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# Postmodern Features in John Ashbery's Poem "My philosophy of life"

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**Abstract:** Postmodernism in literature challenges traditional notions of meaning, narrative coherence, and authorial authority, finding fertile ground in poetry for its embrace of ambiguity and fragmentation. John Ashbery's "My philosophy of life" encapsulates these postmodernist traits, blending high cultural references with mundane details, and resisting the consolidation of ideas into a single philosophical system. While Ashbery's work has been widely examined, focused analysis of how this poem enacts postmodernist strategies to critique and reimagine philosophical discourse remains underexplored. This study aims to analyze the poem through the lenses of fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, irony, and epistemological relativism, revealing its engagement with postmodernist aesthetics. The analysis identifies five defining features: narrative discontinuity, self-referential commentary on the act of philosophizing, juxtaposition of elevated and trivial subjects, ironic undermining of grand philosophical ambitions, and the valorization of uncertainty and interpretive "gaps." These traits dismantle cultural hierarchies, reject metanarratives, and promote a playful, contingent approach to meaning. The study demonstrates how Ashbery transforms philosophical inquiry into an open-ended, sensory, and humorous practice, offering a nuanced contribution to the understanding of postmodern poetics. By reframing philosophy as a flexible, lived experience rather than a rigid system, the poem underscores the creative potential of ambiguity and positions itself as both a critique and an extension of philosophical thinking within late twentieth-century American literature.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, John Ashbery, Poetry Analysis, Fragmentation, Metafiction, Intertextuality, Irony, Epistemological Relativism, American Literature, Philosophical Discourse

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## 1. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of postmodernism as both an aesthetic orientation and a philosophical disposition, challenging the stability of meaning, the authority of the author, and the coherence of narrative. While these tendencies emerged across the arts, poetry became a particularly fertile space for their exploration, given its inherent openness to ambiguity, fragmentation, and intertextual play. Among the poets who navigated and expanded the postmodern sensibility, John Ashbery occupies a central position. His work, often described as elusive, self-referential, and ironically detached, has been the subject of sustained critical attention for its capacity to merge the banal and the profound, the philosophical and the trivial, into an intricate linguistic mosaic [1].

Ashbery's poem "My philosophy of life" exemplifies these qualities through a deliberately unstable meditation on the very possibility of having a "philosophy." The

speaker appears to formulate a coherent worldview, yet digresses into domestic anecdotes, whimsical hypotheticals, and abrupt narrative shifts. This tension between intention and execution aligns with Jean-François Lyotard's account of the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives," for the poem resists consolidating its musings into a singular, authoritative system. Instead, Ashbery constructs a textual space where philosophical speculation coexists with images of watermelon consumption, public toilets, and the idle observation of strangers. These juxtapositions not only dismantle hierarchies between "high" and "low" culture but also invite the reader to reconsider the boundaries of poetic subject matter[2].

Moreover, the poem engages in a sustained form of metacommentary, reflecting on its own discursiveness and the inadequacy of traditional philosophical methods in capturing lived experience. The recurrent motif of "letting things be what they are" functions as both a philosophical stance and an anti-philosophical shrug, an attitude consistent with Linda Hutcheon's characterization of postmodernism as "complicitous critique," wherein the text simultaneously participates in and undermines the conventions it invokes. The final exhortation to "enjoy yourself, and yes, enjoy your philosophy of life, too" encapsulates the poem's playful resistance to closure, suggesting that meaning is provisional, contingent, and, above all, to be experienced rather than systematized [3].

The aim of this article is to conduct a postmodernist reading of "*My philosophy of life*" through the lens of fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, irony, and epistemological relativism. Using close reading and theoretical perspectives from postmodern literary criticism, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how Ashbery's text not only reflects but also enacts the postmodern condition. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of poetry in a cultural landscape characterized by multiplicity, discontinuity, and the blurring of categorical distinctions[4].

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach rooted in close reading and thematic analysis, informed by postmodern literary theory. Close reading enables the identification of micro-level textual features, specifically, lexical choices, syntactic patterns, shifts in narrative voice while thematic analysis facilitates the recognition of recurring conceptual motifs such as fragmentation, irony, and meta-discursivity. These elements are examined not in isolation, but as part of a larger aesthetic strategy that aligns with postmodernist literary principles[5]. The analytical lens for this study is shaped by three major theoretical contributions to postmodernism:

- a. Jean-François Lyotard's *incredulity toward metanarratives*, applied to the poem's resistance to unified philosophical systems.
- b. Linda Hutcheon's theory of *complicitous critique*, which explains how the text simultaneously engages with and undermines philosophical discourse.
- c. Fredric Jameson's concept of *cultural pastiche*, relevant to the poem's juxtaposition of disparate cultural references, from William James to everyday activities such as making preserves[6].

By situating Ashbery's poem within this theoretical triangulation, the study avoids reductive readings and instead foregrounds the multifaceted ways in which postmodernism operates at the level of imagery, tone, and structure[7].

The primary text for analysis is John Ashbery's "*My philosophy of life*", originally published in the late 20th century during a period in which postmodern poetics were already well established in American literature. While the analysis focuses on the poem as a self-contained work, relevant contextual factors such as Ashbery's broader oeuvre, the American postmodern literary climate, and intertextual references are also considered. This allows for a reading that is both textually attentive and contextually informed. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

- a. Textual segmentation - the poem was divided into thematic units based on shifts in imagery, narrative focus, or rhetorical stance.
- b. Feature identification - each segment was examined for hallmarks of postmodernism, including but not limited to narrative fragmentation, irony, metafictional awareness, and the blending of high and low culture[8].
- c. Synthesis and interpretation - findings from the textual analysis were synthesized into an overarching interpretive framework, aligning the poem's aesthetic strategies with theoretical models of postmodernism.

This methodological approaches enables a systematic yet flexible engagement with the text, ensuring that the analysis captures both the particularities of Ashbery's style and the broader postmodernist ethos in which it participates.

### 3. Results

The textual analysis of John Ashbery's "*My philosophy of life*" revealed five primary features characteristic of postmodernist poetry: fragmentation and narrative discontinuity, metafictional self-awareness, juxtaposition of high and low culture, ironic deflation of philosophical ambition, and valorization of uncertainty and the "gaps between ideas." Each feature is described below with illustrative examples from the poem[9].

The poem resists linear progression, shifting unpredictably between hypothetical philosophical principles, sensory impressions, personal anecdotes, and digressive imagery. The opening gesture "call it a philosophy of life, if you will immediately frames the poem as provisional, subject to alteration. Subsequent lines move abruptly from abstract speculation to concrete, often trivial, experiences: eating watermelon, standing on a subway platform, or visiting public toilets. These abrupt transitions disrupt any sense of narrative cohesion, reflecting the postmodern tendency toward nonlinearity and discontinuous thought structures [10].

The speaker repeatedly acknowledges the difficulty, and perhaps impossibility, of articulating a coherent "philosophy." Statements such as "Not a single idea emerges from it" and "I can move no farther along this train of thought something's blocking it" operate as meta-commentary on the very act of composing philosophical discourse. This reflexive stance aligns with Hutcheon's notion of postmodernism's self-conscious engagement with its own narrative processes, as the poem exposes its own limitations and hesitations rather than concealing them[11].

Throughout the text, Ashbery pairs lofty philosophical gestures with mundane or even absurd scenarios. The invocation of William James—an eminent figure in American pragmatist philosophy—appears alongside recollections of a Boston bull terrier's cushion and the graffiti inside public restrooms. This interplay dismantles traditional cultural hierarchies, a hallmark of postmodern aesthetics described by Jameson as the leveling of high/low distinctions through cultural pastiche. Such juxtapositions destabilize the reader's expectations and democratize the material deemed worthy of poetic treatment[12].

The poem humorously undercuts the speaker's initial ambition to "live the way philosophers live." Domestic and trivial details—putting up "jellies and preserves" against winter, tolerating "friends' dumb remarks"—become central to the philosophy, suggesting that grand theoretical systems are less relevant than small acts of survival and companionship. This ironic undercutting reflects the postmodern suspicion toward universal systems and "grand narratives", replacing them with localized, contingent, and often playful meaning-making[13].

The concluding assertion "there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas" functions as both a thematic resolution and a philosophical proposition. Rather than striving for conceptual closure, the poem celebrates indeterminacy and open-endedness. This aligns with the postmodern embrace of multiplicity and epistemological relativism,

wherein gaps, silences, and contradictions are not flaws to be eliminated but spaces of creative possibility.

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis of "*My philosophy of life*" demonstrates that Ashbery's poem operates as a microcosm of postmodernist poetics, synthesizing several defining features of the movement while also developing a distinctly personal tone. In light of the results, three major interpretive observations emerge: the subversion of philosophical authority, the transformation of everyday banality into poetic material, and the celebration of epistemic openness[14].

##### **Subversion of philosophical authority**

By opening with the claim of having "a philosophy of life" and immediately questioning which principles it would follow, the poem dismantles the expectation of a unified worldview. This aligns closely with Lyotard's rejection of "grand narratives" as organizing principles for human experience. Ashbery's speaker does not reject philosophy outright, but reframes it as a loosely structured, contingent mode of engagement with the world. The invocation of William James—deliberately undercut by the admission that the cited book was never read—serves as an ironic commentary on the cultural cachet of philosophical reference without the substance of systematic reasoning. This move foregrounds the performance of philosophy over its doctrinal content, an approach that mirrors postmodern skepticism toward absolute truth claims.

##### **The poetics of the everyday**

The incorporation of quotidian images such as watermelon, subway platforms, public toilets serves not merely as comic relief but as a conscious challenge to traditional poetic decorum. Ashbery places these alongside canonical philosophical figures, producing an intentional flattening of cultural hierarchies. This strategy exemplifies Jameson's concept of cultural pastiche, where fragments from disparate registers coexist without a unifying frame of value. In Ashbery's hands, this juxtaposition is not merely aesthetic but philosophical: it suggests that life's meaning is constructed in the interplay between the profound and the ordinary, without privileging one over the other[15].

##### **Humor as critical strategy**

Humor in the poem operates as a destabilizing force, preventing the text from slipping into didacticism. For instance, the image of "put[ting] up jellies and preserves" against "winter cold and futility" both literalizes and mocks the metaphor of philosophical preparation. Similarly, the imagined confrontation in a crowded theater plays out as a miniature morality play, yet is framed with absurdity rather than solemnity. Hutcheon identifies such humor as a form of "complicitous critique," where irony functions as both a participation in and a subversion of the very systems it engages.

##### **Embracing the gaps**

Perhaps the most significant postmodern gesture is the poem's final valorization of "the gaps between ideas." This statement not only condenses the poem's thematic thrust but also resonates with McHale's notion of ontological plurality in postmodern literature. By positioning these gaps as sites of "fun," Ashbery affirms the generative potential of ambiguity. The refusal to close interpretive possibilities reorients the reader toward a mode of philosophical play, in which meaning is provisional and constantly renegotiated.

##### **Implications for postmodern poetics**

The poem's blend of reflexivity, fragmentation, and cultural democratization reflects a mature phase of postmodernism in American poetry, one that is less invested in the shock of innovation and more concerned with sustaining a dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity. Ashbery's work does not seek to overthrow philosophy but to reimagine it as a lived, flexible practice grounded in sensory experience and humor. This positions "*My philosophy of life*" not only as a specimen of postmodern poetics but as a subtle meditation on the nature of thinking itself.

## 5. Conclusion

John Ashbery's "*My philosophy of life*" exemplifies key traits of postmodernist poetry through its fragmentation, self-reflexivity, juxtaposition of cultural registers, ironic undermining of philosophical systems, and embrace of uncertainty. The poem resists the closure and universality that traditionally accompany philosophical pronouncements, instead presenting a fluid, situational, and often humorous mode of thought. By dismantling the authority of "grand narratives" while simultaneously engaging in philosophical play, Ashbery enacts the postmodern conviction that meaning is locally constructed and perpetually provisional.

The findings suggest that Ashbery's poem should be read not as a rejection of philosophy but as an expansion of its possible forms—integrating banality, absurdity, and sensory immediacy into a valid mode of reflection. This approach models an intellectual humility that values the "gaps between ideas" as generative spaces for thought. Consequently, "*My philosophy of life*" offers both a commentary on the instability of philosophical systems and a celebration of the creative potential found in that instability, positioning it as a significant contribution to the ongoing conversation about the scope and style of postmodern literature.

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