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Although generally called a movement, it is more valid to see modernism as an international body of literature characterized by a new self-consciousness about modernity and by radical formal experimentation. Several literary movements and styles, notably Imagism and Vorticism, were fostered within modernism, which flourished from around 1890 until 1940. There was also a period of so-called “ high modernism,” 1920-5.

Generally, modernists were driven by the belief that the assurances once provided by religion, politics, or society no longer sufficed. This belief intensified after World War I, when it seemed to many that history itself was coming to an end and that modern life was horrific, chaotic, and ultimately futile. Some modernists, notably T. S. Eliot, expressed a deep sense of loss and despair. However, others responded with a fresh sense of both the freedom and the responsibilities of the artist in a new age. Ezra Pound in particular envisaged the possibility of a new society to which artists would contribute meaningfully.

Many modernists shared an ambitious, aspirational belief in the role and place of the artist in contemporary life, believing that art had replaced religion in providing coherence, guidance, and insight into the human condition. For some writers this meant a fresh sense of the possibilities of ancient myths, and a reevaluation of the contemporary meanings of myth was typical of high modernism. Others, especially Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Ernest Hemingway, were less convinced by the relevance of myth, believing that the creation of meaning and coherence was the task of the writer, performed in opposition to false and damaging external impositions of order. This overall sense of the serious

responsibility of the artist helps to account for the large projects in which many modernists engaged, for instance the long poem or the epic.

The modernist period also saw a radical experimentation in literary form and expression. In part this developed in response to new insights provided by recently established disciplines such as psychology. This was certainly true of the stream-of-consciousness technique, and in many respects modernist prose narrative begins with the complex later novels of Henry James.

Experimentation was also partly a response to the new forms of expression that were developing in painting, sculpture, and music; another of modernism's characterizing features was the intense interaction between literature and the other arts.

A further reason for modernist experimentation lay in technological innovations, such as the telephone and the cinema, which were changing the forms and the very meaning of communication. New forms were needed, as was the reinvigoration of established forms. Pound's famous exhortation "Make it new" is rightly considered one of modernism's mottoes, but as well as demanding novelty he was urging writers to apply new energy to established forms. A considerable amount of Pound's earlier poetry was written in antiquated forms as part of his attempt to revitalize and update tradition. At the same time, most modernists believed that literature should challenge and unsettle readers, and much modernist work may be demanding and difficult, alluding to a wide range of learning.

American modernism was broadly of two kinds. One was cosmopolitan, and created by expatriate writers, especially Pound, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886-

1961), Stein, and Eliot. Based in urban centers such as London and Paris, these writers sought to internationalize literature, often making powerful connections between their work and a broad range of past literature. Generally, they had little belief in the usefulness (or existence) of an American literary tradition. There was also a group of non-expatriate American modernists, even though several of them did spend time abroad. Stevens, Frost, Williams, Marianne Moore (1887-1972), F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Hemingway developed a modernist literature that was connected to American traditions, and the heavy concentration on region and place in the work of Stevens, Frost, Faulkner, and Williams marked them as radically different from Pound, Stein, and Eliot. What all the modernists shared was a belief in literature's importance in the modern world, and the need for it to be continually vital. Although its origins were European, naturalism was an important movement in American literature from the 1890s until the 1920s.

While it is strongly associated with realism, in the shared emphasis on depicting surface reality, naturalism is more than a literary technique, involving as it does the philosophy of determinism. Naturalism is antiromantic in emphasizing the limited ability of humans to impose will upon their own destiny, and also in devaluing the imagination's embellishment of reality. For the naturalist, it is the duty of the writer to present to the reader reality without illusion, to offer a scientific, detached view of it rather than to adorn or mislead or simply please the reader. The writer is also seen to have a diagnostic function, scrutinizing the ills of society, and the scientific element of naturalism has its origins in the

theories of Darwin and, after Marx, in the development of the social sciences during the nineteenth century. American naturalism developed broadly in two directions, one examining the social and political dynamics of American urban life and the other examining the biological aspects of deterministic thought. The influence of Marx is frequently evident in the former branch and that of Darwin in the second.

This diagnostic element of naturalism derives directly from the French novelist Émile Zola, the most important figure in the development of literary naturalism. American writers, notably Stephen Crane, endorsed this view of the writer's responsibility to analyze, and Crane's novel *MAGGIE, A GIRL OF THE STREETS* (1893) is a classic of American naturalism. In it he shows that “environment is a tremendous thing in the world, and frequently shapes lives regardless.” The novel presents the process of the disruption of Maggie's family, her descent into prostitution, and her eventual suicide, and considers this process as an inevitable consequence of the limited choices offered by the poverty of her New York environment. *MAGGIE* exemplifies much American naturalistic writing in its use of an urban setting, its refusal to condemn or sentimentalize Maggie's prostitution, its depiction of slum life, and its objective focus on scandalous or immoral subjects. The supposedly immoral nature of naturalistic writing should not be underestimated; as in France, much naturalistic writing in the United States was considered scandalous and liable to censorship or prohibition. Although Crane later moved away from classic naturalism, his work maintained its diagnostic anti-illusionist element.

The naturalistic emphasis on how economic and social forces determine human behavior was developed by novelists such as W. D. Howells (1837-1920), Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, while elements of naturalism are present in the works of Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) and John Steinbeck (1902-68), who both brought a progressive socialist political commitment to the movement. The novels of Dreiser, notably *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY* (1925), and of Norris (*MCTEAGUE* [1899], *THE OCTOPUS* [1901], *VANDOVER AND THE BRUTE* [1895/1914]) were particularly significant in exploring the fate of the individual during the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the United States; naturalist writing is closely linked to American social change during a period of dramatic capitalist growth and the rise of big business. Social Darwinism forms an important part of naturalism at the end of the 19th century.

The deterministic concern with biological forces is generally less evident in American writing than it is elsewhere, although it emerges in the 1890s novels of Mark Twain (especially *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON* [1894]) and in some women's writing. For example, in spite of the romantic tradition in which she wrote, Kate Chopin explored naturalistic ideas. This is especially so in *THE AWAKENING* (1899), in which she expresses through the character Dr. Mandelet the naturalist view that romantic love is an illusion damaging to women's social status since it determines for them the biological role of motherhood.

The illusion of love, he says, is “ a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race.” In spite of this, Chopin's heroine, Edna Pontellier, maintains a romantic view of experience and her suicide, in sharp contrast to <https://assignbuster.com/modernism-case-essay-sample/>

that of Crane's *Maggie*, is a triumphant expression of individual will over circumstance. Other writers associated with naturalism include Jack London (1876-1916), who often explored the Darwinian contiguity between humans and animals and how the otherwise buried animalistic survival instinct surfaces in extreme circumstances. This is exemplified in *THE SEA-WOLF* (1904), but is frequently a theme in London's Klondike stories, and distinctions between human and animal behavior were often blurred in his writing, as in *THE CALL OF THE WILD* (1903) and *WHITE FANG* (1906).

Although naturalism was most influential in the period 1890-1925, aspects of it survived into modernism; Hemingway's early work, for instance, often uses the naturalistic concept of the individual who is being tested by extreme circumstance and learning to live without self-delusion, and realist writers such as Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) and Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) made use of naturalistic idioms in their analyses of human motivation and circumstance. Postmodernism

Variously defined, "postmodernism" can refer to a historical period that began in the 1940s, a style of literature, philosophy, art, and architecture, or the situation of Western society in a late capitalist or postcapitalist age.

The French theorist Jean-François Lyotard succinctly defined postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives"; that is, a skepticism toward the "grand narratives" that seek to explain and plot human life and history.

Literary postmodernism is generally characterized by features such as: a mixing of styles ("high" and "low," for example) in the same text; discontinuity of tone, point of view, register, and logical sequence;

apparently random unexpected intrusions and disruptions in the text; a self-consciousness about language and literary technique, especially concerning the use of metaphor and symbol, and the use of self-referential tropes. Even though the writers most often associated with postmodernism may deal with serious themes, their work often has absurd, playful, or comic aspects, and sometimes makes special use of parody and pastiche and of references to other texts and artifacts.

References:

The American writers most typically termed postmodernist are Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), William S. Burroughs (1914-97), John Ashbery (b. 1927), Adrienne Rich (b. 1929), John Barth (b. 1930), Donald Barthelme (1931-89), Robert Coover (b. 1932), Richard Brautigan (1933-84), Thomas Pynchon, James Tate (b. 1943), Leslie Marmon Silko, and Kathy