

**Modernism****Definition:**

Jurgen Habermas states that “Modernity revolts against normalizing functions of tradition; Modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” (“Modernity,” 162). Therefore, Modernism was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of their time.

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."

Modernism in its broader sense means innovation that is something in progress. Modernism wants to find new ways of expression as a result to the new situation of man who has lost his faith in traditional beliefs.

Modernism, then, is a trend of thought that affirms the power of human being to create, improve, and reshape their environment.

**Factors of the Emergence of Modernism**

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

- The emergence of many scientific theories;
  - ✓ Psychological theories: Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung
  - ✓ Historical-cultural theories: Karl Marx
  - ✓ Philosophical theories: Fredric Nietzsche ... etc

## **Main Themes in Modernism**

World War I and II, industrialization and other social and political circumstances led modernists to see themselves as disillusioned and lost. Accordingly, modernist themes included:

The twentieth century was considered the age of **chaos and disorder**. The huge destruction of World War I caused a widespread of social and political instability. The society's harmony was broken down and the social values and traditions were declined.

**Alienation** as a psychological state is essential idea in the modernist works. Feeling of isolation and disillusionment was experienced by all the people after WWI. Psychoanalysis defines alienation as a psychological phenomenon that affects the individual to make him either alienated from his own self or from the surrounding people and consequently making him detached from his social reality.

**Spiritual death** is the result of the individual's alienation and disappointment. Modernist writers argue that this death is because three reasons; the loss of traditional values, the breakdown of social and political systems and the loss of faith in God.

The damaging war devastated people's hope for having a good stable life. The world around them is a wasteland in which people are victims of a harsh fate striking to give a meaning to their existence.

Therefore, **pessimism** was a prominent theme in most modernist works:

'To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility : it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.O, the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death !' (62).

**Uncertainty and doubt** is obvious as modernist individual was no longer certain about anything; neither his future, nor his past. A sense of meaninglessness and emptiness led many people to give up their dreams and live a life of absurdity.

## Techniques of Modernism

### ➤ Interior Monologue:

It is a narrative technique. Interior monologue allows readers to see the inner thoughts of the characters in the narrative.

An interior monologue may be either direct or indirect.

### ➤ Stream of consciousness

It is a literary technique.

- It often follows an associative rather than a logical sequence, without commentary by the author. It can be regarded as an interior monologue but more that because it's mimicking the non-linear way our brains work.

Consequently, the re-creation 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**.

### ➤ Fragmented narratives

Fragmented narratives tend to possess a beginning, middle and end, but this composition can be disordered.

### ➤ Mythical Method

It is a constant parallel between the writer's modern age and the past through the use of mythological references. T.S Eliot describes this method:

In using 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

**What are the modernist literary techniques in the following quotes?**

“I looked into the reception room. It was empty of everything but the smell of dust. I threw up another window, unlocked the communicating door and went into the room beyond. Three hard chairs and a swivel chair, flat desk with a glass top, five green filing cases, three of them full of nothing, a calendar and a framed license bond on the wall, a phone, a washbowl in a stained wood cupboard, a hatrack, a carpet that was just something on the floor, and two open windows with net curtains that puckered in and out like the lips of a toothless old man sleeping.

(Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*, 1942)

How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself. Do not come and worry me with your hints that it is time to shut the shop and be gone.

(Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, 1931)

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 . . .

(Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*)

the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's

is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me  
it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me"

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming — W. B. Yeats

### **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

## **A Reading on the social and cultural background of *The Great Gatsby***

### **1. Terms associated with Modernism in American Literature:**

Social and cultural aspects of any society have a great impact on writers. In order to understand something about writers' works, we often need to get some information about their life and society. Modernist writers tended to tackle issues that really reflect their social environment. The terms mentioned below are often associated with modernism in America.

- **The Roaring Twenties**

The Roaring Twenties was a period in history of dramatic social and political change. For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation's total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and this economic growth swept many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar "consumer society." People from coast to coast bought the same goods (thanks to nationwide advertising and the spread of chain stores), listened to the same music, did the same dances and even used the same slang! Many Americans were uncomfortable with this new, urban, sometimes racy "mass culture;" in fact, for many—even most—people in the United States, the 1920s brought more conflict than celebration. However, for a small handful of young people in the nation's big cities, the 1920s were roaring indeed

- **The flapper**

The most familiar symbol of the "Roaring Twenties" is probably the flapper: a young woman with bobbed hair and short skirts who drank, smoked and said what might be termed "unladylike" things, in addition to being more sexually "free" than previous generations. In reality, most young women in the 1920s did none of these things (though many did adopt a fashionable flapper wardrobe), but even those women who were not flappers gained some unprecedented freedoms. They could vote at last: The 19th Amendment to the Constitution had guaranteed that right in 1920. Millions of women worked in white-collar jobs (as stenographers, for example) and could afford to participate in the

burgeoning consumer economy. The increased availability of birth-control devices such as the diaphragm made it possible for women to have fewer children. And new machines and technologies like the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner eliminated some of the drudgery of household work

- **Prohibition**

The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—which banned the manufacture, transportation and sale of intoxicating liquors—ushered in a period in American history known as Prohibition. Prohibition was ratified by the states on January 16, 1919 and officially went into effect on January 17, 1920, with the passage of the Volstead Act. Despite the new legislation, Prohibition was difficult to enforce.

- **The Jazz Age**

The Jazz Age was a cultural period and movement that took place in America during the 1920s from which both new styles of music and dance emerged. Largely credited to African Americans employing new musical techniques along with traditional African traditions, jazz soon expanded to America's white middle class

## **2. F. Scott Fitzgerald and his depiction of the American society.**

We as reader often get to know people and cultures through reading their literatures. Philip Stevick in *The Theory of The Novel* states:

The novel, more than any other genre, is capable of containing large, developed, consistent images of people, and this is one of the reasons that anyone reads novels. The novel, more than any other genre can give form to a set of attitudes regarding society, history, and the general culture of which the novel is a part. (1967)

F. Scott Fitzgerald as one of the modern American writers is highly praised for his craftsmanship in writing. He is the writer who voiced the Jazz Age and its hilarious and gay time during the Twenties. Many critics regard him as the spokesman of the age. He was the most important and representative writer of the 1920's.

In his book, *Understanding Fiction*, Francis Conolly says:

We read because of a hunger for information, or amusement, or solace, because of an appetite for truth that seems to grow by what it feeds on. Men read to discover themselves in their world, to assert special roles in the universe, to learn the meaning of the personal struggles in which they are engaged. ( 1955 )

Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* can be considered as a mirror of the downfall of the American dream and American society as a whole.

The novel looks at America in the 1920s and gives insight into the culture in which Gatsby's behavior takes place. There were many changes in American society around that time, with more freedom in some areas and restrictions in others, particularly related to social class; how this affects Jay Gatsby is examined.

The novel tackles issues such as class stratification, war, the American bohemian lifestyle criminality and love.