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INDETERMINACY AND OPEN MEANING IN JOHN ASHBERY'S POSTMODERN POETICS

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Abstract

This article examines the function of indeterminacy in the poetry of American postmodern poet John Ashbery. The study argues that ambiguity in Ashbery's poetic language should be understood not as obscurity or communicative failure, but as a conscious artistic strategy closely connected with postmodern aesthetics. The research focuses on the semantic, syntactic, referential, and narrative dimensions of uncertainty that shape Ashbery's poetic discourse. The theoretical framework of the article is grounded in postmodern literary theory, deconstruction, and the concept of the open text. Through qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the study demonstrates that Ashbery intentionally destabilizes fixed meaning, fragments lyrical subjectivity, and transforms the reader into an active participant in the process of interpretation. The findings indicate that ambiguity in Ashbery's poetry functions simultaneously as an aesthetic principle and a philosophical position reflecting the postmodern crisis of representation and the instability of language. The article contributes to contemporary discussions of postmodern poetry by offering a systematic analysis of indeterminacy as a central element of Ashbery's poetics.

Keywords: postmodernism, indeterminacy, John Ashbery, poetic discourse, deconstruction, open text, ambiguity, postmodern poetics.

Introduction

Postmodern literature emerged as a response to the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical transformations of the second half of the twentieth century. One of the defining characteristics of postmodern aesthetics is the rejection of stable meaning, unified identity, and authoritative interpretation. In contrast to traditional literary systems that seek coherence and logical structure, postmodern writing emphasizes fragmentation, uncertainty, multiplicity, and textual openness.

Within this literary and philosophical context, ambiguity occupies a particularly important place. Postmodern theorists argue that language can no longer be viewed as a transparent medium capable of delivering fixed meaning. Instead, meaning becomes unstable, shifting, and dependent upon interpretation. Literary texts therefore resist closure and invite multiple readings.

The poetry of John Ashbery represents one of the most influential examples of postmodern poetic experimentation in contemporary American literature. Ashbery's poems are characterized by discontinuous narration, unstable voice, fragmented imagery, unexpected syntactic transitions, and semantic indeterminacy. Although his poetry is frequently described as difficult or obscure, such descriptions often overlook the fact that ambiguity in his work functions as a deliberate artistic method.

Rather than attempting to guide readers toward a single interpretation, Ashbery constructs poetic texts that continuously defer meaning. His poems challenge conventional assumptions about poetic communication, authorship, and subjectivity. As a result, reading becomes an active interpretative process rather than passive reception.

The relevance of this study is connected with the growing scholarly interest in postmodern poetics and contemporary theories of textual indeterminacy. While numerous studies have explored

Ashbery's stylistic complexity, fewer works have systematically examined ambiguity as a coherent postmodern strategy.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how indeterminacy functions in the poetry of John Ashbery and to determine its aesthetic and philosophical significance within postmodern literary discourse.

The study focuses on several major objectives. First, it examines the theoretical foundations of postmodern ambiguity and textual openness. Second, it analyzes the primary forms of uncertainty operating within Ashbery's poetry. Third, it explores the relationship between linguistic instability and fragmented subjectivity. Finally, it investigates the changing role of the reader in the construction of meaning.

The object of the study is the poetry of John Ashbery as a significant phenomenon of postmodern literature.

The subject of the research is the artistic and linguistic mechanisms through which ambiguity operates in Ashbery's poetic texts.

Materials and Methods

The research materials consist of selected poems by John Ashbery that most clearly demonstrate the features of postmodern indeterminacy. Among the primary texts analyzed in this article are *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*, and *Soonest Mended*. These poems were chosen because they illustrate central aspects of Ashbery's poetic style, including semantic instability, syntactic fragmentation, shifting narrative perspective, and resistance to interpretative closure.

The theoretical basis of the study includes contemporary works on postmodern literary theory, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, and modern poetics. The research draws particularly on the ideas of Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Jacques Derrida, Steven Connor, Hans Bertens, and Marjorie Perloff.

Several analytical methods are employed throughout the study. The primary method is close reading, which allows detailed examination of textual structures and linguistic patterns. Structural-semantic analysis is also used in order to identify the mechanisms through which meaning becomes unstable within the poems. Elements of deconstructive reading help reveal contradictions, semantic shifts, and disruptions of textual coherence.

The methodological framework of the article is organized around four interconnected forms of ambiguity. The first concerns semantic ambiguity, which involves unstable meanings and shifting lexical associations. The second relates to syntactic ambiguity, visible in disrupted grammatical structures and non-linear sentence organization. The third form is referential ambiguity, reflected in unstable pronouns and fragmented subjectivity. The fourth involves narrative ambiguity, characterized by discontinuity, open-endedness, and fragmented poetic progression.

This methodological approach makes it possible to analyze ambiguity not as an isolated stylistic phenomenon but as an integrated poetic strategy that shapes the entire structure of Ashbery's texts.

Results and Analysis

The analysis demonstrates that ambiguity functions as one of the central organizing principles of John Ashbery's poetry. Indeterminacy appears at multiple textual levels and contributes to the destabilization of meaning, identity, and narrative structure.

Semantic Instability and the Fluidity of Meaning

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Ashbery's poetry is the instability of lexical meaning. Words and phrases rarely maintain fixed semantic boundaries. Instead, meanings shift

according to context, association, and textual movement. Ashbery frequently combines abstract language with ordinary conversational expressions, creating semantic tension between familiarity and uncertainty.

In *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, meaning constantly moves between philosophical reflection, visual description, and subjective meditation. The poem refuses to settle into a stable interpretative framework. Images emerge and dissolve, while concepts remain incomplete and provisional.

This semantic instability reflects a central postmodern assumption: language does not transparently represent reality. Instead, language produces an endless chain of signification in which meaning is continuously postponed. Ashbery's poetry therefore challenges the traditional expectation that poems should communicate a clear or unified message.

Semantic ambiguity also transforms the role of the reader. Since the poem does not provide definitive interpretative guidance, readers must actively construct meaning themselves. Interpretation becomes dynamic rather than fixed.

Syntactic Fragmentation and Disrupted Coherence

Another important aspect of Ashbery's poetic technique is syntactic disruption. His poems often contain unusually long sentences, abrupt transitions, interruptions, and loosely connected clauses. Conventional grammatical expectations are repeatedly destabilized.

In many cases, syntax no longer functions as a logical organizing system. Instead, it reflects the fragmented movement of consciousness itself. Sentences expand unpredictably, associations replace linear progression, and thoughts shift direction without warning.

In *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*, for example, syntactic structures appear conversational while simultaneously undermining communicative certainty. The poem continuously moves between self-reference, irony, and philosophical reflection, creating instability within the reading process.

Syntactic ambiguity prevents the reader from relying on conventional reading strategies. Meaning must be negotiated through fragments, partial connections, and interrupted structures. This technique reflects the postmodern rejection of narrative coherence and stable representation.

The fragmentation of syntax also reinforces the idea that reality itself cannot be represented through unified systems of language. Instead of clarity and order, Ashbery presents instability, movement, and uncertainty.

Referential Ambiguity and the Fragmented Subject

A major feature of Ashbery's poetry is the instability of the lyrical voice. Pronouns such as "I," "you," and "we" often appear without clear referents. The speaking subject continuously shifts, making it difficult to identify a stable narrative perspective.

Traditional lyric poetry usually depends upon the presence of a coherent poetic self. In Ashbery's work, however, subjectivity becomes fragmented and decentralized. The lyrical "I" no longer functions as a unified consciousness but as a shifting textual position.

This fragmentation corresponds closely to postmodern theories of identity. Postmodern philosophy questions the existence of stable subjectivity and argues that identity is socially, linguistically, and culturally constructed. Ashbery's poetry reflects this condition by presenting the self as unstable and constantly changing.

Conclusion

This study has explored ambiguity and indeterminacy as essential components of John Ashbery's postmodern poetic practice. The analysis demonstrates that uncertainty in Ashbery's poetry functions not as accidental obscurity or stylistic difficulty, but as a deliberate aesthetic and

philosophical strategy that challenges traditional concepts of meaning, subjectivity, and textual coherence.

The research reveals that ambiguity operates across multiple dimensions of the poetic text. Semantic instability prevents the emergence of fixed meanings, while syntactic fragmentation disrupts linear reading and conventional grammatical expectations. Referential ambiguity destabilizes the lyrical voice and undermines the notion of a unified poetic self, whereas narrative discontinuity resists closure and creates an open textual structure. Together, these elements form a complex poetic system grounded in indeterminacy and multiplicity.

The findings also confirm that Ashbery's poetry reflects major principles of postmodern literary theory. His texts reject the idea of language as a transparent medium capable of representing reality objectively. Instead, language becomes unstable, self-reflexive, and constantly shifting. Meaning is therefore not fully contained within the text itself, but emerges through the interpretative activity of the reader.

Another important conclusion concerns the transformation of the reader's role in postmodern poetry. Ashbery's poetic discourse requires active participation and interpretative engagement. Readers are not passive recipients of meaning; rather, they become co-creators of significance within the open structure of the text. This process reflects the postmodern rejection of authoritative interpretation and emphasizes plurality of meaning.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that ambiguity in Ashbery's poetry possesses not only aesthetic significance but also philosophical depth. His poetic language reflects the broader cultural and intellectual conditions of postmodernity, including skepticism toward absolute truth, fragmentation of identity, and the crisis of representation.

Therefore, John Ashbery's poetry can be regarded as one of the most important manifestations of postmodern poetics in contemporary American literature. Through indeterminacy, fragmentation, and openness, Ashbery redefines the possibilities of poetic expression and establishes a literary model based on interpretative freedom and textual multiplicity.

The results of this research may contribute to future studies devoted to postmodern poetry, ambiguity, reader-response theory, and comparative literary analysis. Further investigations may also explore the relationship between poetic indeterminacy and issues such as cultural identity, gender representation, and digital forms of literary expression.

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