

Modernism in two poems by marianne moore

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Introduction

" The most serious poetry today is still modernist. Modernism in literature is not easily summarized, but the key elements are experimentation, anti-realism, individualism, and a stress on the cerebral rather than emotive aspects" (Wills 24). To some extent, Marianne Moore's poems *The Fish* and *A Grave* really follow the discussed modernist principles, but it is difficult to agree that Moore completely denies emotiveness and replaces it with modernist cerebral attributes. As a result, it is possible to assume that *The Fish* and *A Grave* are the two examples of non-traditional modernist writing, in which experimentation, realism, and individualism are combined with unusual writing techniques, complicated poem structure, and extreme emotiveness.

To start with, *The Fish* and *A Grave* display vivid similarities in the tone of writing, and the use of similar images. " The barnacles which encrust the side of the wave" in *The Fish* are evidently similar and are almost parallel to " the blades of the oars / moving together like the feet of water-spiders" in *A Grave*: the unpleasant and almost tragic character of water in both poems is critical to understanding the modernist implications of both poetic works. However, in order to completely realize the scope and meaning of Moore's modernist verses, we should analyze each poem separately.

" Repeated / evidence has proved that it can live / on what cannot revive / its youth. The sea grows old in it" (Moore 32). This is where we face the complicatedness and incomprehension of modernist poetry. What did Moore want to say with this passage? Is it that she imagined nature in its full purposefulness which was not characteristic of traditional classical poetry? It

is more probable that a thirty-year-old poet was striving to express her sympathies with the nature, which she persistently viewed as deeply abused.

The description of nature's violence, its wholeness, the sea as the source of physical injury and actually a threat to a human life - these are the signs of modernism in Moore's writing. Having depicted nature as the threat of violence, Moore risked causing misinterpretation of the literary and sensual implications in *The Fish*. For many of those who have read *The Fish*, violence in poetry may initially seem inappropriate and confusing. Yet this is not a reader's mistake: Moore was really trying to show the nature in its power which bordered on violence against human beings. "The water drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge / of the cliff", and the "external marks of abuse" (Moore 32) is the combination of nature's violence and the violence against nature; it is the combination of the two incompatible elements, which is the distinguishing feature of poetic modernism.

The modernism of *The Fish* is in that Moore was actually trying to combine the incompatible images, allusions, implications, and ideas. The initially incompatible conjunction of accidental and purposeful is another distinguishing feature of modernism in Moore's poem. Criticizing Moore's works, Heuving writes that "it should not be surprising that 'the chasm side is dead', but if the chasm side is dead, ravaged as it clearly has been by the force of water it contains, how does it live on the barnacles that adhere to its surface? Why does the sea, clearly the most active and powerful force in this scene, grow old within this teeming shelter?" (29)

Moore neither answers these questions, nor provides the reader with a single opportunity to find these answers anywhere else within the poem. The

reader finds himself in the slow motion of the undersea world, with which he is hardly familiar, and which seems even more threatening and complicated through Moore's descriptions: " All / external / marks of abuse are present on this / defiant edifice" (Moore 32).

Moore writes her poem in a way to create an image of sinister beauty of the sea she describes. The rhythm of her poetic lines does not break the smooth and threatening movement of the undersea. The eight stanzas of the poem display the evident and easily noticeable repetition of the consonants, as if waves create a cyclic sound pattern. " Whereupon the stars, / pink, / rice-grains, ink-/ bespattered jelly fish, crabs like green / lilies and submarine / toadstools, slide each on the other" (Moore 32).

While the sea is the central image in *The Fish*, *A Grave* is the expression of Moore's impossibility to see this sea. Some " man looking into the sea" seems to close " the view from those who have as much right to it as / you have it to yourself" (Moore 49). *A Grave* is frequently interpreted as the expression of Moore's feminism: " Moore calls attention to two difficulties here: the problem of seeking through a man, including a man's viewpoint, and the related problem of establishing herself as a centered speaker when she cannot stand 'in the middle of this' (Wills 110). However, modernism of *A Grave* is not in its feminist expressions, but rather in the opacity of its meanings and the confusion of various symbolic implications similar to those in *The Fish*.

Modernism in poetry is invariably linked to difficulties of interpretation, and these interpretation difficulties and ambiguities are evident in both *The Fish* and *A Grave*. Moore has been extremely individual in her modernist

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expressions, and the poetic structure of *A Grave* again suggests that poetic modernism may and probably should exist in the area of extreme emotions. The sense of crisis makes both poems similarly modernist: the description of nature and its scenes are central to both poems, and it is very probable that Moore seeks resolution of her crisis in those natural sceneries.

" The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx - beautiful / under networks of foam, / and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the / seaweed" (Moore 49). The two poems seem to create a single line of nature's threat and power. This " violent" line of nature is developed in *The Fish*, where Moore emphasizes the threat of nature towards a man; this line of nature's abuse reaches its climax in *A Grave*, where Moore asserts that " the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave" (Moore 49).

The rhythm of Moore's *A Grave* is another display of modernism in her poetry. Moore seems to treat her rhythms and stanzas with almost painful desire to keep the rhyme. The reader is frequently obsessed by an impression that the rhythm of the poem prevails over its meaning. Yet, modernist writings are traditionally characterized by unusual and often difficult rhymes. The combination of complex stanzas with complicated meanings and literary implications makes certain works of modernist writing completely incomprehensible.

This is not the case with Marianne Moore. Each line makes the rhymes enervated, and creates an unusual combination of the sea's threat and immobility: " the birds swim through the air at top sped, emitting cat-calls [...] and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of / bell-buoys, / advances as usual, looking as if it wee not that ocean in which /

dropped things are bound to sink" (Moore 49). The heavy contrast in this passage creates the impression of a deceptive revelation: one might think that the sea and its threats were unreal and were produced by an ill mind.

However, it is a surface feeling: a Man and the sea are real. The word "consciousness" with which Moore concludes her poem, is the ultimate expression of her position against the described Man and against the sea as the grave for humanity. " Moore reserves her climactic position for the quality of attentiveness to self and to 'other' which is her highest aesthetic and moral value, while giving her sea the last word, the last hiss" (Martin 63).

Conclusion

Poetic modernism was traditionally viewed as the combination of several critical attributes: poetic individualism, self-expression, complicatedness of writing, and emotional indifference. Moore has completely denied these approaches: poetic modernism cannot live without emotions. On the contrary, Moore's modernism in itself stems from the climactic emotions the poet wanted to express and to deliver to her reader. Poetic modernism of Marianne Moore is something more than the self-expression and the description of individualistic regressions. In Moore's hands modernism becomes global, challenging, and almost revolutionary. For many of us the sea and its threats will look as the end of everything, A Grave for humanity; yet, in Moore's vision it is only the beginning of everything that is meaningful to a person.

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