



Research Article

## Postmodern Ethos in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 1 And Book 15

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20623239>

### Abstract

The postmodern movement emerged in the second half of the 20th century in art, literature, philosophy and culture in the aftermath of World Wars. The world witnessed the mass destruction and collapse of great empires: the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, The Ottoman Empire and the German Empire. The myths of scientific progress, rationality, nationalism, truth, knowledge, religion and salvation were busted. Early 20th century Modernistic ideas and concepts were questioned in the wake of the emerging post-modernistic movement. Postmodernism questions the grand narratives, universal truths and permanent identities; exposing the fragile nature of reality, and embracing the little narratives, subjectivity of reality, fragmentation, self-reflexivity, pastiche and intertextuality. Postmodern Ethos challenges the traditional concepts of science, progress, truth, objective reality, religion and reason. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an 8th-century epic, composed in the Latin language during the reign of Augustus Caesar, reflects postmodern ethos. The epic is distinct from contemporary classical literature and other epics, unlike Virgil's *Aeneid* which celebrates the glory of Rome, its heroic ideals, divine lineage of the Caesars and the divine cause behind the foundation of Rome, *Metamorphoses* reveals fragmentation, suffering, voicelessness, cruelty, suppression and failure of grand narratives, it is a mosaic of Petit recit (little narratives) and over 250 discentric myths. Its heroes are not heroic; rather they are erratic gods and powerless mortals, nothing is permanent in their lives, only change is consistent and permanent, their identities are fluid and fragile. *Metamorphoses* is a synthesis of several small subplots, events and narratives rather than a chronological grand plot, it relies on intertextuality and allusions heavily, producing a mythological pastiche conversing with the great Greek and Roman masters such as Homer, Virgil, Hesiod, Sophocles, Euripides, Callimachus, Nicander, Cattulus and Ennius. It raises the concern of the destruction of nature and the environment, and blurs the differences between nature and humans.

### Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 13-04-2026
- Accepted: 05-06-2026
- Published: 10-06-2026
- IJCRM:5(2); 2026: 747-751
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

### How to Cite this Article

Tyagi S. Postmodern ethos in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 1 and Book 15. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(2):747-751.

### Access this Article Online



[www.multiarticlesjournal.com](http://www.multiarticlesjournal.com)

**KEYWORDS:** Metamorphosis, transformation, postmodernism, reason, science, rationality, pastiche, grand narratives, incredulity, fragmentation, fluidity, irony, paradox.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Postmodernism and Its Ethos

Postmodernism is a movement that emerged as a criticism of modernist ideals or values. Modernism focuses on universal truth, science, reason, rationality, progress, systematic order and objectivity. These modernistic beliefs failed when the world wars erupted, and the ideals of science, reason, technology, universal progress, and systematic order could not save the world. World wars cost almost 100 million lives. The world first witnessed nuclear destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and science and technology became a weapon for mass destruction, displacement and chaos. The great empires collapsed, monarchies got abolished, most of the colonies got released, Aftermath of the world wars paved the way for human rights demands, and further steps for women empowerment. Failure of modernistic beliefs gives way to Postmodernism. Postmodernism rejects the modernistic core beliefs of reason, rationality, knowledge, progress, organised system, science and universal objective truth. Instead, it embraces self-reflexivity, different interpretations of truth and reality, minor diverse narratives, fragmentation and pastiche, an amalgamation of high culture and low culture, and different styles). As Jean Baudrillard defines it in his *Selected Writings*: "Postmodernity is the simultaneity of the destruction of earlier values and their reconstruction. It is a renovation within ruination."

Postmodernist literature discards grand narratives, great heroes, great sagas, great ideals, linear plots, religion, moral authority, nationalism, ultimate faith in science and knowledge. It emphasises on Incredulity or scepticism towards metanarratives, the concept of incredulity, coined by French Philosopher Jean- Francois Lyotard, rejects the universal truths like scientific progress, religion, salvation, heroic acts and reality.

### Lyotard defines postmodernism in his text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* as:

Simplifying to the extreme I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of the progress in sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds; Most notably, the Crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institutions which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements-narrative but also denotative, perspective, descriptive, and so on (8).

The philosophical and cultural shift from modernism to Postmodernism has been shaped by the 20th-century thinkers: Jean- Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Douglas Kellner and Richard Rorty. The late 20th century scholars question the preconceived notions of knowledge, truth and power. Michel Foucault states in his book, *Archaeology of Knowledge*:

Showing that scientific demonstration is basically only a ritual that the supposedly universal subject of knowledge is really only an individual historically qualified according to certain modalities, and that the discovery of truth is really a certain modality of the production of truth; putting what is given as the truth of observation or demonstration back on the basis of rituals, of the qualifications of the knowing individual, of the truth- event system, is what I would call the archaeology of knowledge (21).

Michel Foucault remarks in his *Power/Knowledge* on the construction of truth and the role of power in the construction of truth: "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."

Derrida questions the concept of neutrality or objectivity in his *Archive fever: The Freudian Impressions*: "The archive is never neutral; it decides what deserves to be remembered" (45).

Postmodernism questions the concept of Objective truth and rationality. Objective truth can't be achieved as human nature tends to be subjective. They see rationality as a socially and culturally constructed concept, the ideas of reason and rationality are tools to legitimize power and hierarchies. Rationality is not a natural phenomenon rather it's a constructed narrative. Giles Deleuze says in his famous text *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: "It is not the slumber of reason that engenders monsters, but vigilant and insomniac rationality" (48).

Postmodernist ethos is not new in philosophy, literature and art. As Existentialist questions are as old as existence itself, Postmodern Ethos existed in literature since the dawn of literature, just the terminology of Postmodernism was not used for those traits. This paper explores the Postmodernist Ethos in the 8th century Latin epic *Metamorphoses*.

### Ovid's Metamorphosis-

*Metamorphoses*, a masterpiece, composed by Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso who lived during the rule of Augustus Caesar, is one of the three canonical Latin poets along with Virgil and Horace. Ovid was enormously popular in Rome; he was highly respected but he was exiled to Tomis by Augustus Caesar. He pleaded for his return to Rome, but to no avail, Ovid stayed in Tomis till his death. Ovid mentions the reason for his exile from Rome, to a *carmen et error* (a poem and an error). He might have composed a poem which displeased Augustus Caesar and the Roman authorities. Ovid's poetry is different from that of his contemporaries and other poets. Ovid rejected the grand narratives of Roman glory, divine lineage of Caesars, divine foundation of Rome, Roman moral authority, and exposed its deeply flawed society and dangers of absolute power or authoritarianism, he mocked the facade of morality by the Authorities, and advocated for passion, amour and desires in *Ars Amatoria*. Ovid composed several poem collections as *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love), *Heroides* (The Heroines), *Amores* (The Loves) *Fasti*, *Trista & Epistulae ex Ponto* etc. but it was

*Metamorphoses*, a fifteen-book epic written in dactylic hexameter, a saga of physical and psychological transformation. The work inspired several authors as Dante Alighieri, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Shakespeare; it was translated into English by William Caxton, the inventor of First British Printing Press followed by numerous English translations.

#### Postmodern Traits in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 1-

"In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora ;( I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities;" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book1, line 1).

The epic starts from transformation and the very first line reveals its consistent theme in spite of changing identities. The epic ends with the same emphasis on the fluid identity and consistency of change. Pythagoras preaches of the nature of change: "All things change, nothing is extinguished. There is nothing in the whole world which is permanent. Everything flows onward; all things are brought into being with a changing nature; the ages themselves glide by the constant movement." (Ovid, Book-15)

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* begins with the creation of the world and its development up to Augustus Caesar's reign. Ovid asserts that he is going to ponder transformations and invokes the gods. He writes about the creation of the universe, a chaotic situation before the earth emerged. There were no shape and no distinguishable image. Later, the gods filled the earth with creatures, the man came from the dirt or the dirt was metamorphosed into the human beings, Ovid describes the four ages on earth respectively, the Golden age was the first age, the people neither had laws nor punishment in the Golden age. They practiced co-existence, peace and harmony; there was no feud or war, no barricades, no migration. They enjoyed eternal spring, the rivers of milk and honey flowed and the earth produced in abundance, the silver age began, Jupiter took the throne as the king of the gods, the eternal spring came to an end, it was broken into four seasons: summer, autumn, winter and a short spin abundance. The people-built houses to defend themselves from the weather and ceased to live in the caves; they domesticated the oxen and ploughed the fields. The Bronze Age started in the spring with the introduction of weapons. The Iron Age followed and the earth was filled with cruelty, injustice, violence, lies, and deception. The People dug the earth for gold and iron, made boundaries and left their homeland, wars broke out. The giants tried to build stairs to heaven. Jove (Jupiter) crushed the giants with his thunder bolt, the earth wanted to save its creation so crushed giants were metamorphosed into human beings whose hearts were filled with cruelty, deceit and bloodthirstiness. Jupiter looks down from heaven and feels aghast. He visits the corrupt king Lycaon on the Earth, who mocks Jove and kills Jove's companion. Jove strikes Lycaon's palace out of anger, Lycaon flees out of fear, and Jove turns Lycaon into a wolf that growls. Jupiter strikes the entire world to wipe out the wicked and evil human race and sends storm-clouds. Jupiter's brother Neptune wipes out everyone and everything with giant waves. After complete destruction of the world, an innocent man named Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha are left alive, they sail to the reconstructed land, life does not give much hope to Deucalion and Pyrrha, they are afraid of loneliness, if one of them dies, the other will be left alone. They don't desire for power and dominion rather

desire for community living. They pray to the goddess Themis, who advises them to scatter the bones of their mother (rocks), the rocks turn soft and take the form of human beings, thus the human race emerges. Other species as animals emerge, and serpents come from sunlight and heat. Ovid emphasises that the world is not a systematic organised entity, it was not created systematically, it rose from Chaos, it was created from nothing, the human beings were not always human beings, they were dirt and rocks, their existence is not permanent, they are an object of transformation and prone to construction and destructions. Their race is not all powerful, scientific and rational; rather it's fragile, flawed and impermanent. They are no better or superior to other beings. In the golden age human and nature share an interdependent bond and mutual respect, it is also not permanent and humans violate it and exploit nature, which brings calamity for the human race. Ovid details the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Due to a feud between Cupid and Apollo, Cupid strikes Apollo with a love arrow which kindles love and passion in Apollo's heart and shoots Daphne, the beautiful daughter of Peneus with a reverse arrow of repulsion for love and romance. Apollo chases Daphne, Daphne flees away, Apollo tries to convince Daphne but Daphne rejects his advances and flees into the woods. Despite Apollo's requests and his status of God, Daphne refuses to surrender and rejects him. Daphne gets exhausted while running away, she is afraid of being overtaken by Apollo, she requests her father, Peneus to destroy her beauty, her prayers are granted and she transforms into a Laurel tree. Apollo embraces the transformed tree and calls it his tree. Another myth in the Book first, is the story of Io, a human daughter of the river god Inachus. Io's beauty catches eyes of Jupiter; she is raped by Jupiter, to hide his infidelity from his wife Juno, Jupiter transforms Io into a heifer, after suffering to great extent, Io gets transformed again in human form. The myth of Apollo and Daphne erases the grand narratives as Apollo is a god of light, truth and reason, Apollo's pursuit of Daphne dismantled Apollo's image, Apollo seems a slave of his passions and Daphne's refusal to yield to Apollo's advances, questions Apollo's status as a god and part of divinity. The myth exposes Apollo's fragile ego when he embraces Daphne even after her transformation into a tree. Daphne suffers and faces severe trauma, she escapes from humanity and her human form, to escape from patriarchal violence which denies her bodily autonomy. Daphne transforms herself into what Baudrillard calls a 'simulacrum', she ceases to be a vibrant and living woman and becomes a static symbol, a Laurel tree, a cultural icon and a myth Postmodernism celebrate Bricolage, a concept introduced by Claud Levi Strauss in his book *The Savage Mind*. The act of transformation of Daphne into a tree, and Io's transformation into a heifer, is an act similar to Bricolage, both the women go through psychological transformation before their physical transformation to defend themselves from human- violence. Io gets her old shape and identity but loses her voice and autonomy. As Ovid narrates:

Io regained

Her shape became once more what she once was.  
The hair falls from her hide her horns are gone,  
Her great wide eyes contract, her gaping mouth  
Shrinks small again, her arms and hands return,

Her cloven hoofs resume their fivefold form;  
 The heifer vanished, save her hair white grace.  
 The nymph, content to use two legs again,  
 Now walked erect, yet still afraid to speak,  
 Lest, cow-like, she might moo, and timorously,  
 Essayed the syllables so long discussed (1.85).

As Nobel Laureate Han Kang's protagonist imagines herself turning into a tree to escape humanistic violence and patriarchy in the novella, *The Vegetarian*. Jupiter, the king of gods also does not represent high ideals of divinity, and exposes his fragile ego, deceptive nature and insatiable lust.

### Postmodern Characteristics in *Metamorphoses*, Book 15-

The Roman choose their new king Numa Pompous who sets up on a journey to know the rules and laws of nature, he goes to Greece and Cortona, Ovid narrates a story of the philosopher and Mathematician Pythagoras, according to Ovid, Pythagoras was the first man arguing in favour of vegetarianism. He preaches that one should not kill animals to eat them, there are plenty of fruits, honey and milk, humans in the Golden age did not kill animals, and they coexisted with the animals and nature. Pythagoras condemns Animal Sacrificing practices and requests to stop such maddening practices. He exposes the hypocrisy of the people who sacrifice animals and claim that they are sacrificing to please the divinity. Pythagoras reveals that life itself is fluid and death is not a permanent state, it's just a transformation, a change, revealing that he himself lived as a Greek warrior once; change must not be taken as destruction. Pythagoras preaches:

As Yielding wax is stamped with new designs,  
 And changes shape and seems not still the same,  
 Yet is indeed the same, even so our souls  
 Are still the same for ever, but adopt  
 In their migrations ever varying forms (15. 169- 72).

Pythagoras reveals the nature of change as the secret of universe and turns towards cosmology and states that everything is fluid, time itself is as fluid as water, day, night, dawn, dusk are just flow of time, the Sun is followed by moon, and the reverse happens, he compares human life with cycle of seasons: Spring as a baby, Summer as a youthful man, autumn symbolises mature years, and winter, old age. Human life transforms from growth to decay, Death is not permanent oblivion, only body decays, soul survives, one human identity perishes with death and new identity waits. Pythagoras's mention of different elements of the universe, and their transformation into other elements as fire changing into air, air transforming into earth and water reminds Postmodernist concepts of Bricolage and Pastiche.

Pythagoras confirms metamorphoses as the eternal secret of nature:

Nothing retains its form; new shapes form old  
 Nature the great inventor ceaselessly contrives.

In all creation, be assured,

There is no death- no death, but only change and innovation;

What we men call birth

Is but to cease to be the same (15.252).

Pythagoras moves towards changing geographical entities, he mentions collapse of the great empires as Assyria, Media,

Persia, Macedon, Troy and Mycenae and anticipates the fall of Rome from its glory; he moves towards zoology and gives example of bear cubs and mythical bird, Phoenix, its rise from ashes and immersion into ashes again. Ovid is aware of the fact that the lecture of Pythagoras will be assumed as an absurd rant. The Book-15 witnesses' other transformations, as Egeria, Emperor Numa's wife cries on the emperor's death, Diana takes pity on her and transforms her into a spring, Egeria's psychological transformation has taken place out of his extreme grief, his physical transformation into a spring is a symbol of her lifelong trauma.

The book- 15 concludes at the apotheosis or deification of Julius Caesar, who turns into a star from a human being after his assassination, Venus was aware of Julius Caesar's fate, the gods warn the Romans by ill omens: Bloodshed, howl of dogs, roaming of the ghosts on the Roman streets, but they were powerless to change Julius Caesar's fate, Julius Caesar gets assassinated, becomes a star and a god, Ovid prophecies that Julius Caesar's death with the avenged by Augustus Caesar and Augustus also will become a god one day. Ovid mentions his eventual death, he believes in immortality of his masterpiece and literary works; he will survive through his literary works. Thus, in the Epilogue, Ovid reminds the readers the fictional nature of his work or his work is a piece of literature and fictional. Ovid deifies himself through his art, he puts his art in high rank and higher than his physical self. He does not intend the status of the gods for himself; he desires to survive through his art. Ovid speaks directly to the reader and breaks the fourth wall: "And now the work is done, that Jupiter's anger, fire or sword cannot erase, nor the gnawing tooth of time, let that day that only has power over my body, end when it will my certain span of years yet the best part of me will be borne, immortal beyond the distant stars. I will be spoken on people's lips and famous through all the ages if there is a truth in poets' prophecies. Vivam- I shall live." (431)

Ovid attributes art a higher status than gods, humans and physical forms, and calls his poetry itself a metamorphosis.

### CONCLUSION

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a timeless epic. It was composed in ancient times, but it mirrors the unpredictability, obscurity and scepticism of the present age. It is said that great literature surpasses time, geographical and linguistic boundaries and language barriers, its significance never diminishes, it's relevant in all ages, all times and all places, the saying seems true in context of this great Latin classic. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* depicts the fragility, struggle and suffering of human life, and emphasises the nature of change. Change is an inevitable truth, everything changes, and nothing remains the same. *Metamorphoses* demonstrate the postmodern Literature traits significantly. It shows scepticism towards the divine and ideal behaviour of the gods, gods as Jupiter and Apollo etc. are slaves of their passions, ego and whims, they are no better than common human beings, no divine conduct may be attributed to them. The human characters are powerless and voiceless against the circumstances, their lives are as absurd as that of Sisyphus, their toils, virtues, morals and talents seem useless

before circumstances, they are just mute spectators in the hands of fate, identities are impermanent and ever changing, Daphne and Io's struggle against violence and loss of their vibrant and lively identities resemble the modern women's struggle against violent societal and institutional forces, their loss of autonomy, dismantlement of their mind, dreams and choices. Postmodernism emphasises on incredulity, the same incredulity what Daphne expresses when Apollo requests her to stop and yield to him, claiming that he is a god and harmless lover. The human's transformation into stones and other static objects is similar to the modern human's psychological transformation after suffering and trauma. Nature seems the last resort to bewailing humans in *Metamorphoses*; Nature is a source of solace in the present world similarly. Postmodernism discards the organised systematic order, *Metamorphoses* is also a confluence of different genres, different myths and heavily infused with intertextuality, irony and parody. Ovid uses Homer, Hesiod and Virgil's myths as his own, experiments on them creating a mosaic or pastiche. The world of *Metamorphoses* is chaotic, disorganised and uncertain likewise the present world landscape, marked with geopolitical conflicts, civil wars, high inflation and incredulity. Postmodern literature exposes its fictionality through metafiction and breaks the fourth wall between the writer and the reader, Ovid does the same in the Epilogue of *Metamorphoses* when he addresses the reader and gives his work a higher status.

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