

Modernist Poetry

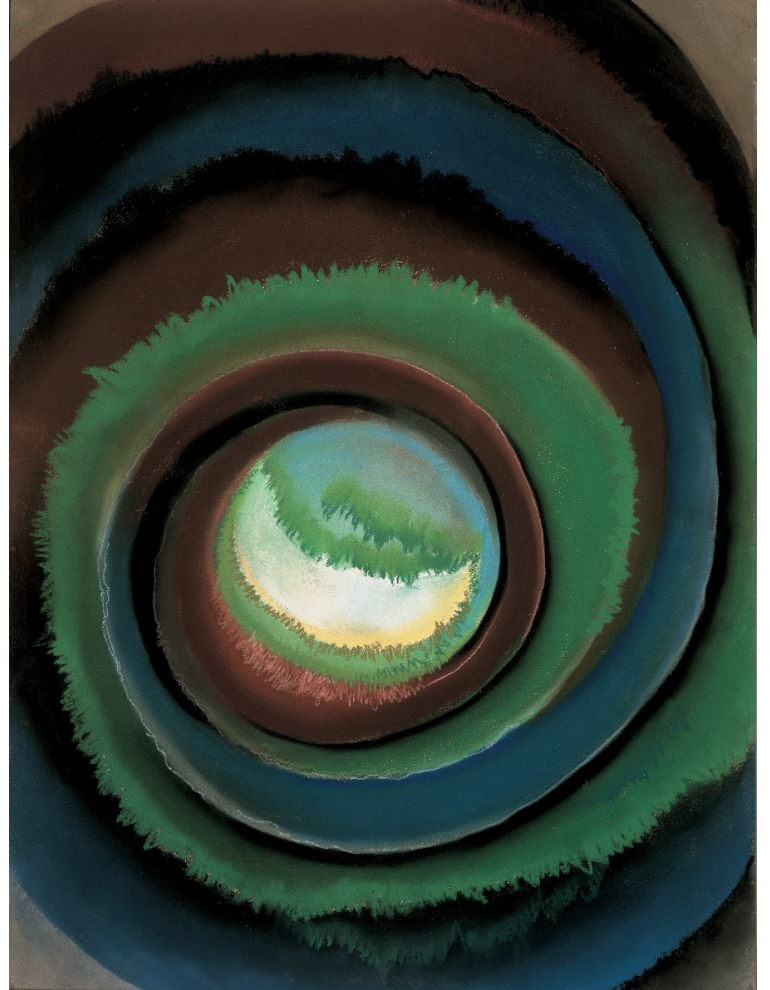
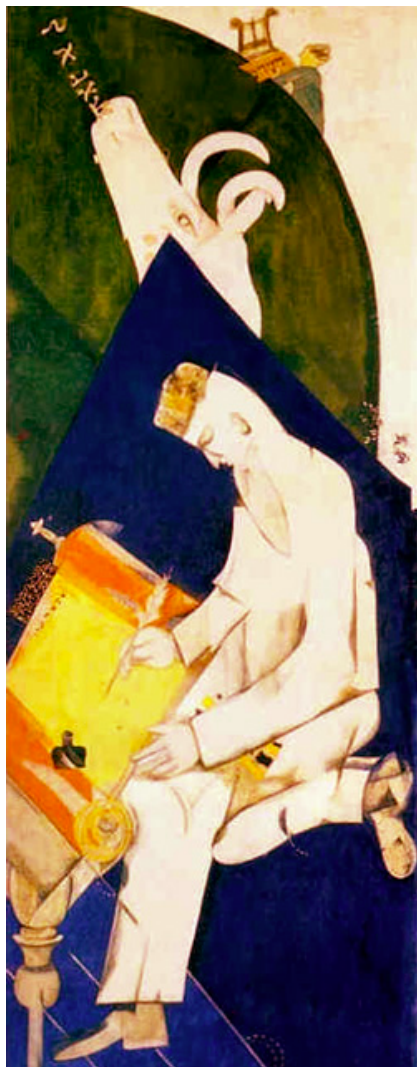
AP English Lit

Modernism

What does the word “modern” mean to you? What do you associate with it?

anything
else?

Marc Chagall "Literature"
1920



Georgia O'Keefe "Pond in the Woods"
1922

Literary Timeframe

Industrial Revolution (~mid 1800s) → Romantics and Victorian Era
Transcendentalism

American Civil War (1860s) → Realism/Naturalism
Existentialism

Modern Period (1900-1960s) → Modernism
(WWI, the Great Depression, WWII)

Contemporary Period (1950s-60s to present) → Postmodern

How Modernism arose

The literary movement we call Modernism rejected Romantic ideas. It grew out of the philosophical, scientific, political, and ideological shifts that followed the Industrial Revolution, through the shock of World War I, and its aftermath.

Modern writers:

- break with the past
- reject literary traditions that seemed outmoded
- reject aesthetic values of their predecessors
- reject diction that seemed too genteel to suit an era of technological breakthroughs and global violence
- break with Romantic pieties and clichés (such as the notion of the sublime) and become self-consciously skeptical of language and its claims on coherence

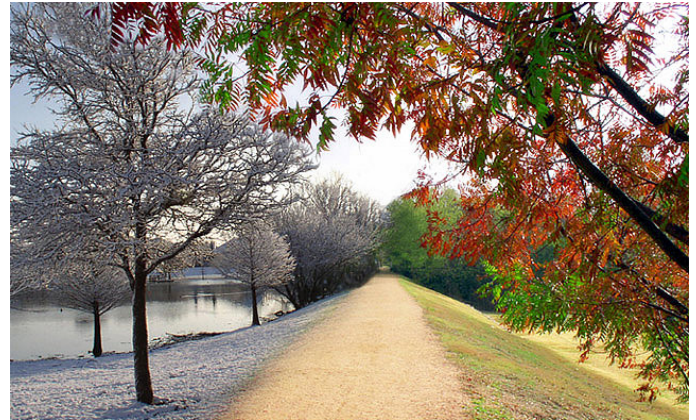
Characteristics of Modern Poetry

- Stylistic experimentation and disrupted syntax
- Stream of Consciousness (a term coined by American psychologist William James to describe the natural flow of a person's thoughts)
- Theme of alienation: characters or speakers feel disconnected from people and/or society/the world
- Focus on images

Syntax

- Syntax is how we structure sentences and language.
- e.e. cummings experimented heavily with syntax. One example of this is his poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town.”

“anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did”



Stream of consciousness

- A narrative mode that seeks to portray an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either in a loose interior monologue, or in connection to his or her actions .
- T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is one example of the use of stream of consciousness.



And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

* * *

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

--from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915)

Imagism: a subset of Modernist poetry

- In traditional poetry, poets describe images in great detail, and then link the images to a philosophical idea or theme.
- In Imagist poetry, the writer does not talk about the themes behind the image; they let the image itself be the focus of the poem.

Ezra Pound, one of the founders of Imagism, set out three guidelines:

1. Direct treatment of the subject. The poem should deal directly with what's being talked about, without fancy words and phrases to talk about it.
2. Use no word that does not contribute to the presentation. Use as few words as possible.
3. Compose in the rhythm of the musical phrase, not in the rhythm of the metronome. In other words, create new rhythms.

Some Modern poets:



William Carlos Williams



e.e. cummings



Marianne Moore



T.S. Eliot



Ezra Pound



Wallace Stevens

- 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.
- Wallace Stevens exalted the imagination for its ability to “press back against the pressure of reality.”
- Ezra Pound vowed to “make it new” and “break the pentameter”.
- In succinct, often witty poems, William Carlos Williams 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.

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)



- master stylist, employing an extraordinary vocabulary and a rigorous precision
- a philosopher of aesthetics, vigorously exploring the notion of poetry as the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality
- By the end of his third year at Harvard, he had received all of the school's honors for writing. However, he didn't graduate because a shortage of family funds forced him to withdraw from the university.
- Not a setback for Stevens, though. He became a journalist, then studied law and worked for an insurance company by day and wrote poetry by night
- The 1955 publication of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* earned him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and a National Book Award.

Sources:

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<http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/the-imagist-movement-poems-examples-key-poets.html#lesson>