

4. Modernism

Literary modernism, or **modernist literature**, has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly in Europe and North America, and is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional ways of writing, in both poetry and prose fiction.

The horrors of World War I (1914-19), with its accompanying atrocities and senselessness became the catalyst for the Modernist movement in literature and art. Modernist authors felt betrayed by the war, believing the institutions in which they were taught to believe had led the civilized world into a bloody conflict. They no longer considered these institutions as reliable means to access the meaning of life, and therefore turned within themselves to discover the answers.

Modernism in Literature

The Modernist impulse is fueled in various literatures by industrialization and urbanization and by the search for an authentic response to a much-changed world. Although prewar works by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after World War I. The enormity of the war had undermined humankind's faith in the foundations of Western society and culture, and postwar Modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and

fragmentation. A primary theme of T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1922), a seminal Modernist work, is the search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. With its fragmentary images and obscure allusions, the poem is typical of Modernism in requiring the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text.

The publication of the Irish writer James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922 was a landmark event in the development of Modernist literature. Dense, lengthy, and controversial, the novel details the events of one day in the life of three Dubliners through a technique known as stream of consciousness, which commonly ignores orderly sentence structure and incorporates fragments of thought in an attempt to capture the flow of characters' mental processes. Portions of the book were considered obscene, and *Ulysses* was banned for many years in English-speaking countries. Other European and American Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative continuity include Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner.

The term Modernism is also used to refer to literary movements other than the European and American movement of the early to mid-20th century. In Latin American literature, Modernismo arose in the late 19th century in the works of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and José Martí. The movement, which continued into the early 20th century,

reached its peak in the poetry of Rubén Darío. (See also American literature; Latin American literature.)

Modernism as a literary movement reached its height in Europe between 1900 and the mid-1920s. 'Modernist' literature addressed aesthetic problems similar to those examined in non-literary forms of contemporaneous Modernist art, such as painting. Gertrude Stein's abstract writings, for example, have often been compared to the fragmentary and multi-perspectival Cubism of her friend Pablo Picasso. The general thematic concerns of Modernist literature are well-summarised by the sociologist Georg Simmel: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life" (*The Metropolis and Mental Life*, 1903). The Modernist emphasis on radical individualism can be seen in the many literary manifestos issued by various groups within the movement. The concerns expressed by Simmel above are echoed in Richard Huelsenbeck's First German Dada Manifesto of 1918: "Art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week. The best and

most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time." The cultural history of humanity creates a unique common history that connects previous generations with the current generation of humans, and the Modernist re-contextualization of the individual within the fabric of this received social heritage can be seen in the 'mythic method' which T.S. Eliot expounded in his discussion of James Joyce's Ulysses: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Ulysses, Order and Myth, 1923). Modernist literature involved such authors as Knut Hamsun (whose novel Hunger (1890) is considered to be the first 'modernist' novel), Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Dylan Thomas, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, James Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, Ernest Hemingway, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Joseph Conrad, Andrei Bely, W. B. Yeats, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Luigi Pirandello, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Jaroslav Hašek, Samuel Beckett, Menno ter Braak, Marcel

Proust, Mikhail Bulgakov, Robert Frost, Boris Pasternak, Djuna Barnes, and others. Modernist literature attempted to move from the bonds of Realist literature and to introduce concepts such as disjointed timelines. Modernism was distinguished by an emancipatory metanarrative. In the wake of Modernism, and post-enlightenment, metanarratives tended to be less emancipatory, whereas beforehand this was not a consistent characteristic. Contemporary metanarratives were becoming less relevant in light of the implications of World War I, the rise of trade unionism, a general social discontent, and the emergence of psychoanalysis. The consequent need for a unifying function brought about a growth in the political importance of culture. Modernist literature can be viewed largely in terms of its formal, stylistic and semantic movement away from Romanticism, examining subject matter that is traditionally mundane – a prime example being The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot (1915). Modernist literature often features a marked pessimism, a clear rejection of the optimism apparent in Victorian literature in favour of portraying alienated or dysfunctional individuals within a predominantly urban and fragmented society. Many Modernist works, like Eliot's The Waste Land (1922), are marked by the absence of any central, heroic figure at all, as narrative and narrator are collapsed into a collection of disjointed fragments and overlapping voices. Modernist literature, moreover, often

moves beyond the limitations of the Realist novel with a concern for larger factors such as social or historical change, and this is particularly prominent in 'stream of consciousness' writing. Examples can be seen in the work of, among others, two exact contemporaries, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (1882-1941).

The Main Characteristics of Modernist Literature

Individualism

In Modernist literature, the individual is more interesting than society. Specifically, modernist writers were fascinated with how the individual adapted to the changing world. In some cases, the individual triumphed over obstacles. For the most part, Modernist literature featured characters who just kept their heads above water. Writers presented the world or society as a challenge to the integrity of their characters. Ernest Hemingway is especially remembered for vivid characters who accepted their circumstances at face value and persevered.

Experimentation

Modernist writers broke free of old forms and techniques. Poets abandoned traditional rhyme schemes and wrote in free verse. Novelists defied all expectations. Writers mixed images from the past with modern languages and themes, creating a collage of styles. The inner workings of consciousness were a common subject for modernists. This preoccupation led to a form of narration called stream of consciousness, where the

point of view of the novel meanders in a pattern resembling human thought. Authors James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, along with poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, are well known for their experimental Modernist works.

Absurdity

The carnage of two World Wars profoundly affected writers of the period. Several great English poets died or were wounded in WWI. At the same time, global capitalism was reorganizing society at every level. For many writers, the world was becoming a more absurd place every day. The mysteriousness of life was being lost in the rush of daily life. The senseless violence of WWII was yet more evidence that humanity had lost its way. Modernist authors depicted this absurdity in their works. Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," in which a traveling salesman is transformed into an insect-like creature, is an example of modern absurdism.

Symbolism

The Modernist writers infused objects, people, places and events with significant meanings. They imagined a reality with multiple layers, many of them hidden or in a sort of code. The idea of a poem as a riddle to be cracked had its beginnings in the Modernist period. Symbolism was not a new concept in literature, but the Modernists' particular use of symbols was an innovation. They left much more to the reader's imagination than earlier writers, leading to open-ended narratives with

multiple interpretations. For example, James Joyce's "Ulysses" incorporates distinctive, open-ended symbols in each chapter.

Formalism

Writers of the Modernist period saw literature more as a craft than a flowering of creativity. They believed that poems and novels were constructed from smaller parts instead of the organic, internal process that earlier generations had described. The idea of literature as craft fed the Modernists' desire for creativity and originality. Modernist poetry often includes foreign languages, dense vocabulary and invented words. The poet e.e. cummings abandoned all structure and spread his words all across the page.

Moreover the Hallmarks of Modernism were that

1. Modernist writers were influenced by such thinkers as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, amongst others, who raised questions about the rationality of the human mind.
2. Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views
3. A central preoccupation of Modernism is with the inner self and consciousness.
4. The Modernist cares little for Nature, Being, or the overarching structures of history

5. The "unreliable" narrator supplanted the omniscient, trustworthy narrator of preceding centuries, and readers were forced to question even the most basic assumptions about how the novel should operate.
6. There is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.

Modernism Influenced by

- Charles Darwin, who forwarded a theory of evolution and natural selection
- Sigmund Freud, who pioneered psychoanalysis and revolutionized the way people thought about the brain
- Karl Marx, who analyzed class inequalities.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, who turned the world on its head when he proclaimed that "God is dead."
- 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.

Important Writers

James Joyce (from Dublin, Ireland) - His most experimental and famous work, *Ulysses*, completely abandons generally accepted notions of plot, setting, and characters.

Ford Madox Ford - *The Good Soldier* examines the negative effects of war.

Virginia Woolf - *To the Lighthouse*, as well, strays from conventional forms, focusing on Stream of Consciousness.

Stevie Smith - *Novel on Yellow Paper* parodies conventionality.

Aldous Huxley - *Brave New World* protests against the dangers and nature of modern society.

D.H. Lawrence - His novels reflected on the dehumanizing effect of modern society.

T.S. Eliot - Although American, Eliot's *The Wasteland* is associated with London and emphasizes the emptiness of Industrialism.