



People' s Democratic Republic of Algeria
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Modernist Literary Criticism

Literary Criticism / Master II

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Modernism 1914-1945

Modernity is associated with the age of reason, or Enlightenment, which begins approximately in the middle of the eighteenth century (1750). However, Modernism, however, is a movement in the arts that questions the "ideals of British Victorianism and reflects both the material and the psychological devastation of two world wars" (Bressler: 101). It is a movement that rejects all the axioms of modernity, including the ability of reason and science to discover absolute truth; rationality; the centeredness of the self; the transparency of language; the objective connection between the signifier and signified; the legitimacy of "grand narratives"; and the autonomy and self-containment of the text. The motto of modernism is "make it new," which was coined by Ezra Pound. It shows the ambition of modernist poets and writers to challenge the long-standing structures and conventions of writing poetry and fiction.

The Structure and Content of Modernist Poems or Fiction:

- ✓ Discontinuity and fragmentation in narration.
- ✓ Absence of beginnings and ends.
- ✓ No linear story.
- ✓ Experimental techniques: punctuation, prose-like poems, stream of consciousness.
- ✓ Dream-like narratives
- ✓ Unconventional use of language, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and syntax.
- ✓ No protagonist or antagonists.
- ✓ Symbolism and ambiguity.
- ✓ Multiplicity of voices.
- ✓ Cinematic effects.
- ✓ juxtaposition, collage, impressionism, imagism, etc.
- ✓ Disillusionment, chaos, alienation, and decay
- ✓ Poetic prose and documentary poetry.

Modernist Techniques and Experimentation:

1) Stream of Consciousness:

Stream of consciousness was first used by the psychologist William James to "describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings in the waking mind" (Abrams 380). An example from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927):

Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement.

In this passage, one may find it quite difficult to identify the right voice or narrator, bearing in mind that James, at the beginning of the novel, is only six years old and cannot make such accurate judgments about his father.

2) Epiphany

Epiphany is used to “signify the sense of a sudden radiance and revelation that occurs during the perception of a commonplace object” (Abrams 111). An example from James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to the sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea bird. Her long slender bare legs were as delicate as a crane’s and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. ... But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.

The protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, is struck by the pure beauty of a woman, whose beauty compels him to become a writer to express her beauty.

References:

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- Abrams, Meyer Howard, and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2014.