* Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
* Belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is.
* There is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.
* No connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
* Championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
* Life is unordered.
* Concerned with the sub-conscious.

Modernism was a cultural wave that originated in Europe and swept the United States during the early 20th century. Modernism impacted music, art and literature by radically undoing traditional forms, expressing a sense of modern life as a sharp break from the past and its rigid conventions. In literature, the elements of modernism are thematic, formal and stylistic.

Destruction

During the First World War, the world witnessed the chaos and destruction of which modern man was capable. The modernist American literature produced during the time reflects such themes of destruction and chaos. But chaos and destruction are embraced, as they signal a collapse of Western civilization's classical traditions. Literary modernists celebrated the collapse of conventional forms. Modernist novels destroy conventions by reversing traditional norms, such as gender and racial roles, notable in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," for example. They also destroy conventional forms of language by deliberately breaking rules of syntax and structure. William Faulkner's novel "The Sound and the Fury," for instance, boldly rejects the rules of language, as Faulkner invents new words and adopts a first-person narrative method, interior monologue.

Fragmentation

Related to the theme of destruction is the theme of fragmentation. Fragmentation in modernist literature is thematic, as well as formal. Plot, characters, theme, images, and narrative form itself are broken. Take, for instance, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which depicts a modern waste land of crumbled cities. The poem itself is fragmented, consisting of broken stanzas and sentences that resemble the cultural debris and detritus through which the speaker (modern man) wades. William Faulkner's novels, such as "The Sound and the Fury" are also fragmented in form, consisting of disjointed and nonlinear narratives. Modernist literature embraces fragmentation as a literary form, since it reinforces the fragmentation of reality and contradicts Hegelian notions of totality and wholeness.

Cycle

Modernist literature is concerned with representing modernity, which, by its very definition, supersedes itself. Modernity must, in order to emerge, annihilate the past. Problematically, modernity must annihilate itself the very moment it is actualized, as the moment it emerges, it becomes a part of the past. Modernist literature represents the paradox of modernity through themes of cycle and rejuvenation. Eliot's speaker in "The Waste Land" famously declares "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 430). The speaker must reconstruct meaning by reassembling the pieces of history. Importantly, there is rebirth and rejuvenation in ruin, and modernist literature celebrates the endless cycle of destruction, as it ever gives rise to new forms and creations.

Loss and Exile

Modernist literature is also marked by themes of loss and exile. Modernism rejected conventional truths and figures of authority, and modernists moved away from religion. In modernist literature, man is assured that his own sense of morality trumps. But individualism results in feelings of isolation and loss. Themes of loss, isolation and exile from society are particularly apparent in Ernest Hemingway's novels, the protagonists of which adopt rather nihilistic outlooks of the world because they have become so disenfranchised from the human community.

Narrative Authority

Another element of modernist literature is the prevalent use of personal pronouns. Authority becomes a matter of perspective. There is no longer an anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator, as there is no universal truth, according to the modernists. In fact, many modernist novels (Faulkner's, for instance) feature multiple narrators, as many modernist poems ("The Waste Land", for instance) feature multiple speakers. The conflicting perspectives of various narrators and speakers reflect the multiplicities of truth and the diversities of reality that modernism celebrates.

Social Evils

Modernist novels did not treat lightly topics about social woes, war and poverty. John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" frankly depicts families plagued by economic hardship and strife, contradicting idyllic depictions of American life represented elsewhere in literature. Modernist novels also reflect a frank awareness of societal ills and of man's capacity for cruelty. Ernest Hemingway's anti-heroic war tales depicted the bloodiness of the battlefields, as he dealt frankly with the horrors of war. Faulkner, particularly in his most famous novel, "The Sound and the Fury," also shows how incomprehensibly cruel man can be, especially with regard to racial and class differences.