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| **Your article** |
| Miller, Henry (1891-1980) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| An iconoclastic writer of autobiographical fiction, travel narratives, and personal essays, Henry Miller drew from several strands of European modernism, including Surrealism, Dada and Expressionism. The autodidactic Miller culled modern psychological theories for their thoughts on sexuality, dreams, and self-actualisation. He also absorbed the ideas of many philosophers, writers, artists, and musicians who helped shape his modernist understandings of temporality, urban alienation, and eschatology, among other concepts. While strictly characterising Miller as a modernist author seems highly problematic, the impact of modernist elements on his writing and thinking is indisputable. |
| An iconoclastic writer of autobiographical fiction, travel narratives, and personal essays, Henry Miller drew from several strands of European modernism, including Surrealism, Dada and Expressionism. The autodidactic Miller culled modern psychological theories for their thoughts on sexuality, dreams, and self-actualisation. He also absorbed the ideas of many philosophers, writers, artists, and musicians who helped shape his modernist understandings of temporality, urban alienation, and eschatology, among other concepts. While strictly characterising Miller as a modernist author seems highly problematic, the impact of modernist elements on his writing and thinking is indisputable.  Like so many modernists, Miller placed fragmented identity at the centre of his thematic interests. Tracing his alienation back to his boyhood days (in *Black Spring* [1936], for example), Miller sought to reclaim his wholeness and faith via his artistic endeavours. Sceptical of Progressive Era notions of human perfectibility (and attracted to apocalyptic philosophers such as Oswald Spengler), Miller rejected systemic, linear thinking in favour of a mixture of metaphysics (particularly from the east) and pseudoscience (the astrology of David Edgar, Conrad Moricand, and Dane Rudhyar, for instance). This counter-enlightenment bent allowed Miller to hold ostensibly contradictory positions and pursue an idiosyncratic narrative that rejected plot and revelled in personal symbolism.  Influenced by a host of the ‘new’ psychologists, including Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank and Carl Jung, Miller inevitably found himself attracted to movements that reflected an interest in the Unconscious, such as Surrealism, Dada, and Expressionism. Dreams and sexual fantasies pervade Miller’s works, such as *The* *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy [1949-1959], and Miller experimented with the techniques he discovered in the thriving Parisian avant-garde culture, including the worlds of art, cinema, and literature. As with his philosophical and spiritual concerns, the world of the unconscious permitted Miller to deviate from both strict plots (although he retained traces of plot in the form of anecdotes) and photographic realism.  The new psychologies proved instrumental in Miller’s representations of sexuality as well. As he explained in *The World of Sex* (1940), Miller did not include explicit sexuality in his works merely for titillation. Rather, he employed them in works such as *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) and *Sexus* (1949) as a symbolic barometer of his characters’ level of self-actualisation. The apocalyptic violence present in other areas of his narratives takes expression in his sexual scenes as well, and Miller claimed in several of his essays that sexuality serves as a manifestation of the struggle required to fully ‘awaken.’  In his earliest American work, such as early drafts of *Moloch* (1992) and *Crazy Cock* (1991), Miller wrote in a type of Dreiserian realism infused with impressionistic flights reminiscent of Surrealism. During this period, Miller attended numerous lectures on a wide variety of subjects, including the radical socialism and anarchism of intellectuals such as Hubert Harrison and Emma Goldman. The latter, in particular, steered Miller toward realist modes such as those employed by Henrik Ibsen. Nevertheless, Miller, a voracious reader who spent hours in the New York Public Library, read many of the books that would fuel international modernism, including the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, John Ruskin, and Henri Bergson. Miller claimed not to have read the early French Surrealists at this time (‘I was writing Surrealistically in America before I had ever heard the word’), but he was well versed in French Symbolism, particularly that of Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire. Miller’s early reading also included James Joyce, John Dos Passos, and other writers who were conversant with experimental modernism. In the late 1920s, though, influences overwhelmed Miller’s own voice, resulting in uneven efforts in which hard bitten realism clashed with experimental verbal flights and stilted romanticism.  After moving to Paris, however, Miller re-examined both his voice and ideas because of a variety of factors, including his discussions with Michael Fraenkel and Walter Lowenfels and his reading of Georges Duhamel, Blaise Cendrars, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and others. While still attracted to subversive thinkers such as Goldman and Nietzsche, Miller began to transform his thoughts on realism and ‘literature’ in general, and turned his energies toward a more chaotic narrative style that reflected his interests in Bergson, Céline, Breton, Faure and others. Additionally, Miller was an avid fan of cinema, the visual arts, and music, and he absorbed many of the radical techniques employed by the avant-garde. For instance, Miller was impressed by aspects of the surrealist cinema that he saw at Studio 28, including Luis Buñuel’s ‘succession of images without sequence’ in *L’Age d’Or* and Machaty’s ‘extra-temporal world’ in *Extasy*. Miller also counted many modernist artists among his friends and influences, and he attempted to recreate in words the visual images of such figures as Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, Abe Rattner, Hilaire Hiler, and others.  Ultimately resulting in *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), Miller’s new alinear style grew organically from his denunciation of prescriptive ideologies that stifled individual growth. A book that would attract modernist readers as ideologically diverse as George Orwell, Ezra Pound, Georges Bataille, and T.S. Eliot, *Tropic of Cancer* employs vestiges of the picaresque plot (particularly its sexual and scatological components), but interrupts it constantly with swirls of imagery, eschatological jeremiads, metafictional excursions, Dadaist jabberwocky, manic catalogues, and other non-realist elements. As he writes of Matisse in the book, Miller possessed ‘the courage to sacrifice an harmonious line in order to detect the rhythm and murmur of the blood’ and ‘tak[e] the light that has been refracted inside him and le[t] it flood the keyboard of color.’ Miller’s modernist precursors—Joyce, Breton, Spengler, Bergson, and many others, haunt the book’s pages, yet Miller avoids the pitfalls of influence that marred his earliest works by adopting an Emersonian central I/eye that subordinates the various parts to the whole and by striving for emotional essence rather than photographic accuracy. While broadly anti-capitalist, *Tropic of Cancer*, as with the rest of Miller’s works, did not advance a political solution but implied that a type of Dionysian self-actualisation could allow individuals to transcend ideological conflict.  Miller developed his ideas in subsequent works—most notably in *Tropic of Capricorn* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, but his primary contribution to modernism was stylistic. Later modern and postmodern writers such as Lawrence Durrell, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Norman Mailer, Phillip Roth, Erica Jong, Mario Vargas Llosa, Paulo Coelho and Thomas Pynchon would respond positively to both Miller’s fugue-like prose and his sexual frankness. Further, while Anglo-American formalists largely ignored Miller, important French Structuralists and Poststructuralists such as Gills Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Maurice Blanchot, and Julia Kristeva, recognized Miller’s importance to discussions of language, desire, and identity. Miller’s influence on American writing can also be measured indirectly through the impact of *Tropic of* Cancer’s 60+ trials and subsequent validation by the Supreme Court.  Miller notoriously avoided movements and trends, and his use of avant-garde modernist tenets and techniques is no exception. Influenced by astrology, Transcendentalism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Romanticism, Theosophy, and anarchism, among many other ideas, Miller resists easy labels, and he rejected what he felt were insular systems. In ‘An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere,’ for example, Miller railed against cohesive artistic movements and claimed that the surrealists lacked ‘*guts* and *significance*’ and were too self-conscious and political. Instead, Miller advocated individualism, anarchy, and ‘true madness’ without ‘the desire to posit an ism.’ Alternating between scenes of frank realism and impressionistic fancy; between extreme violence and tender sentiment, Miller, like his idol Walt Whitman, proudly exulted in contradictions and embraced his difference. In so doing, he developed a composite but singular voice that amalgamated—yet subordinated—traits from his diverse influences and generated a style that rejected systems and binaries while advocating an explosive, chaotic, and ultimately spiritual individualism that rejected the artificiality of both plot and self-conscious surrealism. Exploring this difference in radically experimental narratives that place a premium on interior interrogation and external violence, Miller, like Joyce, John Dos Passos and Dorothy Richardson — among many other modernist writers — epitomises the alienated modern individual on a quest for spiritual rebirth and unity.   List of Works: *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945)  *Aller Retour New York* (1935)  *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymous Bosch* (1957)  *Black Spring* (1936)  *Book of Friends* (1976)  *The Books in My Life* (1952)  *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941)  *The Cosmological Eye* (1939)  *Crazy Cock* (1991)  *Joey* (1979)  *Max and the White Phagocytes* (1938)  *Moloch; or, This Gentile World* (1992)  *My Bike and other Friends* (1978)  *Nexus* (1959)  ‘The New Instinctivism (A Duet in Creative Violence)’ [1931; unpublished MS] *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* 4 (2007): 3-56. [With Alfred Perlès]  *Plexus* (1952)  *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1956)  *Remember to Remember* (1947)  *Sexus* (1949)  *Stand Still like the Hummingbird* (1962)  *Sunday after the War* (1944)  *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* (1956)  *Tropic of Cancer* (1934)  *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939)  *The Wisdom of the Heart* (1941)  *The World of Lawrence: A Passionate Appreciation* (1980)  *The World of Sex* (1941) |
| Further reading:  (Blinder)  (Decker)  (Männiste)  (Masuga) |