

Techniques and concerns of modernism



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Modernism as a movement is an artistic reaction to the conventional art and literature of mid- to late 19th century. World War I introduced advanced technology and the introduction of industrialisation provoked Modernist writers to express their concerns about the changing society and the complexities it of through their works.

Urban alienation, the meaning of life as well as inner psychological perspectives are some issues explored through the experimentation of new literary techniques as the progression from the Realism and Romanticism of the 19th century called for more realistic conventions in literature to allow writers express their values concerning the changing world.

The poem ‘ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ by T. S. Eliot and ‘ Hills Like White Elephants’ by Ernest Hemingway are two texts which highlight the concerns of rapid industrialisation and values such as sex before marriage. Modernist writers expressed their opinions through the use of techniques such as stream of consciousness, non-linear structure, defamiliarisation, impressionism and symbolism. The rapidly advancing world produced concentrated urban areas and the difficulties felt by an individual through the changing perspectives from community to individualism resulted in isolation.

Through a ‘ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, the dramatic monologue of Prufrock provides readers with Eliot’s perspective of the rapidly changing world through the inner consciousness of an individual. The simile “... the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherised upon a table”

reflects the persona's hesitation at making decisions and paralysis as he fears the outcome of his decisions could be damaging to his self-esteem.

This indicates that as a result of the First World War, individuals had lost self-confidence and became less romantic. The anaphora " After the sunsets... ... After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor-" demonstrates Prufrock's inability to find the purpose of living and as he resigns himself to the fact that he will " grow old" and " wear the bottom of my trousers rolled" because of his lacking appearance and inability to make decisions. The importance stressed on his appearance as he constantly refers to it as being lacking, depicts the shallow values of the 20th century. The imagery of " half-deserted streets... ...of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" and " streets that follow like a tedious argument" depicts the effects of industrialisation on the surroundings of an individual as stagnant and fractured.

The persona's reaction to this defamiliarisation is portrayed through the personification of the fog as a cat " lingered upon the pools that stand in drains" and identifies with Prufrock's state of mind of his paralysing indecisiveness where he cannot enter the room and start socialising as he feels inadequate and eventually chooses to " curl once about the house" and become alone once more. The dialogue by Prufrock, " That is not it at all, that is not what I meant, at all" illustrates his frustrations at being misunderstood.

Although there are people around him, they are encased in buildings and participating in social gatherings and Eliot emulates the modern man's

inability to adapt after the Great War in the characterisation of Prufrock, presenting a shallow and isolated world where the inability of people to communicate with one another results in urban alienation. The isolation felt in this desolate world through the use of the subjective perspective on Prufrock's inner psychological reality provides the audience with an understanding of the industrialisation of a war torn world.

Due to the need to prove the effects of the harshness of reality, the modernist concerns of the post-World War I period resulted in changing views on traditional Victorian values and a loss of ontological ground. The Modernist movement saw a break from traditional Victorian values such as having sex after marriage and the perception of sex before marriage and its consequences which is illustrated through ' Hills Like White Elephants'. Hemingway explores the complex thoughts of the characters Fig and the man through non-linear structure of dialogue.

The process of abortion is new to the woman who tries to receive reassurance from the man but through stream of consciousness, it is apparent that the man is all too accepting of the abortion and desensitised to it " They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural. " Hemingway portrays the man as an insensitive human as he continues to proclaim that the abortion is nothing and that he will love her regardless of her choice. The human condition is also explored in ' Hills Like White Elephant" where the meaning of life is questioned and freedom from the burdensome pregnancy.

Hemingway reflects that society has become numb to issues such as abortion, hinting that unwanted pregnancies as a product of sex before

marriage prevailed in the post-World War I period. The portrayal of the couple's relationship and reference to knowing "lots of people that have done it" signifies that having sex before marriage was accepted and common in the 20th century, contrary to the Victorian value of sex after marriage. Through the symbolic use of landscape, Hemingway successfully portrays the advancing society and its complex effects on individuals.

The allusion of "hills like white elephants" to the situation Fig faces provides a sense of ambiguity and encourages an active reader reaction. The euphemism describes the unwanted pregnancy and the tone which surrounds it is negative as the couple are contemplating abortion which reflects that having a child before marriage was inconvenient. Abortion is not mentioned, in order to provide a more realistic view on the subject and the open ending represents the truthful 'reality' of Modernism.

This is to counter the closed endings of Realism and Romanticism writings where issues are resolved unrealistically as Hemingway wished to describe the emotions and thoughts of an individual when dealing with a complex subject such as abortion. The image of hills "white in the sun and the country was brown and dry" symbolises the unwanted pregnancy among the war torn land. The barren background on the man's side and flourishing background on Fig's side juxtaposes one another and represents the outcomes of the choice Fig makes.

Hemingway proposes the meaning of life as black and white as one choice would affect many people. Through Fig and the man, Hemingway successfully depicts the changing world of the 20th century as one where

values and traditions were defied and as a result of the war and damages it brought onto individuals, it is apparent that the meaning of life was questioned as was urban alienation. The reoccurrence of alcohol symbolises the characters' desire to avoid talking directly about the abortion and their desire to forget about the "white elephant".

Hemingway comments on the indulgence of alcohol in situations where one questions the meaning of life and isolates one's self from the world as well as the backlash of poor judgement. He portrays the challenge of societal expectations of the 19th century in the post war period where love and lust ran rampant and alcohol was used to obscure the pain caused by a lapse of judgement. The non-linear structure both texts effectively demonstrates the feeling of being lost and the response an individual has to the pressures of the aftereffects of the war and progression of industrialisation.

Through the anaphora "There will be time, there will be time... .. there will be time to murder and create..." in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Eliot presents the difficulties to become productive as the persona procrastinates to evade the responsibility one felt after the disasters of the First World War. The belief that there is more time consolidates the notion that the war brought a sense of loss of being and inability to find courage to achieve their original goals and to adapt to their new surroundings.

Furthermore, the dialogue between the couple in 'Hills Like White Elephants' illustrates the indecisiveness and inability to act of the couple. They are afraid of the future and Hemingway expresses the concerns about the elusive future of a devastated post war world through his short story. 'The

'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Hills Like White Elephants' utilise stream of consciousness, defamiliarisation and non-linear structure to convey to the audience the sense of urban alienation present in the early 20th century as a result of industrialisation.

World War I provoked the contemplation of an individual's inner psychological reality and the meaning of life and prompted individuals to turn to procrastination in order to convince themselves of their position in the world. Eliot and Hemingway illustrate the environmental and psychological concerns of a changing world through challenging the established realist ideals in order to show their perception of the rapidly advancing world.