

# Modernism

Modernism refers to a global movement in society and culture that from the early decades of the twentieth century sought a new alignment with the experience and values of modern industrial life. Literary modernism, or modernist literature, originated 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 writing. Modernism experimented with literary form and expression, as exemplified by Ezra Pound's maxim to "Make it new." This literary movement was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of their time. The horrors of the First World War saw the prevailing assumptions about society reassessed, and much modernist writing engages with the technological advances and societal changes of modernity moving into the 20th century.

## **Historical backdrop of the movement**

- Industrialization and the increase in city life.
- Technology, experimentation and machinery age
- World War I
- The great depression 1929
- World War II.
- Female right to vote

## **Characteristics of the movement**

Modernity “revolts against normalizing functions of tradition; Modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” (Jurgen Habermas, “Modernity,” 162).

### ➤ **Reflecting awareness of new theories**

- ✓ Psychological theories: Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung
- ✓ Historical-cultural theories: Karl Marx
- ✓ Philosophical theories: Fredric Nietzsche

✓ Evolutionary theories: Charles Darwin

➤ **Stream of consciousness**

Stream of Consciousness, literary technique, first used in the late 19th century, employed to evince subjective as well as objective reality. It reveals the character's feelings, thoughts, and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence, without commentary by the author. The technique of stream of consciousness, however, attempts to portray the remote, preconscious state that exists before the mind organizes sensations. Consequently, the recreation of a stream of consciousness frequently lacks “the unity, explicit cohesion, and selectivity of direct thought”. It is marked by the sudden rise of thoughts and lack of punctuation.

**EX:**

All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough. After that, how unbelievable death was!-that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant . . .

(Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf)

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

(“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot)

### ➤ **Fragmented narratives**

Fragmented narratives tend to possess a beginning, middle and end, but this composition can be disordered. The narrative might begin in the middle line of the story and can go back to the beginning of the plot and then flash forward to the end. Fragmented narratives can be categorized as linear narratives, even if they are told in a non-linear way.

### ➤ **Satire**

It is artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, often with an intent to inspire social reform. In literary works, satire can be direct or indirect.

#### **EX:**

“What’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and isn’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?” (Ch. 16)

“The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that’s what an army is – a mob; they don’t fight with courage that’s born in them, but with courage that’s borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any man at the head of it is beneath pitifulness.” (Ch. 22)

(The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain)

### ➤ **Irony**

As a literary device, irony is a contrast between expectations for a situation and what is reality. It can also be a difference between what might be expected to happen and what actually occurs. It is divided into three main types: verbal, dramatic, and situational.

## Modernist writers and poets

Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and Gertrude Stein.



**The Modern Period in American Literature**

**1915-1945**

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