

The age of modernism: experimentation and individualism



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Modernism was a movement that formed at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted roughly 65 years. Cultural shocks, such as World War I, instigated the era of Modernism. While this war was meant to end all wars, people could not fathom that such an event was actually taking place, and the disastrous state of humanity that it revealed. After World War II followed within the span of a single generation, the morale and peace of Western civilization was profoundly shocked and dismantled. Discontentment led to new forms of thinking, art and literature. As a result, the Modernism movement was birthed, marked by an abrupt and unforeseen departure from inherited ways of living and traditional perspectives of the world as a means of coping with such emotional, mental and physical upheaval.

Modernism came forth as a protest against the reign of established custom. In its denouncement of “instrumental reason and market culture,” modernism set forth patterns that would shatter the status quo while providing a medium through which individuals could process and make use of the unanticipated emotions that a series of cultural shocks had stirred within (Armstrong 4). It was a way of discovering one’s identity in the midst of unbearable instability and inconceivable change, along with the demand for conformity in the name of congruity. Modernism was a valiant attempt to create a safe place for “individuality, creativity and aesthetic value in an increasingly homogenous and bourgeois world” (Armstrong 4). The spirit of modernism can frequently be likened with “cultural despair,” which sees the individual as trapped into “a world of inner freedom” (Armstrong 15). Such notions testify to the modernist intention to separate from the past while

denouncing outmoded traditions that no longer suited the era of technology and worldwide violence.

Experimentation became highly desirable and instrumental to self-discovery, while individualism was prized above all else. Ironically, this central theme of experimentation and individualism are what make the entire literary field of Modernism quite cohesive in intent and theme amongst different authors and artist. Writers never simply fell into modernism in their work; they did so consciously and deliberately. As a result, what brought all of them together was the joint desire to question and reinvent traditional art forms. Such innovators included Waldo Pierce in painting, Gertrude Stein in literature, Isadora Duncan in dance, Igor Stravinsky in music, and Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture. For example, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he writes: "A soft qualm regret, flowed down his backbone, increasing. Will happen, yes. Prevent. Useless: can't move. Girl's sweet light lips. Will happen too. He felt the flowing qualm spread over him. Useless to move now. Lips kissed, kissing kissed. Full gluey woman's lips" (Joyce 65). Here we see a deep focus onto the inner self and the consciousness of being, as shown in the sensual experience of hesitancy and desire for the kiss of a woman. The stream of consciousness structure of the book lends to the experimental nature of Modernism in literature, while altering the entire nature of novel writing for generations to come. The wayward direction of the novel permits the appropriate amount of confusion for the reader, who is forced to question even the most basic aspects of a novel. The emphasis is therefore less about proper form and structure, and more an accurate, experiential exploration of the inner-workings of human consciousness.

In another example, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* exemplifies a deficiency in plot and a departure from traditional narrative form. This defiance of classic standards demonstrates the modernist's general removal from the past while setting forth a new path of absurdism, surrealism, and existentialism. For instance, Lucky begins a verbose, seemingly unending diatribe: " Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda..." (Beckett 1). The lack of cohesiveness and the absurd nature creates the same jolting impetus that first spurred the Modernist way of creating. Whereas the Romantic era paid an almost religious-like reverence for nature, Modernism almost depended upon the decay of the natural world and the increasing isolation of the individual to create the literature that it did. The sterility of modern society in fact catalyzed the experimental and groundbreaking new forms of art and literature.

As a series of cultural travesties rendered Western civilization completely battered and confused, the age of Modernism came forth to provide an avenue for strength, resilience introspection, and unique expression. New forms of literary communication were built, carrying within them the desire to create unforeseen mediums of self-expression. Creative impulses were favored in lieu of the machinery of modern society, as the mind turned inward and attempted to express the language of consciousness. Rather than adorn their work with ornate words or perfect artistic form, they chose

to challenge the known and call forth the true consciousness and inner genius of the individual. Coping with a newfound sense of loss and tragedy also spurred the creative vision. Ultimately, Modernists understood that truth was relative, and that knowing was truly knowable; as a result, the in-flux nature of reality provided them the appropriate backdrop to experiment and express freely while being soberly aware of the fragility of modern day systems supporting their very existence.