

MODERNIST POETRY

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A Brief Guide to Modernism

SOURCE: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-modernism>

“That’s not it at all, that’s not what I meant at all”

—from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T. S. Eliot

English novelist Virginia Woolf declared that human nature underwent a fundamental change “on or about December 1910.” The statement testifies to the modern writer’s fervent desire to break with the past, rejecting literary traditions that seemed outmoded and diction that seemed too genteel to suit an era of technological breakthroughs and global violence.

“On or about 1910,” just as the automobile and airplane were beginning to accelerate the pace of human life and Einstein’s ideas were transforming our perception of the universe, there was an explosion of innovation and creative energy that shook every field of artistic endeavor. Artists from all over the world converged on London, Paris, and other great cities of Europe to join in the ferment of new ideas and movements: Cubism, Constructivism, Futurism, Acmeism, and Imagism were among the most influential banners under which the new artists grouped themselves. It was an era when major artists were fundamentally questioning and reinventing their art forms: Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso in painting, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in literature, Isadora Duncan in dance, Igor Stravinsky in music, and Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture.

The excitement, however, came to a terrible climax in 1914 with the start of the First World War, which wiped out a generation of young men in Europe, catapulted Russia into a catastrophic revolution, and sowed the seeds for even worse conflagrations in the decades to follow. By the war’s end in 1918, the centuries-old European domination of the world had ended and the “American Century” had begun. For artists and many others in Europe, it was a time of profound disillusion with the values on which a whole civilization had been founded. But it was also a time when the avante-garde experiments that had preceded the war would, like the technological wonders of the airplane and the atom, inexorably establish a new dispensation, which we call modernism. Among the most instrumental of all artists in effecting this change were a handful of American poets.

Ezra Pound, the most aggressively modern of these poets, made "Make it new!" his battle cry. In London Pound encountered and encouraged his fellow expatriate Eliot, who wrote what is arguably the most famous poem of the twentieth century—"The Waste Land"—using revolutionary techniques of composition, such as the collage. Both poets turned to untraditional sources for inspiration: Pound to classical Chinese poetry and Eliot to the ironic poems of the 19th century French symbolist poet Jules Laforgue.

H. D. followed Pound to Europe and wrote poems that, in their extreme concision and precise visualization, most purely embodied his famous doctrine of imagism. Among the American poets who stayed at home, Wallace Stevens—a mild-mannered executive at a major insurance firm in Hartford, Connecticut—had a flair for the flashiest titles that poems have ever had: "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." Stevens, the aesthete par excellence, exalted the imagination for its ability to "press back against the pressure of reality."

What was new in Marianne Moore was her brilliant and utterly original use of quotations in her poetry, and her surpassing attention to the poetic image. What was new in E. E. Cummings was right on the surface, where all the words were in lowercase letters and a parenthesis "(a leaf falls)" may separate the "I" from "oneliness."

William Carlos Williams wrote in "plain American which cats and dogs can read," to use a phrase of Moore. "No ideas but in things," he proclaimed. In succinct, often witty poems, he presents common objects or events—a red wheelbarrow, a person eating plums—with freshness and immediacy, enlarging our understanding of what a poem's subject matter can be. Unlike Williams, Robert Frost favored traditional devices—blank verse, rhyme, narrative, the sonnet form—but he, too, had a genius for the American vernacular, and his pitiless depiction of a cruel natural universe marks him as a peculiarly modern figure who is sometimes misread as a genial Yankee sage.

Of the many modern poets who acted on the ambition to write a long poem capable of encompassing an entire era, Hart Crane was one of the more notably successful. In his poem "The Bridge," the Brooklyn Bridge is both a symbol of the new world and a metaphor allowing the poet to cross into different periods, where he may shake hands in the past with Walt Whitman and watch as the train called the Twentieth Century races into the future.

Further information on Modernism

SOURCES: WIKIPEDIA

<http://edsitement.neh.gov>

<http://www.textetc.com/modernist.html>

Mrs Bensch

Mrs Turbiglio

Modernist poetry refers to poetry written between 1890 and 1950 although the beginning and ending of the modernist period are of course arbitrary. Poets, like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or E.E. Cummings went on to produce significant work after World War II. The questions of impersonality and objectivity seem to be crucial to Modernist poetry.

Modernism developed out of a tradition of lyrical expression, emphasizing the personal imagination, culture, emotions and memories of the poet. For the modernists, it was essential to move away from the merely personal towards an intellectual statement that poetry could make about the world. Even when they reverted to the personal, like Eliot in the *Four Quartets* or Pound in the *The Cantos*, they distilled the personal into a poetic texture that claimed universal human significance. After World War II, a new generation of poets sought to revoke the effort of their predecessors towards impersonality and objectivity. Modernism ends with the turn towards confessional poetry in the work of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, among others.

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Modernist poetry often is difficult for students to analyze and understand. A primary reason students feel a bit disoriented when reading a modernist poem is that the speaker himself is uncertain about his or her own ontological (a study of the state of being) bearings. Indeed, the speaker of modernist poems characteristically wrestles with the fundamental question of "self," often feeling fragmented and alienated from the world around him. In other words, a coherent speaker with a clear sense of himself/herself is hard to find in modernist poetry, often leaving students confused and "lost."

Such ontological feelings of fragmentation and alienation, which often led to a more pessimistic and bleak outlook on life as manifested in representative modernist poems such as T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," were prompted by fundamental and far-reaching historical, social, cultural, and economic changes in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The rise of cities; profound technological changes in transportation, architecture, and engineering; a rising population that engendered crowds and chaos in public spaces; and a growing sense of mass markets often made

individuals feel less individual and more alienated, fragmented, and at a loss in their daily worlds. World War I (WWI), moreover, contributed to a more modern local and world view.

The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not, wrote T.S. Eliot, accord with ‘the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.’.. rejecting nineteenth-century optimism, [modernists] presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray.

(Eg: contemporary examples of a radical shift during our time period: 9/11; The fall from grace of the Superpower USA, internet, global village, social networking, computers and cellphones, cellphone cameras which capture events instantly, reality shows, Hollywood, celebs and papparazzi, pop culture, skyscrapers...)

These changes in our world can result in emotional reactions from people. Poets, of course, are the ones who put our insecurities on paper and express our hopes / fears / anxieties etc for all to see.

Pre-Modern World (e.g., Romantic, Victorian Periods)	Modern World (early 20th century)
Ordered	Chaos
Meaningful	Futile
Optimistic	Pessimistic
Stable	Unstable
Faith	Loss of Faith
Morality/Values	Collapse of Morality/Values
Clear Sense of Identity	Confused Sense of Identity and Place in World

Modernism as a literary movement—the “rallying cry” of which was “Make It New!”—tried to break from the formal traditions and poetic style of Romantic and Victorian poetry. One clear difference centers on the poem’s speaker. In the following example from Romantic and Victorian poetry, the “I” of the poem typically is clear and well-grounded, both in terms of the speaker’s identity and sense of himself and in terms of his/her relationship to the world around him/her.

A perfect example of such Romantic poetry is Wordsworth's "The Daffodils" and Barrett Browning's "Sonnet from the Portuguese 43":

The Daffodils
*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

Notice the clarity of the speaker's observations. He celebrates nature and being alive. He feels connected to nature. Compare this scene to the cityscapes, urban decay and factories of the modern world.

FEATURES OF MODERNISM

To varying extents, writing of the Modernist period exhibits these features:

1. experimentation

A belief that previous writing was stereotyped and inadequate ceaseless technical innovation, sometimes for its own sake originality: deviation from the norm, or from usual reader expectations ruthless rejection of the past, even iconoclasm

2. anti-realism

sacralisation of art, which must represent itself, not something beyond preference for allusion (often private) rather than description world seen through the artist's inner feelings and mental states themes and vantage points chosen to question the conventional view use of myth and unconscious forces rather than motivations of conventional plot

3. individualism

promotion of the artist's viewpoint, at the expense of the communal cultivation of an individual consciousness, which alone is the final arbiter estrangement from religion, nature, science, economy or social mechanisms maintenance of a wary intellectual independence artists and not society should judge the arts: extreme self-consciousness search for the primary image, devoid of comment: stream of consciousness exclusiveness, an aristocracy of the avant-garde

4. intellectualism

writing more cerebral than emotional work is tentative, analytical and fragmentary, more posing questions more than answering them cool observation: viewpoints and characters detached and depersonalized open-ended work, not finished, nor aiming at formal perfection involuted: the subject is often act of writing itself and not the ostensible referent

■ The Shock of the New

One feature above all is striking in Modernism: experimentation, change for the sake of change, a need to be constantly at the cutting edge in technique and thought. "Make it new" said Pound. Perhaps this was understandable in a society itself changing rapidly. The First World War shattered many beliefs — in peaceful progress, international cooperation, the superiority of the European civilizations. It also outlawed a high-minded and heroic vocabulary: "gallant, manly, vanquish, fate", etc. could afterwards only be used in an ironic or jocular way. But more fundamental was the nineteenth century growth in city life, in industrial employment, in universal literacy, in the power of mass patronage and the vote. Science and society could evolve and innovate, so why not art?

■ Elitist Intellectualism

But Modernist writers and their commentators do not regard the narrowly individual outlook a shortcoming, quite the opposite. Nineteenth-century realism was tainted with commerce and the circulating libraries. Twentieth-century realism all too blatantly takes the form of TV soaps and blockbuster novels. God forbid that the modern writer should obey the first tenet of art, and portray something of the world in clearer and more generous contours. That would mean actually experiencing the hard world as it is for most of its inhabitants, of living like everybody else.

The intellect has its demands and pleasures, but the Modernists do not generally live such a life, which requires university tenure or independent wealth. Their learning tends to be fragmentary, with ideas serving ulterior purposes, one of which is social distinction. There is a persistent strain of intellectual snobbery in Modernism — sometimes breaking out in racism and contempt for the masses, sometimes retreating to arcane philosophy: idealism, existentialism, Poststructuralism. {13} Modernists are an aristocracy of the intellect. The cerebral is preferred. Modern dramatists and novelists may appeal to mythology, but their understanding is intellectualized: work is not crafted to evoke the primal forces unleashed in plays by Euripides or Racine, but shaped by concepts that serve for plot and structure.

No one would willingly lose the best that has been written in the last hundred years, but earlier doubts are coming home to roost. Modernism's ruthless self-promotion creates intellectual castes that cut themselves off from the hopes and joys of everyday life. The poetry can be built on the flimsiest of foundations: Freudian psychiatry, verbal cleverness, individualism run riot, anti-realism, over-emphasis on the irrational. The concepts themselves are fraudulent, and the supporting myths too small and self-admiring to show man in his fullest nature. Sales of early Modernist works were laughably small, and it was largely after the Second World War, when the disciples of Modernism rose to positions of influence in the academic and publishing worlds, that Modernism came the lingua franca of the educated classes. The older generation of readers gradually died out. Literature for them was connoisseurship, a lifetime of deepening familiarity with authors who couldn't be analyzed in critical theory, or packed into three-year undergraduate courses.

A Noiseless Patient Spider
BY WALT WHITMAN

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them. 5

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul. 10

The Second Coming

By W. B. Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere 5
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand. 10
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, 15
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, 20
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The Garden

By Ezra Pound

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens,
And she is dying piece-meal
 of a sort of emotional anemia.

And round about there is a rabble 5
Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor.
They shall inherit the earth.

In her is the end of breeding.
Her boredom is exquisite and excessive. 10
She would like some one to speak to her,
And is almost afraid that I
 will commit that indiscretion.

Musée des Beaux Arts

By W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along; 5
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot 10
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away 15
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen 20
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

