

# Modernism

- **When:** the art and literature of the post-World War I period
- **Why:** The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not, wrote T.S. Eliot, accord with “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”
- **How:** a distinctive break with Victorian bourgeois morality; rejecting 19th-century optimism, they presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. This despair often results in an apparent apathy and moral relativism.

# Modernism

- **Who:** T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H.D. and Franz Kafka.
- In their attempt to throw off the aesthetic burden of the [realist novel](#), these writers introduced a variety of literary tactics and devices

Summary: tactics and devices

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Works

- linear flow of narrative
- unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause and effect development
- the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action
- rational, public, objective discourse
- realist novels of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie

## Modernism

- stream of consciousness
- no center; fragmented, non-chronological
- the adoption of a tone of self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality
- individual experience; interior landscape
- an inclination to subjective distortion
- juxtaposition and multiple point of view
- open ending

## 1) Loss of 'ontological ground

- a sense of the loss of 'ontological ground', i.e., a loss of confidence that there exists a reliable, knowable ground of value and identity. ("Ontology" is the study of what 'being' is; it is always accompanied by epistemological issues, that is, of questions how we know and what it is to know. Ontological ground is then that which gives us a sense of the surety of being itself.)

## 2) no center, no cogency

- a sense that our culture has lost its bearings, that there is no center, no cogency, that there is a collapse of values or a bankruptcy [interesting metaphor] of values. As Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming", "Things fall apart ; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

## 3) loss of faith in a moral center

- this loss of faith in a moral center and moral direction is based both in the general loss of a sense of sure ontological ground, and in an equally important recognition that the traditional values have, after all, led only to a horrid war, industrial squalor, the breakdown of traditional rural society, exploitation of other cultures and races, and a society built on power and greed. W.W.I was a gruesome wake-up call.

## 4) a shift in paradigms

- a shift in paradigms [models of how the world works] from the closed, finite, measurable, cause-and-effect universe of 19th century science to an open, relativistic, changing, strange universe, and a (related) shift from an evolutionary, developmental model to a structural, surface/depth model: pretext becomes subtext. Einstein was a *modernist* thinker.

## 5) individual experience

- the locus of judgment moves from the traditional sites --consensus, social authority and textual authority --to individual judgment and phenomenological [lived experience] validation, hence to the locating of meaning (and, in a sense, 'truth') in individual experience.

## 6) the process of perception

- the development of studies and ideas which have as their focus the nature and functioning of the individual: the discipline of psychology; psychotherapy; a growing democratization in politics; in aesthetics, movements such as impressionism and cubism which focus on the process of perception.

## 7) structuralism

- a discovery that the forces governing behavior, and particularly the most powerful and formative ones, are hidden: this in the realms of psychology, economics, politics -- Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, etc. This leads to the search for underlying, hidden structures, operational laws and so forth, which motivate behavior and govern phenomena (structuralism).

## 8) Jung and universal archetypes

- a move to the mystical and the symbolic as ways of recovering a sense of the holy in experience and of recreating a sustainable ontological ground -- Yeats and the development of symbolic thought, Jung and the concept of universal archetypes, Lawrence with his notions of the creative mystery and blood knowledge, Madame Blavatsky and the Society of the Golden Dawn, Underhill's *Mysticism*, Otto's explorations of the nature of the sacred, and so forth.

## Some Attributes of Modernist Literature

### 1) Perspectivism:

- the locating of meaning from the viewpoint of the individual; the use of narrators located within the action of the fiction, experiencing from a personal, particular (as opposed to an omniscient, 'objective') perspective; the use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective; the consequent disappearance of the omniscient narrator, especially as 'spokesperson' for the author; the author retires from the

scene of representation, files her or his fingernails (says Joyce).

## 2) Impressionism:

- an emphasis on the process of perception and knowing: the use of devices (formal, linguistic, representational), to present more closely the texture or process or structure of knowing and perceiving.

## 3) Re-presentation

- A re-structuring of literature and the experience of reality it re-presents. (Art always attempts to 'imitate' or re-present reality; what changes is our understanding of what constitutes reality, and how that reality can best be re-presented, presented to the mind and senses most faithfully and fully.)

## 4) Use of fragmentation

- Modernist literature is marked by a break with the sequential, developmental, cause-and-effect presentation of the 'reality' of realist fiction, toward a presentation of experience as layered, allusive, discontinuous; the use, to these ends, of fragmentation and juxtaposition, motif, symbol, allusion.

## 5) Language

- Language is no longer seen as transparent, something if used correctly allows us to 'see through' to reality: rather language is seen as a complex, nuanced site of our construction of the 'real'; language is 'thick', its multiple meanings and varied connotative forces are essential to our elusive, multiple, complex sense of and cultural construction of reality.

## 6) Fragmented form

- Experimentation in **form** in order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life (see next point); also, not necessarily in connection with the former, to create a sense of art as artifact, art as 'other' than diurnal reality (art is seen as 'high', as opposed to popular).

## 7) Juxtaposition & parallels

- The tightening of form: an emphasis on cohesion, interrelatedness and depth in the structure of the aesthetic object and of experience; this is accomplished in part through the use of various devices such as motif, juxtaposition, significant parallels, different voices, shifts and overlays in time and place and perspective.

## 8) stream of consciousness

- The (re)presentation of inner (psychological) reality, including the 'flow' of experience, through devices such as stream of consciousness.
- The use of such structural approaches to experience as psychoanalysis, myth, the symbolic apprehension and comprehension of reality.

## 9) interior or symbolic landscape

- The use of interior or symbolic landscape: the world is moved 'inside', structured symbolically or metaphorically -- as opposed to the Romantic interaction with transcendent forces acting through the exterior world, and Realist representations of the exterior world as a physical, historical, contiguous site of experience. David Lodge suggests in *Modes of Modern Writing* that the realist mode of fiction is based on metonymy, or contiguity, and the modernist mode is based on metaphor, or substitution.

## 10) Interior time

- Time is moved into the interior as well: time becomes psychological time (time as innerly experienced) or symbolic time (time or measures of time as symbols, or time as it accommodates a symbolic rather than a historical reality), not the 'historical' or railway time of realism. Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards and forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth.

## 11) Open endings

- A turn to 'open' or ambiguous endings, again seen to be more representative of 'reality' -- as opposed to 'closed' endings, in which

matters are resolved.

## 12) Epiphany

- The search for symbolic ground or an ontological or epistemic ground for reality, especially through the device of 'epiphany' (Joyce), 'inscape' (Hopkins), 'moment of being' (Woolf), '*Jetztzeit*' (Benjamin) (no, evidently not the source of 'jet-set') -- the moment of revelation of a reality beneath and grounding appearances. This relates as well to the move to tighten up form, to move experience inwards, and to explore the structural aspects of experience.

## Themes

- The appearance of various typical themes, including: question of the reality of experience itself; the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced.

## Review:

- 1. an emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity in writing [on HOW seeing take place rather than on WHAT is perceived.] (Ex: stream-of-consciousness writing)
- 2. a movement away from the apparent objectivity provided by omniscient third-person narrators, fixed narrative points of view, and clear-cut moral positions. (Examples: Faulkner's multiply-narrated stories are an example.)
- 3. a blurring of distinctions between genres, so that poetry seems more documentary and prose seems more poetic. (Ex: Poetry: as in T.S. Eliot or e.e. cummings / Prose: as in Woolf or Joyce)
- 4. an emphasis on fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random-seeming collages of different materials.
- 5. a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness, about the production of the work of art, so that each piece calls attention to its own status as a production, as something constructed and consumed in particular ways. (Ex: Poetry of Pound, Stevens)
- 6. a rejection of elaborate formal aesthetics in favor of minimalist designs (as in the poetry of William Carlos Williams) and a rejection, in large part, of formal aesthetic theories, in favor of spontaneity and discovery in creation. (Ex: as in the poetry of William Carlos Williams)
- 7. A rejection of the distinction between "high" and "low" or popular

culture, both in choice of materials used to produce art and in methods of displaying, distributing, and consuming art.

## Modernism

- the movement in visual arts, music, literature, and drama which rejected the old Victorian standards of how art should be made, consumed, and what it should mean.
- In the period of "high modernism," from around 1910 to 1930, the major figures of modernism literature helped radically to re-define what poetry and fiction could be and do: figures like Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Proust, Mallarme, Kafka, and Rilke are considered the founders of twentieth-century modernism.

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