

Aspects of Literary Modernism



Or
How to Recognize a Modernist Novel or Poem
When You See One

Contextualizing Modernism

- Social, economic, political and social aspects of early 20th-century metropolis (Williams)
 - Diversity of metropolis brought about by colonial and rural to urban immigration (rural social expectations and social structures dissolve)
 - Possibility of creating new social, cultural and economic formations/organizations/relationships
 - Class noted political movements (woman's suffrage) and social conditions (prohibition) that brought people together across social and economic lines

Contextualizing Modernism

- City, cont'd
 - *Intensification* of feelings of alienation, isolation, strangeness of existence in city and of moral darkness of city and its physical layout
 - Possibility of the city—new types of identities in “open, complex and mobile society” (Williams 91)
 - City gave audience to and space for pool of new writers
 - Metropolitan dwellers having “exceptional liberties of expression” (Williams 91)

Contextualizing Modernism

- Masculine anxiety over women's success in literary marketplace that *intensified* in early 20th century giving rise to “exclusive” modernist aesthetic (Gilbert and Gubar)
- Blues, jazz—rise of African American art forms—growing use of vernacular language and folk culture in African American literature (Baker)

Context Influences Form

- Williams identifying “breaks in form” as defining characteristic of modernism rising out of artists and intellectuals location “within the changing milieu of the metropolis” (90)
 - “Openness and complexity” of metropolis engendering openness of form. “Emphasis on medium, and on what can be done in the medium, became dominant” (92).
 - Immigrants confronted with new language (and natives with new uses) see it as arbitrary rather than natural and thus open to shaping and reshaping

Context Influences Form

- “Renaissancism”: “a *spirit* of nationalistic engagement . . . that prompts the black artist’s awareness that his or her only possible foundation for authentic and modern expressivity resides in a discursive field marked by formal mastery and sounding deformation” (Baker 108)—a mixture “of class and mass” (109).
- Gilbert and Gubar see modernism as “an integral part of a complex response to *female* precursors and contemporaries” (156)
 - “Exclusive” language and form of anti-establishment avant-garde (“use of puns, allusions, phrases in foreign languages, arcane and fractured forms”) (156).

Modernisms

“Although modernism can be clearly identified as a distinctive movement, in its deliberate distance from and challenge to more traditional forms of art and thought, it is also strongly characterised by its internal diversity of methods and emphases; a restless and often competitive sequence of experiments, always more immediately recognised by what they are breaking from than by what . . . they are breaking towards” (Williams 89).



Literary Modernism

- Emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity (individual consciousness experiencing a moment: stream of consciousness, form of interior monologue).
- Exploration of *how* seeing takes place, rather than on what is perceived.
- Movement away from the apparent objectivity provided by omniscient third-person narrators, fixed narrative points of view, and clear-cut moral positions.

Literary Modernism, cont'd

- Blurring or melding of genre styles.
- Time and space become subjective, move inward. According to [Lye](#), space is “structured symbolically or metaphorically” and “time becomes psychological time.”



Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931. Image courtesy [MOMA](#).

Literary Modernism, cont'd

- Experimentation in **form** in order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life.
- Language is seen as a complex, nuanced site of our construction of the 'real'; its multiple meanings and varied connotative forces are essential to our elusive, multiple, complex sense of and cultural construction of reality.

Text from Howard Lye, "Some Attributes of Modernist Literature."
Available at: <http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/2F55/modernism.php>

Literary Modernism, cont'd

- a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness, about the production of the work of art, so that each piece calls attention to its own status as a production, as something constructed and consumed in particular ways.



Duchamp, Marcel. Fountain. 1917.
Image courtesy of: [SF MOMA](https://www.moma.org)

Literary Modernism and Woolf

- Scott draws attention to Woolf's use of repetition and metaphoric language
- Woolf's own discussion of modernism in "Modern Novels"



Freund, Gisele. *Photograph of Virginia Woolf*. 1939. Image courtesy: Guardian.co.uk

Mrs. Dalloway, Opening

- Language of newness, calmness and peace: children, “fresh,” beach, wave (extended metaphor of beach)
- However, these images interspersed with ominous overtones of death and anxiety
 - Multiple connotations of term “plunge” and “plunged at Bourton into the open air” (3).
 - Clarissa’s feeling at 18 “that something awful was about to happen” (3).
- Peter: motif of him being in her thoughts continually, marriage plot, comfort with her, intrusion into her physical and mental solitude

Image Sources

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