

课程论文



**论文题目： A Review of British Modernism Literature Through the View of Experimental Skills**

学生姓名： 宁若汐/Ning RuoXi

学生学号： 3190105959

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所在学院： School of International Studies

**Hangzhou，Zhejiang**

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**Abstract**

Under the influence of the fast-changing and complex social reality of 20th century, the British modernism literature were largely different from the literature before in the light of both the form and the content. This article views the changes made by the authors, consciously or unconsciously, as a kind of experimental skills; for example, the expressionism, symbolism, and imagism principles in poetry composing, the “stream of consciousness” skills in fictions and the absurdity in dramas. This article will use the view of experimental skills as a scope, to provide a brief review of the styles and features of British modernism literature of the 20th century, and trying to give several explanations to the formation of the “experimental fever” from the view of philosophy and historical background. Finally, this article reached a conclusion that the British modernism literature was extinct for its experimental skills, with both the language beauty and creativity and the thoughts they conveyed with illogical, fragmented and subjective features.

***Key Words:*** experimental, British, modernism, literature, 20th century

1. **A Brief Introduction to British Modernism Literature**

Modernism is a comprehensive term to summarize all the international trends and movements since the end of 19th century. (Cuddon 399) From that we know that the modernism is not merely a simple style, but a mix of thoughts and trials of different artists in a whole age;

The British modernism literature was originated in such a complex age, with accurate contradiction between urbans and rurales and among different social hierarchies.

1. **Experimental Skills in Different British Modernism Literature and Representative Authors**

Almost all the thoughts and trials showed a same character. That is the experimental skill. The word “experimental” means anti-convention; it is the reflection of the marginalized and chaotic massive psychology under a complex historical background.

Different literature genres showed different experimental skills, but no matter it is called the expressionism in poetry, the “stream of consciousness” in fictions or the “theatre of absurd” in drama, all the experimental skills are the same in nature—they show the personalized experience of the composer themselves. The modernism holds an opinion that the world is not flat, but “cubic”. The composer and the audience reach a conclusion not through the texture and figural meanings, but the common understanding of a kind of atmosphere beyond the story. (颜 19)

1. **Modernism Novels**

For modernism novels, the “stream of consciousness” is the most extinctive skill.

“Stream of consciousness” describes a way of narration which tell the story not according to the objective time, but the subjective thoughts and emotions of the characters or even the narrators. (佚名 太原)

The visual feature of “stream of conscious” novel could be without punctuations, for example, the last chapter of *Ulysses*. The sentences and paragraphs of a “stream of conscious” novels are usually highly irrelevant, faithfully like the process of thinking happening in ones’ brain.

Two master of “stream of conscious” skills in British modernism age were Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and James Joyce (1882-1941). Both of them consciously applied the experimental skills in her novels.

The three most famous and successful works of Virginia Woolf are *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Mrs. Dalloway.* In To The Lighthouse, all the interest is concentrated on the thoughts, moods and mental impressions of the various characters. And the author does not point out what the lighthouse symbolizes. (刘 410) The Waves if “the climax of Virginia Woolf’s experiments in novel form.” This novel told every story by its characters’ interior monologues, which occur in groups and follow a piece of depiction of the natural environment to show the time. (刘 411) Her experimental skills were summed up by a French writer Andre Maurois: “She undoubtedly wanted to discover a new technique for the novelist which would make it possible to portray the inner reality very truthfully…” (刘 411)

James Joyce’s 7 years’ hard work on the novel Ulysses made it overshadowing his other novel works. The name Ulysses was adopted from the ancient Greek poetry Odysseus, but the story was a normal day of three normal people. The “stream of consciousness” method was used by the author to depict what the inner, mental world of his characters actually was—thus the reader may see “a whole individual” who is representative of universal human existence in modern western world. Joyce was free in his experiments with the English language and grammar. He sometimes retained the ordinary sentence structures and more often he broke the “fetters of syntax”. His language went though every stage in the development of English prose from Anglo-Saxon to modern English to symbolize the growth of a foetus; the last chapter did not use any punctuations to represent the real flow of thoughts of his characters.

1. **Modernism Poetry**

Expressionism is the most outstanding feature of modernism poetry. It evolves with imagism and symbolism with the intention of showing the personalized view of the world of the poet themselves. (李 49) It could be summarized as “showing but not telling”.

W.B. Yeats was known for his use of symbolism in his poets. He felt that the 20th century represents the end of a cycle that has gone 2000 years, and that a new one is just emerging, which explains the turmoil and violence of modern times. This view is expressed by the following stanza of his poem, *The Second Coming*. (刘 398)

T.S. Eliot is famous for his poetry *The Waste Land*. the symbols he uses are irrelevant, the words he writes are fragmented, the thoughts of the characters are illogical. (李 50) The “stream of consciousness” skill is also applied in this poem. The fragmented dialogue between the wide and husband, the staccato language of the wife with every word seemingly stressed and the scarce words of the husband all faithfully showed the emotion and thoughts of the characters, which are free verses different from the traditional poetry. (李 49)

Imagism was an Anglo-American poetic movement but was also evolved in the formation of expressionism and influenced the British modernism. The definition of imagism given by Richard Aldington was that “to use the language of common speech…to employ the exact word…to present an image…poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities.” Through this definition, we can also find out the experimental integrate of the languages and contents of the imagism poetry.

The expressionism as an experimental skill is characterized in that it banished the forms and aesthetic standards of the past time; it refuses to use complete sentences and to follow the rules of the traditions of poetry writing.

1. **Modernism Drama**

“The Theatre of Absurd” is a representative term of modernism drama. Though Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, which was at the turning point of modernism and post-modernism, it could still be a representative of the features of the modernism drama. It was the climax of modernism drama. The theory of absurdity was generated from the composer’s direct experience of the world. It concerns with illogical and irrational plots, “estrangement” features and characters with simile meanings. (高 11)

1. **The Philosophical Origins of the Experimental Features**

This chapter will mainly deal with the philosophical thoughts that are considered to largely influence the form and origin of British modernism.

Freudism was thought to have the deepest influence on modernism literature, but before him, Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was another philosopher who was not so famous but also had great impact on modernism.

From a historical point of view, Schopenhauer’s voluntarism and pessimism thoughts were the two most important things he left to the world. (罗素 339) His voluntarism thought, summed up in his The World as Will and Idea, was a typical idealism. Voluntarism depicted the inner will—the desires and wants of human beings and even of the objective world are objective, real and more important than any other things; instead, it views the objective world as subjective. Its influence on modernism literature was that it offered a view of the relationship of human’s objective body and inner will, and managed to prove that the inner will is nearer to the truth and reality that contemporary people managed to find. This explained why all the experimental features, more or less, tries to abandon the realistic depictions of the environment and plots, and turns to tell the thoughts and personalized experience in the literary composing.

After that there appeared a fever of Freudism in Europe. Freudism was a theory about the mental activities of humans, developed by psychologist Sigmund Freud. A most important opinion was the “iceberg theory”, which suggests that the mental world of humans are like an iceberg—the controllable part is small while the uncontrollable part is large. Then the name of this uncontrollable part—subconsciousness was adopted by the modernism novel and was developed into the “stream of consciousness” skill we mentioned above. Their philosophical nature are also the same—to hold the opinion that the uncontrollable and irrational part “id” is nearer to the reality than the rational “ego”. Freudism also suggests that the “id” could be released out given a person is under extreme pressure. (佚名 西安) The “stream of consciousness” novels are correspondingly the expression of the released “id”, in reaction to the absurd and contradicted reality of the society.

Another important philosophical origin was the “de-spacialized” view of time in 20th century. The view of time of this century was largely influenced by the physicist Albert Einstein and the philosopher Henri Bergson. Einstein proved the nature of time changeable according to the difference of the viewer in a scientific way—the relativity, which largely shocked the world who long held the opinion that the time is spacialized and absolute.

1. **The Objective Historical Backgrounds of British Modernism Literature**

The historical background was complex in 20th century. Two most damageable world wars happened in this century, which largely killed the hope of life and belief of truth of most people. After the second industrialization movement since 1970s, the urbanization was speeding up in Europe during the 20th century, which intensified the contradiction between the rich and poor, the urban and rural and the men and women. Virginia Woolf explained, the social relations changed, so the literature changed. These historical facts are propulsions to modernism to carry on experiments in literature.

The readers are also largely different from those in 19th century. Europe had its school education developed rapidly in 20th century, which equipped more people with literacy. Thus, the situation of reading books changed from the family gathering mode in 19th century to a more personalized form in 20th century. European people no longer have to gather together, listening to the only educated family member to read the books; they can read by themselves in a more personalized space. In corresponding, the literature works with symbolized or “stream of consciousness” characters could cater on the interests of the contemporary readers. (颜 21)

1. **A Summary of British Modernism Literature**

The experimental skills made the modernism literature different from Britain’s critical realism tradition. The modernism, in different aspects, are still reflecting the social reality of the contemporary Britain, with realistic characters like Mrs. Dalloway or Leopold Bloom and critical symbols like the waste land. The difference（与第一次提到的地方离得有点远） lied in those experiments that the authors made, which turned the identity of the author from an “omniscient, omnipotent” God to the author themselves. (颜 19) Through these experimental language or narrative methods, the author could faithfully describe what they personally thought, which themselves also considered to be nearer to the reality. They abandoned the function of educating the society, and managed to just provide a personalized inspiration or suggestion.

The British modernism is anti-logical, but not anti-rational. It believed that the truth and reality lied in not the outside world (as the critical realism believes) but the “inner world” of human beings. However, it believed that there at least is a reality, which is different from the following post-modernism which believes that the reality does not exist at all for human beings to find out. 定从套定从不太好

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