’s rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselfe to Laurens County’s gorgios while they went doublein their murmur all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick not yet, though venisoon after, had a kidscad buttended a bland old isaac: not yet, though all’s fair in vanessy, were sosie sesters wroth with twone nathandjoe.

(Joyce, 1939, p. 1)

NOTE

The mind (psych.) is the element of a person that enables them to be aware of the world and their experiences, to think, and to feel, the faculty of consciousness and though while the soul (rel.) is the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, which is regarded as immortal.
2.5. Reflexivity of the work of art

According to the modernists, writing is not only about a story, but it is also about writing in itself. The author (and in many cases, the narrator) are self-conscious that a work of art is in progress. It has to be designed and consumed in a specific way. It is art for art’s sake and nothing else, because the world does not make sense and all attempts at explaining it are hopeless and vain.

I am now in the mood. I can write the letter straight off which I have begun ever so many times. I have just come in; I have flung down my hat and my stick; I am writing the first thing that comes into my head without troubling to put the paper straight. It is going to be a brilliant sketch which, she must think, was written without a pause, without an erasure. Look how unformed the letters are—there is a careless blot. All must be sacrificed to speed and carelessness.

(Woolf, 1931, p. 46)

2.2.6. Blurred boundaries between "low" and "high" culture

While "high" culture is defined by its intellectual manifestations through arts (that is, the "traditional arts": Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Music, Poetry, Dance and Theatre), "low" culture is supposed to be defined by its popularity among the masses.

After the modernist storm, this distinction does not exist anymore (hence the addition of Cinema, Photography and Comics to the list) and literature, which is the highest form of all, draws on popular culture, both in the material chosen to produce art and in the way it is distributed.

In 1935, if you wanted to read a good book, you needed either a lot of money or a library card. Cheap paperbacks were available, but their poor production generally tended to mirror the quality between the covers. Penguin paperbacks were the brainchild of Allen Lane, then a director of The Bodley Head. After a weekend visiting Agatha Christie in Devon, he found himself on a platform at Exeter station searching its bookstall for something to read on his journey back to London, but discovered only popular magazines and reprints of Victorian novels. Appalled by the selection on offer, Lane decided that good quality contemporary fiction should be made available at an attractive price and sold not just in traditional bookshops, but also in railway stations, tobacconists and chain stores.

(Penguin)

3. On Modernism

Because of its opposition to the traditional Victorian values, Modernism is quintessentially British. Nevertheless, it also has roots in French Impressionism and it had a strong influence on many great American authors.

Modernism can be labelled as an “international” phenomenon as well as a more general sensation: not only did it change the way we perceive literature, but it also was a revolution in the fields of architecture (Le Corbusier, for instance) or painting (Pollock), just to name a few.

TO GO FURTHER...

The main figures of Modernism:
- Henry JAMES
- Joseph CONRAD
- T.S. ELIOT
- William Butler YEATS
- Virginia WOOLF
- E.M. FORSTER
- William FAULKNER (U.S.)

The pioneering studies in other disciplines that influenced Modernism:
- In psychology: WILLIAM JAMES, Principles of Psychology (1890), FREUD, The Interpretation of Dreams (1899)
- In physics: EINSTEIN, General Principles of Relativity (1915)
- In anthropology: FRAZER, The Golden Bough (1890-1915)

The main characteristics of postmodern literature are (1) **irony**, (2) **playfulness**, and (3) **black humour**. Modernist authors celebrate the meaninglessness of the world and of art as tragic, whereas postmodern authors celebrate it through humour and through the use of humorous devices. Moreover, while in the modern perspective, the meaninglessness of the world and of art is perceived as tragic, postmodern authors celebrate it through humour and through the use of humorous devices.

### 1.1. Zeugmas

Zeugmas is a figure of speech in which a word applies to two others in different senses. For example, “She looked at the object with suspicion and a magnifying glass.”

### 1.2. Parody

Parody is a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity.

A postmodernist is a writer who uses parody to critique the grand narratives of modernism.

While parody needs irony in its distance with the work to which it refers, it does not mean that it is funny or that it seeks a comical effect; it can be (and often is) aimed at emphasizing one aspect or another of an original work rather than at criticizing it.
**Examples of parodies in Automated Alice**

### Textual parody

All along the text, Jeff Noon keeps on mimicking Lewis Carroll’s style:

Alice was not a bit hurt, and she jumped up on to her feet in a moment: she looked up, but it was all dark overhead; before her was another long passage, and the White Rabbit was still in sight, hurrying down it. There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned a corner, ‘Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it’s getting!’ She was close behind it when she turned the corner, but the Rabbit was no longer to be seen: she found herself in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.

(Noon, 1996, p.20)

The likeness is quite striking indeed:

Alice was not a bit hurt: the earth was quite soft, and she jumped up in a moment. She looked around only to find herself standing in a long corridor under the ground. The walls and the floor and the ceiling of the tunnel were made of dirt, and it curved away in both directions until Alice felt quite funny trying to decide which way to go. ‘Oh Whippoorwill,’ she cried, ‘wherever have you flown to?’ And then she heard three men approaching around the corridor’s bend.

(Noon, 1996, p.20)

### Visual parody

As the original Alice books were illustrated (which was quite common in the Victorian era, even in the case of books aimed at adults such as the Sherlock Holmes short stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when they were first published in The Strand Magazine), it was only fair for Jeff Noon to use that aspect to his own purpose in the context of a parody.

Indeed, the illustrations refer to Punch cartoonist John Tenniel’s original illustrations for the Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There. It is even acknowledged on the back cover of Automated Alice:

Cover image based on the illustration by Sir John Tenniel, adapted by Ian Murray.

(Noon, 1996, back cover)

©Harry Trumbore and Doubleday

‘Drink Me’ by John Tenniel – Detail (1866)

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**NOTE**

It is particularly interesting to note that Jeff Noon parodied Lewis Carroll while Lewis Carroll was a great parodist himself, well before Postmodernism made it fashionable.

For instance, he parodied the 19th century English lullaby *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* by Jane Taylor (generally sung along Mozart’s KV. 265) in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky.

Here’s Carroll’s version, recited by the Mad Hatter:

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!
How I wonder what you’re at!
Up above the world you fly,
Like a tea tray in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!
How I wonder what you’re at!
1.3. Intertextuality

According to Graham Allen from University College, Cork,

Literary texts possess meaning; readers extract that meaning from them. We call the process of extracting meaning from texts reading or interpretation. [...] Works of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature. The systems, codes and traditions of other art forms and of culture in general are also crucial to the meaning of a work of literature.

(Allen, 2011, p. 1)

Bulgarian-French philosopher and member of the British Academy Julia Kristeva summed this up quite efficiently in her essay Word, Dialogue and Novel, “any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”

In the field of postmodern literature, not only is intertextuality acknowledged; it is also encouraged.

1.3.1. Examples of Intertextuality

(A) The Starry Night by Vincent Van Gogh (1889)

This postimpressionist canvas by the famous Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh, depicting the view from his room in a sanatorium nearby Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is one of the most prominent paintings in the contemporary era. It is so prominent that it comes as no surprise when it is referenced to in other arts.

For instance, the poem The Starry Night by American poetess Anne Sexton, published in 1961 expresses the authoress’s feelings towards the painting:

The town does not exist except where one black-haired tree slips up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how I want to die.

(Saxton, 1961)

Vincent (Starry, Starry Night) by American singer-songwriter Don McLean — better known for another intertextual song, American Pie — links the painting to its creator’s biography:

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how I want to die:
into that rushing beast of the night, sucked up by that great dragon, to split from my life with no flag, no belly, no cry.

©Museum of Modern Art, New York
Starry, starry night
Paint your palette blue and gray
Look out on a summer’s day
With eyes that know the darkness
in my soul
Shadows on the hills
Sketch the trees and the daffodils
Catch the breeze and the winter chills
In colors on the snowy linen land

Now I understand what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they’re not listening still
Perhaps they never will

(McLean, 1971)\textsuperscript{14}

Besides, both the painting and the painter were used as key elements in 2010 in the BBC television series Doctor Who tenth episode of the fifth season, Vincent and the Doctor.

\textit{(B) Meditation XVII} by John Donne
(1624)
No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(Donne, 1624)\textsuperscript{15}

This excerpt was used by Ernest Hemingway as the opening as well as for the title of his war novel \textit{For Whom the Bell Tolls} (1940)\textsuperscript{16}.

In Nick Hornby’s novel \textit{About a Boy} (1998)\textsuperscript{17}, the protagonist Will Freeman says that he believes that John Donne was wrong and that every man is an island, precisely. In the 2002 film adaptation\textsuperscript{18}, the same character assumes that the famous quote was first written by Jon Bon Jovi.

\textbf{Intertextuality in Automated Alice}
In Automated Alice, James Marshall Hentrails, a sculpture made of rubbish, and who contains the insides (\textit{entails}) of a hen, is a parody of the American guitar icon Jimy Hendrix whose real name was James Marshall Hendrix. He plays on a terrible racket, which justifies the initial wordplay. The song he sings later in the chapter is called \textit{Little Miss Bonkers} (p. 88), which clearly is a parody of \textit{Little Miss Strange}\textsuperscript{19} by Jimy Hendrix.

In the same vein, the first victim of the Jigsaw Murders is a Spiderboy named Quentin Tarentula, whose “violent, celebratory portrayal of the criminal life” (p. 108) for the “Chimera” (cinema) is an obvious reference to Quentin Tarantino. The neo-noir crime parody \textit{Pulp Fiction}\textsuperscript{20} had had a major commercial success as well as a huge cultural impact just two years before \textit{Automated Alice} was published.

As far as literary theory is concerned, intertextuality is not only the natural consequence of the blurring of the boundaries between “low” and “high” culture in the previous movement, it is also a reinforcement of that new paradigm.
1.4. Metafiction

Metafiction is the postmodern equivalent of the modern “reflexivity of the work of art.” It pushes the idea further with the author clearly expressing his or her presence in the text.

One of the classic tricks of Metafiction consists in writing a book about someone who is writing a book (like in many novels by Stephen King):

[Metafiction is] writing about writing, an attempt to make the reader aware of its fictionality, and sometimes, the presence of the author. Authors sometimes use this technique to allow for flagrant shifts in narrative, impossible jumps in time, or to maintain emotional distance as a narrator.21

For example, at the end of his brilliant novel Atonement, Ian McEwan uses Metafiction in order to plunge his readership in the horror of reality (that is, <SPOILER ALERT> both protagonists die):

No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there’s always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, “But what really happened?” The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.

(McEwan, 2001, p. 370)22

In Automated Alice, Jeff Noon uses this device in order to mimic Lewis Carroll’s idiosyncrasy (the British author tended to address his audience as well) but he does it much more often than the writer he parodies.

1.5. Technoculture and hyperreality

According to Frederic Jameson, hyperreality is a defining characteristic of what he calls the “Third Machine Age,” a late-capitalist phenomenon in which “contemporary culture reflects a shift from machines of production to machines of reproduction,” that is from machines such as steam-engine locomotives (that produce) to machines such as television or the computer (that reproduce reality).

The most famous example of hyperreality probably is Andy and Larry Wachowski’s 1999 film The Matrix in which Neo, the protagonist played by Keanu Reeves, is sent to a computer-simulated reality. In the context of Postmodernism, and of hyperreality, the underlying idea to science-fiction is not to create a projection of the sort of future that might lie ahead, but to show a representation of the context in which such fiction is created. Reeves, is sent to a computer-simulated reality. In the context of Postmodernism, and of hyperreality, the underlying idea to science-fiction is not to create a projection of the sort of future that might lie ahead, but to show a representation of the context in which such fiction is created.

1.6. Temporal distortion

Temporal distortion is a technique that uses a non-linear timeline. The characters may jump backward or forward in time and the narration may use flashbacks or flash-forwards.

Temporal distortion can also imply cultural or historical references that do not fit in the settings of the narration, such as anachronisms. Lately, this latter sort of devices has been used in movies more than in literature.

1.7. Historiographic metafiction

According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafictions are literary texts that assert an interpretation of the past but are also intensely self-reflexive.

Historiographic metafiction fictionalizes actual historical events and characters. This means that some scenes might take place during historical events or that historical figures can be part of the fiction. In Michael Cunningham’s The Hours, the reader follows a fictional Virginia Woolf:

She, Virginia, could be a girl in a new dress, about to go down to a party, about to appear on the stairs,
1.8. Magical realism

Magical realism is an aesthetic mode in which the reader can find a matter-of-fact incorporation of fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction. In magical realism, the supernatural element is not displayed as a questionable component. While it is obvious for the reader that the irrational and rational are supposed to be conflicting and polarized, they are not disconnected or in total opposition because the supernatural is integrated in the realism of the fiction.

*lice being the plural of *louse, which adds up to the feeling of nonsense.

The main figures of postmodernism:

- Jorge Luis BORGES
- Umberto ECO
- John IRVING
- Salman RUSHDIE
- Haruki MURAKAMI
- Kurt VONNEGUT

Postmodern criticism:

- Roland BARTHES, Jacques DERRIDA, Pierre BOURDIEU, Gérard GENETTE

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References:

17. Hendrix, Jimmy, Redding, Noel. *Little Miss Strange* on the album *Electric Ladyland* (1968), London: Track. You may listen to the song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bi0RqnLbKw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bi0RqnLbKw) [online, last accessed 15/11/2013]
Consider the titles of the chapters in Jeff Noon’s *Automated Alice*. How many of them correspond to characteristics of Postmodernism? In which ways?

(1) Through the Clock’s Workings
(2) The Wriggling of a Worm
(3) Alice’s Twin Twister
(4) Adventures in a Garden Shed
(5) The Long Paw of the Law
(6) Languishing in Gaol
(7) The Stroke of Noon
(8) Alice Looks up Herself
(9) The Hunting of the Quark
(10) Snakes and Leaders
(11) Dorothy, Dorothy and Dorothy
(12) ‘What Time Do You Call This, Alice?’

Taddeo and Miller argue that steampunk re-imagines the Victorian age in the future, and re-works its technology, fashion, and values with a dose of anti-modernism. How does this definition apply to *Automated Alice*?

Jeff Noon reportedly said that he only had re-read the first few pages of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* before setting to work on *Automated Alice*. Do you think the author is to be believed?

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**TO GO EVEN FURTHER…**


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