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Modernist Literature

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MODERNIST LITERATURE

Modernism as a literary movement reached its height in Europe between 1900 and the mid-1920s. 'Modernist' literature addressed aesthetic problems similar to those examined in non-literary forms of contemporaneous Modernist art, such as painting. Gertrude Stein's abstract writings, for example, have often been compared to the fragmentary and multi-perspectival Cubism of her friend Pablo Picasso. The general thematic concerns of Modernist literature are well-summarised by the sociologist Georg Simmel: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life" (*The Metropolis and Mental Life*, 1903).

The Modernist emphasis on radical individualism can be seen in the many literary manifestos issued by various groups within the movement. The concerns expressed by Simmel above are echoed in Richard Huelsenbeck's First German Dada Manifesto of 1918: "Art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week. The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time." The cultural history of humanity creates a unique common history that connects previous generations with the current generation of humans, and the Modernist re-contextualization of the individual within the fabric of this received social heritage can be seen in the 'mythic method' which T.S. Eliot expounded in his discussion of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "In using the 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 shape and significance to the immense panorama of

futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Ulysses, Order and Myth, 1923).

Modernist literature involved such authors as Knut Hamsun (whose novel *Hunger* (1890) is considered to be the first ‘modernist’ novel), Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Dylan Thomas, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, James Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, Ernest Hemingway, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Joseph Conrad, Andrei Bely, W. B. Yeats, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Luigi Pirandello, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Jaroslav Hašek, Samuel Beckett, Menno ter Braak, Marcel Proust, Mikhail Bulgakov, Robert Frost, Boris Pasternak, Djuna Barnes, and others. L to R: Samuel Beckett; Ezra Pound (by Wyndham Lewis, 1939); Dylan Thomas; Virginia Woolf.

Modernist literature attempted to move from the bonds of Realist literature and to introduce concepts such as disjointed timelines. Modernism was distinguished by an emancipatory metanarrative. In the wake of Modernism, and post-enlightenment, metanarratives tended to be emancipatory, whereas beforehand this was not a consistent characteristic. Contemporary metanarratives were becoming less relevant in light of the implications of World War I, the rise of trade unionism, general social discontent, and the emergence of psychoanalysis. The consequent need for a unifying function brought about a growth in the political importance of culture. Modernist literature can be viewed largely in terms of its formal, stylistic, and semantic movement away from Romanticism, examining subject matter that is traditionally mundane – a prime example being *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot (1915). Modernist literature often features a marked pessimism, a clear rejection of the optimism apparent in Victorian literature in favor of portraying alienated or dysfunctional individuals within a predominantly urban and fragmented society. Many Modernist works, like Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), are marked by the absence of Manuscript extracts from *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot any central, heroic figure, as the narrative and narrator are collapsed into a collection of disjointed fragments and overlapping voices. Modernist literature, moreover, often moves beyond the limitations of the Realist novel with a concern for larger factors such as social or historical change, and this is particularly

prominent in ‘stream of consciousness’ writing. Examples can be seen in the work of, among others, two exact contemporaries, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (1882-1941).

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

by Philip Glass Paris’ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, on May 29, 1913, was the setting of the most notorious event in the musical history of the 20th century – the world premiere of *The Rite of Spring*. Trouble began with the playing of the first notes, in the ultra-high register of the bassoon, as the renowned composer Camille Saint-Saëns conspicuously walked out, complaining loudly of the misuse of the instrument. Soon other protests became so loud that the dancers could barely hear their cues. Fights broke out in the audience. Thus, Modernism arrived in music, its calling card delivered by the 30-year-old Russian composer Igor Stravinsky.

Born in 1882 in Oranienbaum, Russia, a city southwest of St. Petersburg, Stravinsky was rooted in the nationalistic school that drew inspiration from Russia’s beautifully expressive folk music. His father was an opera singer who performed in Kyiv and St. Petersburg, but his greatest musical influence was his teacher, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. The colorful, fantastic orchestration that Stravinsky brought to his folk song-inspired melodies was derived from Rimsky-Korsakov.

But the primitive, offbeat rhythmic drive he added was entirely his own. The result was a music never before heard in a theatre or concert hall. In 1910 Serge Diaghilev, then director of the world-famous Ballets Russes, invited Stravinsky to compose works for his company’s upcoming season at the Paris Opera. *The Firebird*, the first to appear, was a sensation. *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* quickly followed. Soon Stravinsky’s audaciously innovative works confirmed his status as the leading composer of the day, a position he hardly relinquished until his death nearly 60 years later.

After leaving Russia, Stravinsky lived for a while in Switzerland and then moved to Paris. In 1939 he fled the war in Europe for the U.S., settling in Hollywood. In 1969 he moved to New York City. (The story goes that when asked why he made such a move at his advanced age, he replied,

“To mutate faster.”) Over the years, Stravinsky experimented with virtually every technique of 20th-century music, reinventing and personalizing each form while adapting the melodic styles of earlier eras to the new times. In the end, his musical voice always prevailed.