

A Reading Of The Midnight Library And The Dead Fathers Club Through Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

Matt Haig's works contribute significantly to contemporary British literature by engaging with psychological, philosophical, and narrative complexity. In *The Midnight Library* and *The Dead Father's Club*, the protagonists Nora and Philip embody the postmodern subject, caught in the tension of shifting realities and uncertain truths. This article explores how both novels illustrate postmodern themes such as hyperreality, narrative fragmentation, and the breakdown of universal truths. Through a postmodern theoretical lens, particularly drawing on the works of Jean Baudrillard and Linda Hutcheon, the analysis reveals how identity is no longer rooted in internal essence but constructed through memory, perception, and language. Thus, this study examines how these two works reflect key aspects of postmodern literature such as the blending of genres, intertextuality and historiographic metafiction. By focusing on these aspects, we can develop a deeper understanding of how postmodernism introduces new perspectives reshapes the way identity is understood.

Keywords: *Matt Haig, The Midnight Library, The Dead Father's Club, Linda Hutcheon*

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Gece Yarısı Kütüphanesi ve Ölü Babalar Kulübü'nün Postmodernizm Açısından Okuması

ÖZ

Matt Haig ve eserleri, psikolojik, felsefi ve anlatımsal karmaşıklıkla etkileşime girerek çağdaş Britanya edebiyatına önemli katkılar sunar. *The Midnight Library* ve *The Dead Fathers Club* adlı romanlarda, başkahramanlar Nora ve Philip, değişken gerçeklikler ve belirsiz hakikatler arasında sıkışıp kalmış postmodern özneyi temsil eder. Bu makale, her iki romanın da hipergerçeklik, anlatının parçalanması ve evrensel doğruların çöküşü gibi postmodern temaları nasıl ortaya koyduğunu incelemektedir. Özellikle Jean Baudrillard ve Linda Hutcheon'ın çalışmaları temel alınarak yapılan bu postmodern kuramsal okuma, kimliğin artık içsel bir özden değil; hafıza, algı ve dil aracılığıyla kurulduğunu ortaya koyar. Bu bağlamda çalışma, türler arası geçiş, metinlerarasılık ve tarihsel-kurgusal metafiksiyon gibi postmodern edebiyatın temel yönlerini ele alarak, postmodernizmin yeni bakış açıları sunduğunu ve kimliğin nasıl yeniden şekillendirildiğini daha derinlemesine anlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's literary world, postmodern fiction often centers on the blurred lines between reality, identity, and storytelling. This article compares Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) and his earlier novel *The Dead Fathers Club* (2006), exploring how both books reflect postmodern traits like fragmented narratives, stories that acknowledge their fictional nature, and uncertain realities. While their plots differ, both novels question stable truths and highlight how personal experience shapes our sense of reality. At the heart of *The Midnight Library* is Nora Seed, a woman caught in a grey area between life and death, given the opportunity to step into countless alternate versions of her life. The story's structure challenges the usual way we think about time and chain of events, showing both time and identity as fluid and unresolved. In *The Dead Fathers Club*, we follow Philip, a boy who may be haunted in more than just a metaphorical sense by the ghost of his father, who demands revenge. Drawing on Hamlet, the novel blurs the lines between fiction and reality, sanity and madness, inviting the reader to question whether the ghost is real or a manifestation of trauma. Both novels resist fixed meaning and objective truth. Instead, Haig's novels break apart fixed ideas of identity and time, echoing postmodern themes of doubt and the idea that meaning is never fully stable. The main characters in both stories struggle with having multiple, shifting versions of themselves, the novels challenge the notion of a singular, authoritative narrative, choosing instead to highlight uncertainty on purpose. This approach reflects a broader postmodern sensibility, characterized by skepticism toward fixed meanings and a preference for multiplicity and interpretive openness. This article positions Haig's novels within the broader discourse of postmodern literary theory. Drawing on theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, and Jean-François Lyotard, the analysis explores how postmodern devices such as intertextuality, metafictional self-awareness, narrative play, and the rejection of master narratives are employed to challenge conventional representations of time, memory, and identity. Defining Postmodernism is challenging, as the movement itself resists fixed meanings or definitive explanations. While thinkers have offered influential interpretations, no single definition can fully capture what Postmodernism is. Understanding Postmodernism often begins by focusing on what it challenges, rather than trying to define exactly what it is.

Literature Review

Analyzing whether a specific novel contains Postmodern elements can be difficult, but identifying those elements through the broader understanding of Postmodernism can help clarify what qualifies as Postmodern and what does not. This study focuses on two notable works, *The Dead Fathers Club* and *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig. This topic is significant because it encourages

readers to question how they see reality and pushes back against traditional beliefs about truth and accepted social values. This paper explores a main question: what key Postmodern features define these two novels as works of Postmodern fiction? The book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-François Lyotard would be a great first stop in the journey of understanding Postmodernism. Published in 1979, Lyotard explains to his readers how the decline of grand narratives is connected to the role of science. He analyzes the nature of knowledge as well as the impact of computerization on it. According to Jean-François Lyotard, instead of forcing ideas in one metanarrative, Postmodernism embraces the diversity of them (Lyotard, 1979). In addition, Postmodernism deconstruct metanarrative, and it changed the way language is used. So basically, his argumentation is that everyone can have their own perspectives and ideas without having to fit into one frame (Lyotard, 1979). In addition to Lyotard's theories, Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and simulacra, as discussed in *Simulacra and Simulation* suggests that the lines between the reality and fiction are blurry. *Simulacra and Simulation* is an important source for this study because the blurred boundaries between reality and fiction are a key element in the Postmodern literature. Baudrillard's idea of simulation, where reality is replaced by representations, helps make sense of the alternate lives in *The Midnight Library*. Nora's journey is not through real possibilities but imagined versions of life, making her experience feel more like moving through hyperrealities than actual (Baudrillard, 1994). In *The Dead Fathers Club*, the ghost of Philip's father and the unclear divide between delusion and reality reflect a similar collapse. The world becomes a space where signs and symbols blur the difference between what is real and what is imagined. In addition, both novels include cultural references and intertextually. Intertextuality is another Postmodern element that is explored by Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. She also examines Postmodern literary techniques including parody, pastiche, and metafiction. To build on this, Fredric Jameson argues that Postmodernism is a cultural condition that is influenced by the social changes, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson explains how modern culture has lost its strong sense of history and now relies heavily on imitation and the reuse of past styles (Jameson, 1989). Unlike Fredric Jameson, Hans Bertens the author of *The Idea of The Postmodern* believes that Postmodernism is a concept with multiple meanings that influences both cultural production and identity formation, and that the term Postmodernism when it first came up was problematic because the word "postmodernism" suggests a clean break from modernism, but it does not fully depart from Modernism but rather extends it through new perspectives and approaches. (Bertens, 1995). David Harvey on the other hand focuses on the relationship between Postmodernism and late capitalism. He explores how economic and cultural conditions shape and

influence literature (Harvey, 1990). This literature review demonstrates how *The Dead Father's Club* and *The Midnight Library* contribute to Postmodern literature by presenting complex storytelling. This complex narrative style could be best understood by first having a general idea about the history of Postmodernism and second by examining the elements of Postmodern novels through the theories that many scholars like Linda Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Hans Bertens presented.

A Brief History Of Postmodernism

Any movement or any sort of ideas can be seen as a reaction to another. Industrialization and new technologies gave humanity the confidence that they need to see the world using more complex approach, Modernists believed that through science and reason they could establish universal principles. Movements such as symbolism and romanticism laid the groundwork for Modernism by establishing norms and introducing new ways to represent reality and emotions (Eysteinnsson, 1990). The late 19th century and the early 20th century was characterized by the dominance of Modernism, but the devastation of the World War II laid the groundwork to question grand narrative and ideologies which eventually led to Postmodernism. One of the first Postmodernist writers in the 1940s was Jorge Luis Borges, in his book *Fictions*, elements of metafiction and skepticism towards the nature of reality are noticed (Deliu, 2015). Postmodernism started to have a clearer form in the 1960s and 1970s with the presentation of Fragmented narratives in literature, novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) includes nonlinear structure which does not present the events of the story chronologically. Fragmented narrative style is still a distinguishing feature of Postmodern novels. After the 1980s it is observed that Postmodernism became more common in literature and theatre. One of the names that contributed to the shift away from Modernism is the poet Charles Olson, he is considered as one of the first poets to apply Postmodern literary elements such as fragmentation. However, he himself never wrote about Postmodernism as a set of ideas, but his rejection of traditional poetic structures can be seen as a reflection of postmodernism. Charles Olson applied Postmodern elements in his poems even though the concept of Postmodernism was not perfectly formed yet during his time. His poet represents a departure from modernist ideology (Bertens, 1995). Postmodernism continues to evolve over time and its change can be noticed by looking at the Postmodern novels and how they are combining different elements in a chaotic way. This development will resume because of the technological influence, in addition to the cultural and social changes. This way of challenging grand narratives keeps introducing new perspective through which to view the world and influencing literature by combining features from different genres and literary devices in an engaging manner.

Attempts To Define Postmodernism

Postmodernism has been defined by many scholars but one of the most essential definitions is Jean-François Lyotard's, in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He defines Postmodernism as the "incredulity towards metanarratives," (Lyotard, 1979) and he argues that Postmodernism contains disbelief in grand, he questions grand narratives like Enlightenment-era science, highlighting how people once relied on a single overarching idea to explain all aspects of the world around them. He also explores the nature of knowledge and challenges the idea that science holds the only claim to truth, arguing instead that it is just one of many "language games" within Postmodern thought. He believes that the Postmodern artists and writers do not aim to tell a straightforward story but rather they want their readers to look at reality with skepticism. Rather than making a beautiful piece of art, the Postmodern artist can create a chaotic artwork that inspires readers in an authentic way: "The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done." (Lyotard, 1979, p. 81).

What Postmodernism does is not only challenge the Metanarrative, but also it challenges the reality itself and the nature of it, as Jean Baudrillard's Theory of Hyperreality presents. In his theory, Baudrillard explores how thin is the line between what is simulated and what is real, because we are constantly surrounded by representations and copies of reality, it is no surprise that the media plays a significant role in producing these simulations that reshape how we understand and interpret the world (Baudrillard, 1994). In his book *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example, saying it's not just a theme park. It's made to feel more real than the outside world, hiding the fact that the real world is just as fake (Baudrillard, 1994). Building on this idea of simulation, Linda Hutcheon offers another angle by focusing on how postmodernism challenges traditional narratives through irony, parody, and self-awareness. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* Hutcheon talks about the nature of Postmodernism by analyzing specific elements in different fields such as architecture, TV, linguistics and film. Rather than providing a single definition of Postmodernism, she believes that Postmodernism has a contradictory nature, and it challenges the traditional boundaries in literature. Hutcheon focused on the characteristics of Postmodernism such as intertextuality, questioning metanarrative, Historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 2004). There are some comparable aspects between the two novels and one of these points is the element of intertextuality, as she defines it: "Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context." (Hutcheon 2004, 118). Linda Hutcheon concerns with cultural and political aspects of Postmodernism

unlike David Harvey who focuses on the economical aspect of it. He links Postmodernism to global capitalism by introducing the concept of Flexible Accumulation. In contrast to the past, modern factories are no longer confined to produce the same item repeatedly. With a more flexible approach, they can switch between different categories of products according to the needs of the markets. Also, almost everything that shapes who we are such as music, movies, or experiences is shaped by capitalism and tied to its means of production, which makes personal identity something that can be bought. He also argues that everything someone buys can shape who they are and how others see them. (Harvey, 1990). Many scholars support Harvey's ideas about Postmodernism. Fredric Jameson views Postmodernism as both a cultural and economic phenomenon. He argues that economic conditions play a major role in shaping identity and influencing culture. According to him, Postmodernism reflects a cultural state shaped by the economic shifts of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Postmodernism is hard to define. Hans Bertens calls it "problematic." Both he and Hutcheon talk about ideas like metafiction and intertextuality, but they focus on different things. Bertens looks more at how Postmodernism pushes against old styles and genres, while Hutcheon is more interested in how narratives are told as well as the stylistic features of Postmodern literature and film (Bertens, 1995). Literature and media under Postmodernism often reflect these themes through metafiction, intertextuality, and genre-blending, blurring the lines between reality and representation. Works such as *The Midnight Library* and *The Dead Fathers Club* exemplify how fiction navigates uncertainty and questions the coherence of the self. In doing so, they not only illustrate Postmodern ideas but also invite readers to reconsider how they perceive truth and identity. Postmodernism remains a dynamic lens through which to critique culture, revealing how our understanding of the world is shaped not by absolutes, but by shifting, unstable frameworks.

Postmodern Visions In *The Dead Father's Club* And *The Midnight Library*

This section examines the postmodern elements in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* and *The Dead Fathers Club*. Both novels explore questions of identity, reality, and narrative structure through techniques like unreliable narration, intertextuality, and fragmented timelines. Matt Haig's novels give us the chance to explore postmodern narrative techniques. *The Dead Fathers Club* is seen as a postmodern reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where familiar themes of revenge, identity, and grief are filtered through a fragmented, self-questioning narrative. These themes are presented through techniques such as metafiction, intertextuality, and narrative unreliability. The plot of both novels has major similarities, both Hamlet and Philips communicate with their fathers' ghosts, and they are commanded to kill their uncles, both characters struggle with grief and

the absence of their fathers. In both stories, the mother marries the uncle following the father's death. The element of intertextuality can be observed in the following quotes: "I kept looking round the bar and Nan kept talking to me and that is when I saw him. That is when I saw Dads Ghost." (Haig, 2006, p. 13), "And now she's with Uncle Alan. How could she? And why didn't she see what was happening?" (Haig, 2006, p. 16). Here, Philip is expressing his sadness that his mother is marrying his uncle similarly to Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 2; "O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (Shakespeare, 1603, 1.2.65). The themes of death, grief and revenge in Hamlet are also noticed in *The Dead Fathers Club*. Hamlet is not only mentioned in the element of intertextuality, but also the author plays with the readers familiarity with hamlet and deconstructs it. Matt Haig challenged the traditional narrative, by deconstructing the character of Hamlet and Shakespeare's play in general. He constructed the character by introducing Philip as a child protagonist, unlike Hamlet who has princely duties, Philips represents innocence and vulnerability. The last couple of chapters of *The Dead Fathers Club*, the novel departure from Hamlet and introduces the reader to a shocking open ending. Uncle Alan who parallels Claudius is seen as the antagonist from the beginning of the novel, but at the end of the novel, he saves the protagonist's life which makes the reader realize that it was the protagonist's imagination and the reader's familiarity with Hamlet who presented Uncle Alan as the wicked figure.

In Hamlet, the readers are not exposed to Hamlet's emotional side because there are political concerns in the plot. On the other hand, Philip is a kid who is trying to interpret the world around him, there aren't any political conditions, and the focus is on Philip's emotions after losing not only his father but his support system. The narrator of the novel is a kid who is trying to deal with a trauma which makes him unreliable narrator from the perspective of the reader. Unreliable narration leads both the reader and Philip to question what is real and what can be trusted. Philip constantly doubts his own perception, and the novel's ending highlights just how uncertain and unstable his version of reality really is.

The protagonist of *The Dead Father's Club* has a sense of self-awareness which is another Postmodern element, it is best seen in the following quote: "I am 11 so I am not a little brain, and I am not a man" (Haig, 2006, p. 22). This quote captures the postmodern ambiguity of identity by placing Philip in a transitional space between childhood and adulthood. Rather than developing a clear sense of self, he defines his identity through what he is not, reflecting a postmodern rejection of fixed or essentialist categories. His position in this borderline zone, neither child nor adult, underscores the instability of selfhood, shaped less by internal essence than by external forces such as trauma, perception, and narrative. His uncertainty

reflects the unstable subject that lies at the heart of postmodern literature. Also, Phillips interaction with his dad's ghost creates a hyperreal experience for him. The narrative style always makes the readers question what's real and what's not. Philip tries to make sense of his father's command to kill the uncle, but at the same time it is noticed that he is struggling between believing in the supernatural explanations and rationalizing events logically. This element of hyperreality in the novel helps the reader see how personal experiences influence and shape what we understand as reality. The following dialogue between Philip and his mother shows the unrecognizable boundaries of reality and imagination: "I said Neither did I until I saw my dad's ghost. She said Philip. I said Im not making it up. She said I know youre not Philip. Its just after terrible things happen it is sometimes hard to know what is real and what is not." (Haig, 2006, p. 139). The misspellings in the quote are intentionally preserved to capture the narrator's childlike voice and perspective.

Turning to *The Midnight Library*, the book starts with a quote by Sylvia Plath that said: "I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life." (Haig, 2020, p. 3) Which shows intertextuality with other works and books from the beginning of the novel. Both in *The Midnight Library*, and in *The Dead Fathers Club*, the protagonists are struggling with their identity, Philip is struggling with his identity because he is moving away from childhood to adulthood. Nora Seed on the other hand is experiencing a fragmentation of identity. In the novel, the protagonist experiences different versions of her life, each life is presented as a book in a library. Every life presents a possibility; in one life she's a swimmer and in another she's an artist. This multiplicity of possibilities creates a chance for fragmented identities. She navigates these new versions of herself through living in different realities.

Just like *The Dead Fathers Club*, in this novel also the boundaries between reality and fiction are not clear because Nora is experiencing the potential lives you could've lived as if they are her reality: "Between life and death there is a library, and within that library, the shelves go on forever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived." (Haig, 2020, p. 6). Another important feature in this novel is the non-linear narrative, Nora it's experiencing different versions of her life out of chronological order. The narrative structure of the novel suggests that there are multiple storylines or at least more than one plot within the one narrative. Also, the element of metafiction is experienced, the readers are introduced to a set of books within the book that they are reading, the novel is aware of its own fictionality. The Midnight Library itself functions as a literal

library of possible lives. This invites the reader to think about their reality and their appreciation for the life that they have. Themes such as depression, anxiety, regret and existential concerns are presented but also a theme of hope in life could be noticed: “You don’t have to understand life. You just have to live it.” (Haig, 2020, p. 248). Jean Baudrillard’s concept of *hyperreality* is subtly present. The many lives Nora experiences begin to feel as real than her original life. The library functions as a bridge between life and death. Nora’s journey captures the essence of postmodern life, moving through carefully crafted versions of herself in search of purpose, much like how people today sift through digital profiles, filtered images, and consumer-driven roles that often feel more authentic than their actual lives. The novel ends without giving the reader a closure or fixed message, but rather it remains open to interpretation showing the value to subjective experience.

Conclusion

By exploring *The Midnight Library* and *The Dead Father’s Club* through the lens of postmodernism, this study has demonstrated that both novels reflect a crisis of identity shaped by narrative instability and blurred realities. The characters’ struggles are not simply personal journeys but expressions of a broader cultural condition in which meaning is no longer fixed. Nora’s shifting lives and Philip’s ghostly encounters reveal how perception, memory, and imagination can challenge the boundaries between the real and the unreal. These texts resist resolution and finality, emphasizing instead the openness of experience and the multiplicity of truths. Both novels critique conventional storytelling by foregrounding ambiguity, metafictional awareness, and the role of language in shaping reality. Through this, they present a powerful argument for understanding contemporary identity as fluid and deeply intertwined with the narratives we create about ourselves. These two novels show how influential the Postmodern narrative style can be. What these novels aim to do is giving the readers a chance to rethink about the concepts that they thought it's constructed and real, it is also an invitation to not have any pre-judging of any character. It is wonderful to see Postmodern literature evolve and mix different elements to create novels that are engaging and inspiring. In a world where identity has many sides and truth is shaped rather than found, the one thing we can count on might be how uncertain the self really is, and how literature reflects that confusion.

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