

Modernism: a critical analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

T. S. Eliot did not invent modernism in literature, but his poem *The Waste Land* (1922) expresses more distinctly than anyone else what the modernist endeavor really was. More than a poem, it was an occasion, a cry that defined a moment in time, and which it is not possible to repeat. Eliot himself declared that he had moved on from the style of *The Waste Land* immediately after. Shortly after its publication he expressed in a private correspondence, “As for *The Waste Land*, that is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling toward a new form and style” (qtd. in Chinitz 69).

The Hollow Men (1926) is nothing as fragmentary, chaotic and nihilistic as is the 1922 poem. In *The Waste Land* we seem to hear an unalloyed expression of despair; the despair that purposeful art in no more possible in “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (qtd. in Sigg 182). Yet the poem is not a complete negation of art. It manages a sort of coherence towards the end, in which we may read a suggestion that art may still be possible amidst desolate meaninglessness of the modern age.

The First World War is the event that finally shattered the cozy certainties of the Victorian age. At a more protean level, it annulled the optimism of the humanist endeavor which gave rise to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the scientific world view. It is significant that the major part of this endeavor was carried out in art and literature. In the aftermath to the Great War came disillusionment, because it was widely perceived that progress did not bring peace but war – the most brutal and mindless sort. It was not just

corpses and rubble that littered Europe, but the Western psyche too was littered with rubble.

The Waste Land is essentially a collection of fragments from the tradition of literature. The ultimate statement made by Eliot is that there is no more meaning in which the artist can take his tradition and further it. Yet he cannot abandon the past either, for his identity is still contained within those fragments. “ These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” says the Fisher King, who is not able to redeem the wasteland that stretches before him (Eliot 69). This expresses the core sentiment of the poem, which is in the end a mere collection of literary fragments. It is a demonstration of what the function of the artist has become, for the message of Eliot is that the artist is indeed reduced to gathering debris from his cultural past.

Eliot’s poem is not meant to be imitated. Its function is to locate the spirit of the age and give it voice. So successful was it in this latter role that many of its literary features began to be adopted, especially so in the novel form, towards the creation of the modernist novel. The most common feature of this fiction is the dysfunctional and alienated protagonist in an urban setting who struggles against encroaching meaninglessness. Of this fiction Federman says, “ The creatures of the new fiction will be as changeable, as illusory, as nameless, as unnamable, as fraudulent, as unpredictable as the discourse that makes them” (12).

To render such a narrative effective novelists were soon employing a device known as “ stream of consciousness”. It sacrifices coherence for an effect which seems to suggest that we are privy to the unexpurgated thoughts and impressions of the protagonist. Ulysses by James Joyce is composed entirely I

this mode, and another novelist who use this method effectively is Virginia Woolf. Most often it is used for effect in novels which retain some meaningfulness, therefore are not entirely nihilistic. In such novels we identify the continuing search for possibilities in art which Eliot had instigated.

The novels of Franz Kafka use the conventional narrative voice, yet depict a world that is fragmented and devoid of meaning. The protagonist in *The Trial* wakes up one morning to discover that he is under arrest, subject to trial, but free to move about in the meantime. There is no immediate explanation of his wrong-doing, and none is forthcoming as the trial grinds on. Not only self-preservation, the protagonist is also seeking for meaning. But the only meaning that emerges is that ‘the system’ has decided that he is “the accused”, which has set into motion a process whose eventual and inevitable outcome is a brutal execution.

Everybody seems to be helpless before the system, both friend and foe. They cannot effect its course, and neither can they extract meaning from it. The state embodies logic, of which Kafka says, “Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living” (Kafka 263). Instead of war, Kafka’s focus is on the bureaucratization of the modern state, but evokes the same sense of despair and the helplessness of the individual before greater and inexplicable forces, the unmistakable stamp of modernism.

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway is also considered a modernist novel. Though more famed for his hard-edged realism, in this last effort before his death Hemingway has created a powerful parable of futility. Santiago is a Cuban fisherman who has met bad luck, having not caught a

fish for 84 days. On the 85th day he becomes reckless and ventures further into the sea than anyone else before. He hooks a marlin of such tremendous size that it hauls Santiago and his boat around sea for an entire day.

The old fisherman is soon locked in an epic battle of strength, guile and wits with the marlin, and expends every last bit of himself for over three days of struggle. Bloodied and drained, he has his catch in the end, which he begins to drag shoreward. But sharks then fall upon the marlin, and the old man cannot battle them off with his harpoon. Though futile, Hemingway suggests that the old man's struggle has transcendental value.

He makes frequent comparisons between the old man and Christ, and describes the old man in awe of the nobility of the marlin, even while locked in a life and death battle with it. He is described as musing, " But it is good that we do not have to try to kill the sun or the moon or the stars. It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers" (Hemingway 75). In its tenor of unremitting futility the novel is modernist. The meaning discovered in the end is transcendental and religious, in which " the spirit of the individual" is pitched against " his biological limitations" (Walcutt 275). This is significant when we recall that Eliot too discovered religion later in life.

In conclusion, in his poem *The Waste Land* Eliot expressed a feeling that conventional motivation of the artist was no longer relevant in the modern age, because the aspirations of the previous age, that which had motivated writers and artists in the Victorian era, had been rendered null and void. But at the same time it initiated a new quest in literature, which became a movement known as modernism, and especially employed by novelists. In their novels, which mostly emphasized the meaninglessness of modern

existence, the modernist novelist nevertheless tends to discover transcendental or religious meaning.

Works Cited

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