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# Analysis of the Narrative Style of Modiano from the Postmodernism - Through *dans le Café de la jeunesse perdue*

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**Abstract:** Patrick Modiano is a highly regarded French writer known for his talent. His work, *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, has been extensively studied, but its postmodern aspects have often been overlooked. Modiano employs postmodern narrative techniques such as fragmentation, irony, and the blending of virtual and real in his writing. The success of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* is closely tied to Modiano's recurring theme of Paris and loss, which aligns with his exploration of life and postmodernist tendencies. This article aims to analyze how the narrative style of this work showcases the postmodern elements of Modiano's writing, using the theories of postmodernism by Ihab Hassan. The analysis will establish the correlation between Modiano and postmodernism, contributing to the scholarly understanding of his work.

**Keywords:** Patrick Modiano; Postmodernism; Indeterminacy; Immanence

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## Introduction

Patrick Modiano is widely recognized as one of the most talented French writers, achieving success with novels like *La Ronde de nuit* and *Les Boulevards de ceinture*. In 2014, he was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the Occupation.<sup>[1]</sup> His works often revolve around the themes of loss, memory, and the struggle to understand society's complexities, while also touching on identity and fatherhood. While researchers have extensively studied the plot, artistic expression, and narrative strategy of his work, they have often overlooked its postmodern aspects. Since his first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*, Modiano has consciously or unconsciously employed postmodern narrative techniques such as fragmentation, irony, black humor, and the blending of the virtual with the real, as well as the manipulation of time and space. The success of his acclaimed work *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* is deeply intertwined with his recurring theme of Paris and loss. This theme also aligns with the exploration of life and the postmodernist tendencies found within his writing.

During the period when Modiano began his writing career in the 1970s, postmodernism had already gained significant popularity. Consequently, his works, influenced by this creative movement, are characterized by fragmentation, the fusion of reality and illusion, and the interplay of time and space. Ihab Hassan, an eminent theorist of postmodernism, argues that indeterminacy and immanence constitute fundamental characteristics of this artistic movement. In this article, by utilizing the postmodern theories of Hassan, we will analyze how the narrative style of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* prominently showcases the postmodern elements of Modiano's oeuvre. This analysis aims to establish not only the correlation and relevance between Modiano and postmodernism but also to enrich the scholarly value of this literary masterpiece.

## 1. Presentation of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* and Postmodernism

### 1.1 Overview of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*

The story of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, set in 1960s, opens with a quote from Guy Debord: "At the halfway point of the journey making up real life, we were surrounded by a gloomy melancholy, one expressed by so very many derisive and sorrowful words in the café of the lost youth."<sup>[2]</sup> Then various narrators provide different perspectives on the life of Louki, the heroine. The Mines student recalls encounters with Louki in the Café and describes her as a young woman seeking a fresh start. The detective investigates Jacqueline's disappearance. Louki reflects on her lonely childhood and her mother's work at the Moulin Rouge. Roland, Louki's lover, shares their love story and interests in esotericism. However, Louki retreats from Roland and everyone else, ultimately choosing the path of suicide. These young people have lost their traditional beliefs and lived a wild life, refusing to sacrifice their youth but happiness and joy<sup>[3]</sup>, creating an atmosphere of "counter-culture" and moving towards "international situationism"<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 1.2 Definition of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a widely discussed topic in various fields like art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications,

fashion, and technology. Han Bertens, a renowned Dutch scholar, identified four stages of postmodernism: famous writers like Onis and Dudley Fitts started incorporating postmodernism in their literary works (1934-1964); postmodernism interacted with the American counter-cultural movement, leading to a complete rejection of modern writers (1960s); postmodernism became an international movement heavily influenced by European existentialism (1972-1976); when postmodernism became more inclusive by embracing diverse cultural phenomena that were not accepted by modernism (1970s-1980s)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Postmodernism challenges the ideas of modernism, and breaks away from the reliance on rationality, remaining some modern ideas, such as the alienation of humanity and historical discontinuity, etc. Nevertheless, it employs postmodern techniques such as illusion, absurdity, and abnormality to deconstruct the meaning of works, the identity of protagonists, and the traditional narrative style of writing, leading to a rupture and fragmentation of traditional narratives. Within this process of deconstructing modernism and reconstructing postmodernism, Ihab Hassan, the famous American postmodern theorist, draws out the two fundamental tendencies of postmodernism: indeterminacy and immanence.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **2. Indeterminacy in *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue***

### **2.1 Definition of Indeterminacy in Postmodernism**

Indeterminacy, in philosophy, can refer both to common scientific and mathematical concepts of uncertainty and their implications, as well as to another type of indeterminacy resulting from the nature of definition or meaning. It is linked to deconstructionism and Nietzschean critique. Ihab Hassan created the term “postmodern indeterminacy” in 1987, describing a complex category composed of different concepts. Indeterminacy includes the ideas of ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, chance, rebellion, perversion, and deformation, all of which represent the universal desire of postmodernists to challenge everything<sup>[7]</sup>.

According to Ihab Hassan, one of the core traits of postmodernism is indeterminacy. It refers to the result of the disappearance of a formed center and ontology, under the premise of questioning the entire discourse system or Western civilization. This result is interpreted through ambiguity, discontinuity, heresy, pluralism, chance, rebellion, metamorphosis, deformation, and other constantly derived connotations, representing the dissolution of all orders and formations into doubt and search.

### **2.2 Indetermination of the Identity and narrator**

Regarding the category of postmodern indeterminacy and its relationship with Modiano, we can consider the statement of the Nobel Prize Committee: “for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation.”<sup>[8]</sup> Modiano’s novels explore human destiny, memory, and indeterminacy. *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* exemplifies this style, as memory serves as the inspiration for concepts like indeterminacy, fracture, and forgetfulness.

The heroine, Louki, is depicted as a mysterious woman. From narrators’ memories, she frequented a café named “the door of shadows” through a narrow door, avoided conversation, and left around midnight. Modiano creates a sense of suspense and depth in the novel, portraying Louki as a complex figure in the indeterminate world. The detective described her as the strange clientele in the café with unknown background, a pseudonym and a shattered life. The perspectives of multiple narrators highlight the indeterminacy of Louki’s identity and existence. These narrators, much like Louki herself, are marginalized individuals lacking stability. Such as the graduate student or Caisley, remains in uncertain positions, constantly wandering. Roland seeks security but finds himself in liminal spaces. The café serves as a meeting place for young people, embodying the theme of killing time. Various narrators depict the life and death of the heroine.

The indeterminate nature of their narratives extends to memory, time, space, identity, creates a sense of fracture, suspension, vagueness, and forgetfulness, aligning with the style of postmodernist literature. It offers readers not only profound ideas but also a reflection of the social realities in post-World War II France.

## **3. Immanence and Paradox in *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue***

### **3.1 Definition of Immanence in Postmodernism**

Immanence is the state of being completely within something, as opposed to transcendence. It is often used in theology to describe God, and can be seen in different ways, such as theism or pantheism. According to Ihab Hassan, language constructs our world and also restricts us within it. He explores how we can overcome the limitations of language by emphasizing the immanence of the human subject. This involves qualities like impulse, interaction, communication, and interdependence. Hassan believes that immanence represents the mind’s ability to adapt to the environment, reality, and creativity. It is the internal inclination of the human mind to adjust to any situation. If changing the world is difficult, we can adapt ourselves to the ever-changing reality. Immanence, as a key aspect of postmodern critique, seeks to internalize and deepen subjectivity.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **3.2 Immanent search for the heroine**

Modiano’s novels often explore the theme of search, as characters try to uncover their identity and find happiness. In *Dans le café de la*

jeunesse perdue, the protagonist Louki's immanence is portrayed as she tries to build her own world and expand her inner self.

Louki's pursuit of happiness is a recurring theme. She experiences both the freedom to determine her own destiny and the terror of facing a lonely life, dreaming a comfortable, beautiful, and secure family with her lover, where she can be protected, and saved. Modiano references philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of "les lignes de fuite" in book, which signifies the line that completely detaches from the mass and transforms from rupture to fracture.<sup>[10]</sup> This concept reflects Louki's fragmented and uncontrollable flow through life, without finding stable reference points. To escape loneliness, she marries Jean-Pierre Choureau, starts afresh in the misty street and seeks love in Roland, replaces the name *Louise* with *Jacqueline*, the pseudonym. However, in the end all she obtains is loneliness, loss, confusion, crisis, and panic, so she ultimately chose to end her life.

#### 4. Conclusion

In light of the postmodern theory, Chinese literary critic Feng Shounong has emphasized that deconstruction, the elimination of center, opposition to interpretation, or the end of the subject in postmodern theories tend to lead us into the dilemma of nihilism<sup>[11]</sup>. In response to this dilemma, Ihab Hassan has explored the reasons why postmodernism evolves towards nihilism by establishing the postmodern category: indeterminacy and immanence, revealing that indeterminacy leads to fragmentation and immanence leads to the end of the subject.

Modiano uses various narrators and their memories as clues to construct interdependent life stories in a postmodern context. His narrative strategy of memory can be categorized as postmodern according to Ihab Hassan. Because in the face of the indeterminate external environment, the indeterminate narrators' memories deconstruct Louki's life and identity, interprets her immanence about why she chooses to suicide, highlighting the search for self and failure.

All of this reflects the core theory of postmodernism and the postmodern category proposed by Ihab Hassan. Modiano narratively interprets the dilemma of nihilism caused by postmodern forms, and deeply demonstrates the agitation of French society after World War II, the confusion and disappointment of the younger generation. He used the narrative of memory to cross the boundary between life and death and realize the dialogue between self and other in a new way, which has created a new trend for Western postmodern literary creation.

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