

## MODERNISM

Modernism is, in its broadest definition, modern thought, character, or practice. More specifically, the term describes the **modernist movement**, its set of cultural tendencies and array of associated cultural movements, originally arising from wide-scale and far-reaching changes to Western society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Modernism was a revolt against the conservative values of realism. Arguably the most paradigmatic motive of modernism is its rejection of the tradition. Modernism rejected the lingering certainty of Enlightenment thinking and also rejected the existence of a compassionate, all-powerful Creator God. Modernism was initiated around the turn of the century by rapidly changing technology and industry, then it was affected by the horrific consequences of World War I on the cultural psyche of artists.

In general, the term modernism encompasses the activities and output of those who felt the "traditional" forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life were becoming outdated in the new economic, social, and political conditions of a fully-industrialized world. The poet Ezra Pound's 1934 injunction to "Make it new!" was paradigmatic of the movement's approach towards the obsolete (not in use any more, having been replaced by something newer and better or more fashionable). Another paradigmatic exhortation was articulated by philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno, who, in the 1940s, challenged conventional surface coherence and appearance of harmony typical of the rationality of Enlightenment thinking. A salient characteristic of modernism is self-consciousness. This self-consciousness often led to experiments with form and work that draws attention to the processes and materials used (and to the further tendency of abstraction).

The modernist movement, at the beginning of the 20th century, marked, for the first time, the term "avant-garde", with which the movement was labeled until the word "modernism" prevailed, was used for the arts (rather than in its original military and political context). Surrealism gained fame among the public as being the most extreme form of modernism, or "the avant-garde of modernism".

*"Avant-garde"* (adjective) describes creative ideas, styles and methods that are very original or modern in comparison to the period in which they happen.

*"The avantgarde"* (noun): the work of painters, writers, musicians and other artists, whose ideas, styles and methods are very original or modern in comparison to the period in which they live.

Modernist literature is a sub-genre of Modernism, a predominantly European movement beginning in the early 20th century that was characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional aesthetic forms. Representing the radical shift in cultural sensibilities surrounding World War I, modernist literature struggled with the new realm of subject matter brought about by an increasingly industrialized and globalized world.

In its earliest incarnations, modernism fostered a utopian spirit, stimulated by innovations happening in the fields of anthropology, psychology, philosophy, political theory, and psychoanalysis. Writers such as Ezra Pound and other poets of the Imagist movement characterized this exuberant spirit, rejecting the sentiment and discursiveness typical of Romanticism and Victorian literature for poetry that instead favored precision of imagery and clear, sharp language.

This new idealism ended, however, with the outbreak of war, when writers began to generate more cynical postwar works that reflected a prevailing sense of disillusionment and fragmented thought. Many modernist writers shared a mistrust of institutions of power such as government and religion, and rejected the notion of absolute truths. Like T.S. Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, later modernist works were increasingly self-aware, introspective, and often embraced the unconscious fears of a darker humanity.

## OVERVIEW

Many scholars mark the beginning of the modernist literary movement with the publication of James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*. Joyce's strategies for depicting the events in the life of his fictional protagonist, Leopold Bloom, have come to epitomize modernism's artistic assault on modes of more conventional fiction. The poet T.S. Eliot described these qualities in the American Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* in 1923, noting that Joyce's technique is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art."<sup>[2]</sup>

Modernist literature addressed aesthetic problems similar to those examined in non-literary forms of contemporaneous Modernist art, such as Modernist painting. Gertrude Stein's abstract writings, for example, have often been compared to the fragmentary and multi-perspective Cubism of her friend Pablo Picasso.

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve and protect 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 Modernist emphasis on a 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 thousand-fold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of the last week.

The cultural history of humanity creates a unique common history that connects previous generations with the current generation of humans. 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, Joyce pursued a method which others must pursue after him. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.

Modernist literature attempted to move from the bonds of Realist literature and to introduce concepts such as disjointed timelines. In the wake of Modernism, and post-enlightenment, meta-narrative tended to be a consistent characteristic.

Modernist literature can be viewed largely in terms of its formal, stylistic and semantic movement away from Romanticism. Modernist literature often features a marked pessimism, a clear rejection of optimism. But the questioning spirit of modernism could also be seen, less elegiac, as part of a necessary search for ways to make sense of a broken world, in his modernist expression the artist as "hero" seeks to embrace complexity and locate new meanings.

However, many Modernist works like Eliot's *The Waste Land* are marked by the absence of a central, unifying figure. Modernists rejected the solipsism of Romantics like Shelley and Byron.

Modernist literature often moves beyond the limitations of the Realist novel with a concern for larger factors such as social or historical change. These themes are prominent in "stream of consciousness" writing. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens* and *Mrs Dalloway*, Katherine Anne Porter's *Flowering Judas*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* can be given as examples to the stream of consciousness novel.

Modernism as a literary movement is largely seen as a reaction to the emergence of city life as a central force in society. Furthermore, an early attention to the object as freestanding became in later Modernism a preoccupation with form. The dyadic collapse of the distance between subject and object represented a movement from *means* to *is*. Where Romanticism stressed the subjectivity of experience, Modernist writers were more acutely conscious of the objectivity of their surroundings. In Modernism the object *is*; the language doesn't mean it *is*. This is a shift from an epistemological aesthetic to an ontological aesthetic or, in simpler terms, a shift from a knowledge-based aesthetic to a *being*-based aesthetic. This shift is central to Modernism.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNITY/MODERNISM

### FORMAL/STYLISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

Juxtaposition, irony, comparisons, symbols and images and satire are elements found in modernist writing. The most obvious stylistic tool of the modernist writer is that it is often written in first person. Rather than a traditional story having a beginning, middle and end, modernist writing typically reads as a long stream of consciousness similar to a rant. This can leave the reader slightly confused as to what they are supposed to take away from the work. Juxtaposition could be used for

example in a way to represent something that would be oftentimes unseen, for example, a cat and a mouse as best friends. Irony and satire are important tools for the modernist writer in aiding them to make fun of and point out faults in what they are writing about, normally problems within their society, whether it is governmental, political, or social ideas.

### THEMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

For the first-time reader, modernist writing can seem frustrating to understand because of the fragmentation and lack of conciseness of the writing. The plot, characters and themes of the text are not always linear. The goal of modernist literature is not heavily focused on catering to one particular audience in a formal way. Modernist writing is more interested in getting the writer's ideas, opinions, and thoughts out into the public at as high a volume as possible. Modernist literature often forcefully opposes or gives an opinion on a social concept. The breaking down of social norms, rejection of standard social ideas and traditional thoughts and expectations, objection to religion and anger towards the effects of the world wars, and the rejection of the truth are topics widely seen in this literary era. A rejection of history, social systems, and a sense of loneliness are also common themes. In the interest of elitist exclusivity, the past modernist writers have also been known to create their texts in a stylistic and artistic way, using different fonts, sizes, symbols and colors in the production of their writing.

### MODERNIST MANIFESTOS

The modernist manifesto is a public statement of artistic convictions, normally brief and aggressive. The modernist manifesto was one of the most popular and proclaimed of outcomes of the modernist movement and modernist writing. The word 'manifesto' in Latin is 'to make public'. These authors had no particular audience in mind so long as their manifestos made it into the public eye. Hostility and vulgarity were often styles used within manifestos, as a means of grabbing an audience.

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