



Modernism

1910-1960's

What is Modernism?

- A trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve, and reshape their environment
- With the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation
- Progressive and optimistic
- Political, cultural and artistic movements rooted in the changes in Western society
- At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century
- A series of reforming cultural movements in art and architecture, music, literature and the applied arts emerged in the three decades before 1914
- Encouraged the re-examination of every aspect of existence (e.g. commerce / philosophy)
- Goal: finding which was "holding back" progress, + replacing it with new, progressive and better ways of reaching the same end
- New realities of the industrial and mechanized age: permanent and imminent
- World view: the new = the good, the true and the beautiful
- Rebelled against nineteenth century academic and historicist traditions
- "Traditional" forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life: outdated

Major Principles of Modernism

- Move from the bonds of Realist literature
- Introduce concepts such as disjointed timelines
- Distinguished by emancipatory metanarrative
 - A comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge
 - An explanation for everything that happens in a society
- Move away from Romanticism
- Venture into subject matter that is traditionally mundane (Example: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot)

Major Principles of Modernism— Continued

- **Marked pessimism: a clear rejection of the optimism apparent in Victorian literature**
- **Common motif in Modernist fiction: an alienated individual (a dysfunctional individual) trying in vain to make sense of a predominantly urban and fragmented society**
- **Absence of a central, heroic figure**
- **Collapsing narrative and narrator into a collection of disjointed fragments and overlapping voices**

Major Principles of Modernism—Continued

- Concern for larger factors such as social or historical change
- Demonstrated in "stream of consciousness" writing
- Examples:
 - Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway*
 - James Joyce: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* + *Ulysses*
- A reaction to the emergence of city life as a central force in society

Characteristics of Modern Literature

- Breakdown of social norms and cultural sureties
- Dislocation of meaning and sense from its normal context
- Valorization of the despairing individual in the face of an unmanageable future
- Rejection of history and the substitution of a mythical past, borrowed without chronology

Characteristics of Modern Literature—Continued

- Product of the metropolis, of cities and urban-scapes
- Overwhelming technological changes of the 20th Century
 - Disillusionment
 - A feeling arising from the discovery
 - Something is not what it was anticipated to be
 - More severe and traumatic than common disappointment
 - Especially when a belief central to one's identity is shown to be false

The writer in the Modern period will reflect these ideas through his works.

- Work to locate meaning from the viewpoint of the individual; use of narrators located within the action of the fiction, experiencing the events from a personal, particular (as opposed to an omniscient and/or “objective”) perspective; use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective so that the reader sees the story from many different “perspectives”; make disappear the omniscient narrator, especially as ‘spokesperson’ for the author

Continued

- **Move time into the interior: time becomes psychological time or symbolic time rather than a historic reality. Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards or forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth. Incidentally, 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 sense most faithfully and fully.**

Continued

- Represent 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.
- Work to show the surface disorder of the world/society and nevertheless imply there exists a certain underlying unity.
- Work to depict the myriad ways his characters can become honorable and dignified in a world seemingly lacking both honor and dignity

Modernist Writers

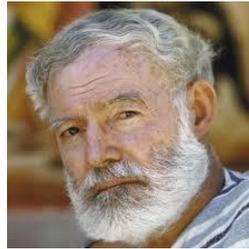
T. S. Elliot



Ezra Pound



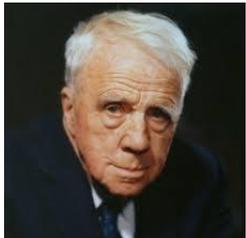
Ernest Hemingway



Virginia Woolf



Robert Frost



James Joyce



Franz Kafka



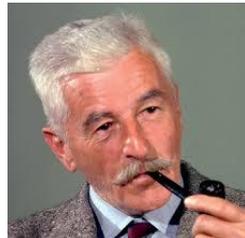
Katherine Mansfield



W. B. Yeats



William Faulkner



Joseph Conrad



F. Scott Fitzgerald

