

Literary Texts:

Third year groups: 1-6

Lecture Three: Modernism in Literature

I. Definition:

As a term, Modernism has been defined by various scholars from different perspectives which made consensus on one major definition almost impossible. It is worth noting that **Modernist** is not synonymous to **modern** which characterises something in modern time (related to modernity). Modernist is ideological as it is related to artists' reaction to external circumstances after the WWI and to the inadequacy of realistic conventions in representing the apocalyptic vision that dominated the scene for years. Modernism is the artistic and literary reaction to previous literary traditions particularly to the nineteenth century realism. It is defined as follows:

Modernism is essentially post-Darwinian: it is a search to explain mankind's place in the modern

world, where religion, social stability and ethics are all called into question. This resulted in a fashion for experimentation, for 'the tradition of the new' as one critic, Harold Rosenberg, memorably put it. (The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland, 350)

Modernists sought to represent the human experience in giving more importance to **its interiority** and to **the workings of the mind** which gained importance after the publication of Freud's theory in addition to a portrayal of everyday life in fiction instead of the heroic as in epic or the private emotions as in lyric poetry. A deliberate change in **form and subject matter** led to a shift from idealising logical organisation and chronological plots to experimentation with form, use of universal mythology and fragmentation of place, time and the individual.

The workings of the unconscious mind become an important subject, and all traditional forms begin to lose their place: 'a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order' might, half-jokingly, sum this up. What went out was narrative, description, rational exposition; what emerged focused on stream of consciousness, images in poetry (rather than description or narration), a new use of universal myth, and a sense of fragmentation both of individuality and of such concepts as space and time. As such, it relates closely to Impressionism in the visual arts, and shares many structural features with the new medium of the cinema, which reached great heights of achievement and influence in the first decades of the twentieth century. (350)

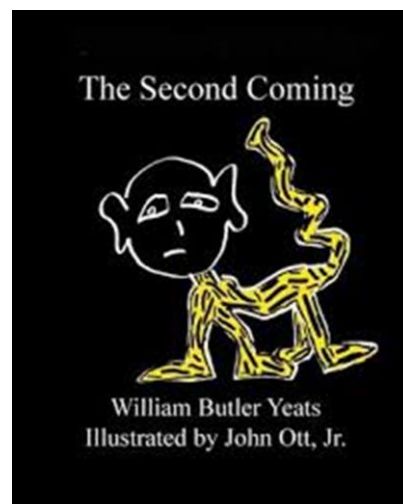
In a rejection of mimetic realism, figures such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were interested in setting new rules for literature's writing, aim and value. They did not create a homogenous movement, instead each one of them experimented to the point that some works were not given the merit they deserved.

There is no dispute over Woolf's status as a pioneer of modernist writing along with James Joyce, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Her experimentation with form and subject matter in fiction challenged the readers' anticipation and understanding of her works which, though complex, remain readable. She is one of the intellectuals who witnessed the rapid changes in the world at the turn of the Twentieth century. The political, social, economic and cultural changes (that were discussed in previous lectures) led to the spread of pessimism among intellectuals who lost faith in government, the church and society as the guardian of morality. The WWI aggravated the artists' anxiety and heightened their sense of

'cultural despair', hence, the portrayal of the war and its aftermath gained paramount importance in their works being poetic or fictional. For example, the world appears as a sterile society of spiritually hollow men in Eliot's "The Waste Land" and "a botched civilization" in Ezra Pound's view, while Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* shows the chaos and destruction the war brought to human lives. W. B. Yeats' Poem "The Second Coming" is reflective of an artist's vision that became influential and dense to the point that some of the poem's lines gained symbolic status in Western culture as a whole.

Extract from the Poem:

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,
W. B. Yeats "The Second Coming"



Examples of References:

- [Chinua Achebe](#)'s novel [Things Fall Apart](#) (1958)
- Robert B. Parker's novel [The Widening Gyre](#) (1983)
- [Harry Turtledove](#)'s novel [American Empire: The Center Cannot Hold](#)
- [Joan Didion](#)'s essay collection [Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#) (1968)
- the song "[Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#)" (which quotes or paraphrases almost all of the poem) by [Joni Mitchell](#) from her 1991 album [Night Ride Home](#);
- [When the Center Held](#), a 2018 memoir by [Donald Rumsfeld](#) of the [Gerald Ford](#) presidency.

The publication of the works of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Sir James Frazer raised many questions about human nature and existence, the fact that made the representation of the human mind and its workings a primary issue in writing literature. The

latter became elitist (addressed for the elite) as it was understood only by a limited class that had background knowledge of psychology, anthropology, mythology and sometimes aesthetics.

Consequences on Arts:

The immediate consequences of the changes that happened in the world at the beginning of the Twentieth century were

- **A reactionary ideology in the arts:** all modernist artists were hostile to what was regarded as mass/ popular culture (the arts that were created for the masses). They also reacted to industrial society that alienated them and to the collapse of civilisation that was brought by the WWI.
- **An attempt to experiment with form and content:** Modernist artists rejected the old conventions of realism in artistic representation. They intentionally broke with the accepted methods of representation in the arts that gave value to artistic creation depending on the level of resemblance between reality and the work that reflects it. For example, the

more a work is faithful to reality or life-like the more it was valued, but for modernists, all the aspects of existence in a moment of time must be represented. In literature, there was a shift from focusing on action, dialogue and external representation to using stream of consciousness to show the workings of mind and include the interiority of human experience. In other words, the inner lives of the characters become more important than what they say and do. In painting, cubism spread as an attempt to represent the three dimensions of an object on a two dimensional surface while Expressionism came after WWI.

Illustrations:

- The following tables show comparisons between realistic and modernist modes of representation in the arts:

<p>Literature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stream of consciousness • Universal mythology • Fragmentation of space and time • Imagism in poetry <p>Modernism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronological plot • Rational exposition • Description and Narrative • Dialogue and action <p>Realism</p>
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Table I: A Comparison between Realism and Modernism in Literature

<p>Painting</p>	 <p>PABLO PICASSO (1881-1973) 'Factory, Horta de Ebbo', 1909 (oil on canvas)</p> <p>Cubism</p>	 <p>John Constable, <i>The Hay Wain</i>, 1821, oil on canvas, 51-1/4 x 73 inches (National Gallery of Art, London)</p> <p>Realism</p>
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<p>Painting</p>	 <p>Max Beckmann (1927)</p> <p>Expressionism</p>	 <p>Christiaan Van Pol (HAARLEM 1752-1813 PARIS)</p> <p>Realism</p>
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Table II:A Comparison Between Realist and Modernist Paintings

Criticism of Modernism:

Modernism was criticised of being elitist and chaotic and many modernist writers faced obstacles in publishing their works which were beyond the capacities of the majority of readers. The modernists' innovative writings were understood only by readers who had knowledge of psychology, anthropology, mythology and sometimes aesthetics. Their works were not as successful as those written by

Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy who kept writing within the tradition. Some of the modernist texts were not understood by critics or even fellow modernist writers.

Examples:

- Virginia Woolf refused to publish James Joyce's *Ulysses* when she reviewed it for publication by her publishing house Hogarth Press. Later the work became regarded as one among the best works since Shakespeare.
- When T. S. Eliot published "The Waste Land", it was difficult for readers and critics as well; hence, for the first time in history a writer provides the public with footnotes that explain his poem.