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Drama

Modernism

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Modernism

Movement Origin 1900

‘‘On or about December 1910 human nature changed.’’ The great modernist writer Virginia Woolf wrote this in her essay ‘‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’’ in 1924. ‘‘All human relations shifted,’’ Woolf continued, ‘‘and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.’’ This intentionally provocative statement was hyperbolic in its pinpointing of a date, but almost anyone who looks at the evolution of Western culture must note a distinct change in thought, behavior, and cultural production beginning sometime in the late nineteenth century and coming to fruition sometime around the Second World War. This change, whether in art, technology, philosophy or human behavior, is generally called Modernism. Modernism like Romanticism, designates the broad literary and cultural movement that spanned all of the arts and even spilled into politics and philosophy. Like Romanticism, Modernism was highly varied in its manifestations between the arts and even within each art. The dates when Modernism flourished are in dispute, but few scholars identify its genesis as being before 1860 and World War II is generally considered to mark an end of the movement’s height. Modernist art initially began in Europe’s capitals, primarily London, Milan, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and especially Paris; it spread to the cities of the United States and South America after World War I; by the 1940s, Modernism had thoroughly taken over the American and Modernism European academy, where it was challenged by Postmodernism in the 1960s. Modernism’s roots are in the rapidly changing technology of the late nineteenth century and in the theories of such late nineteenth-century thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche. Modernism influenced painting first (Impressionism and Cubism are forms of Modernism), but in the decade before World War I such writers as Ezra Pound and James Joyce translated the advances of the visual arts into literature. Such characteristically modernist techniques as stream-of-consciousness narration and allusiveness, by the late 1930s, spilled into popular writing and became standard. The movement’s concerns were with the accelerating pace of society toward destruction and meaninglessness. In the late 1800s many of society’s certainties were undermined. Marx demonstrated that social class was created, not inherent; Freud reduced human

individuality to an instinctive sex drive; Darwin provided fossil evidence that the Earth was much older than the estimate based on scripture; and Nietzsche argued that even the most deeply held ethical principles were simply constructions. Modernist writers attempted to come to terms with where humanity stood after its cornerstones had been pulverized. The modernists sifted through the shards of the past looking for what was valuable and what could inspire construction of a new society.

In many ways, Ezra Pound was the father of literary Modernism.

THEMES

Technology

In very real terms, the entire world and the way that humans understood that world changed between 1860 (when the modernist period is generally understood to have begun) and 1940. In 1860 the idea of traveling at a mile a minute was but a dream, as was the notion off light for human beings. The photograph was new; moving pictures, much less moving pictures that talked, were only fantasies. Electrical signals being sent through wires was a possible dream, but the idea that voices could be transmitted was fantastic. The idea that voices could be transmitted without wires, through the air, was utterly unreasonable. In 1940 the world was a different place. Machines allowed people to see moving, talking pictures; to travel at more than one hundred miles an hour; to fly through the air; to transmit both voices and images without wires; to talk, in real time, with someone at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Humans relied on machines to a much greater extent than they ever had. It is hard today to conceive of a world without powered machines, but in 1860 many people in the United States lived their entire lives without ever encountering a powered machine. By the 1940s machines had made it possible to communicate or travel—or destroy—with much greater speed and efficiency than anyone had ever dreamed in 1860. The modernist writers, almost as a rule, feared the new technology and left it out of their writing. Joyce set his masterpiece *Ulysses* in 1904, before motorcars had become widespread. Eliot and Pound move easily between historical periods but rarely mention the technological advances that had permeated all aspects of urban life by 1920. Rather, they look back to the

classical or medieval or Renaissance periods, fearing that dependence upon machines will cloud their minds, make them less able to understand what is truly important about being human. The only modernist writer who really engaged with technology, in fact, is the Italian futurist writer Filippo Marinetti. Marinetti was a Milanese who came to London to perform spoken-word pieces that celebrated machines. The glory of airplanes, cars, factories, and machine guns was always the subject of Marinetti's verse. Blinded by his fascination with the clean efficiency of machines, Marinetti ended up advocating the violence of World War I and, in the mid-1920s, became an apologist for Mussolini.

Modernism evolved as an artistic reaction to dramatic changes in politics, culture, society, and technology. The two world wars of the twentieth century had an enormous effect on the modernist movement. Many critics feel that the movement hit its height just after World War I and was effectively killed by World War II. What did writers of the modernist movement do during the war years? In addition to being a reaction to changes in technology and politics, Modernism was a reaction to important developments in Western thought. Dozens of philosophers and scholars of the late nineteenth century rejected the accepted explanations about the world and proposed their own. Of these, the thinkers who had the greatest effect on Modernism were the economist Karl Marx, the naturalist Charles Darwin, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. Although he did not actually invent the discipline, Freud is considered the father of psychoanalysis. His writings propose a three-part model of the psyche consisting of the id (or the primitive drives), the ego (the sense of the self), and the superego (or the moral lessons and codes of behavior people internalize).

The "Unreal City"

In ''The Waste Land'' Eliot describes London as an ''Unreal City,'' a city through which shades of the dead troop over the bridges. Modernism was the first literary movement to take urban life as a given, as a form of experience that was categorically different from any other kind

of life. The city, where technology and masses of people and anonymity come together, became the master trope of Modernism itself.

Alienation

Alienation is defined as the sense of being alien, or of not belonging, to one's own milieu. It can also mean separation from something. If the city is the master trope (or image) of Modernism, alienation is its master theme. Almost all modernist writing deals with alienation in some form. The primary kind of alienation that Modernism depicts is the alienation of one sensitive person from the world. The stream-of-consciousness technique of narration is particularly well suited for this because readers can see the inner feelings of a person and witness his or her essential self along with the actions of the world outside. Woolf's heroines are doubly alienated from the world because of their status as women; because of their sex, they are not allowed to participate in the world of politics, education, or economics. Eliot's narrators (most notably Prufrock in ''The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'') are confronted by a world that is just broken shards of a discarded whole; everyone else seems to walk through the world calmly but they cannot. And for Ezra Pound, it is the world itself that has been alienated, by the forces of greed, from what should truly be historical heritage. The Presence of the Past Surrounded by the debris of all of the smashed certainties of the past, modernist writers looked at the contemporary world as a directionless place, without center or certainty. These past certainties, although oppressive and constructed on specious values, were at least some kind of foundation for the world. The modernist age set out to break apart these certainties; World War I then finished the job and horrified the world by demonstrating what humanity was capable of. Writers in the modernist age often felt that they were at the end of history. Because of this, modernist poems and novels often incorporate and mix together huge swaths of history.

STYLE

Narration Modernism sought to accurately portray the world not as it is but as humans actually experience it. Modernist literature, then, relied especially on advances in narrative technique, for narration (a voice speaking) is an essential way to convey the perceived or

experienced world. Interestingly, the narrative techniques in modernist poetry and modernist fiction illustrate the same ideas about experience, but they do so in very different ways. Modernist fiction tends to rely on the stream-of-consciousness or ‘‘interior monologue’’ techniques. This kind of narration purports to record the thoughts as they pass through a narrator’s head. The unpredictable connections that people make between ideas demonstrate something about them, as do the things they try to avoid thinking about. Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, by contrast, did not delve deeply into the individual consciousness. Rather, they attempted to model the fragmented nature of minds and civilization in their narratives.

Allusion

An allusion is a brief reference to a person, place, thing, idea or language that is not actually present. Because of modernist theories about the omnipresence of the past, allusions are difficult to avoid in modernist literature. Joyce, Eliot, and Pound—the three authors generally acknowledged as the leaders of the modernist movement in English—included allusion as perhaps the central formal device in their writing. The past is everywhere in the writing of these three, and indeed this is the case with most of the other modernist writers. But it is in Joyce, Eliot, and Pound that the allusion is particularly important. Indeed, it is essentially impossible to understand their work without tracking down their more important allusions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I Modernism took place over many decades, and almost no facet of life in the West was not profoundly transformed by the changes that took place between 1860 and 1939. But if Modernism revolved around one historical event, it was the unthinkable catastrophe that became known later as World War I. In the years leading up to World War I, the modernist writers thought of themselves as rebels, ruthlessly breaking apart all of the societal certainties of the Victorian age. The American modernists sneered at American middle-class acquisitiveness, while

the British modernists chafed at the smug, self-assured conservatism of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Modernist writers broke convention by writing frankly about sex, by insulting religion, and by arguing passionately that the poor were not poor simply because of moral depravity. By breaking these societal taboos, modernist writers found themselves cast in the role of rebels, pariahs, even dangerous men and women. And such writers as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis began to believe their own hype about being dangerous to society. The coming of World War I fulfilled the modernist predictions of a coming fragmentation and destruction beyond anything they could have imagined. The war itself came upon an unsuspecting Europe almost in a way that the modernists might have envisioned, for it was society's faith in its own structures that ended up destroying it.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Modernism did not exist until it was almost dead. That is, until the 1930s or later the term ''Modernism'' simply did not mean what it means today: a group of writers, an arsenal of literary devices, a number of characteristic themes. Interestingly, in the 1910s and 1920s— the height of Modernism as it is understood today—the word ''Modernism'' referred to a particular strain of thought in the Catholic Church. At that time, the modernist writers did not see themselves as a unified movement. Instead, the writers now called modernists were members of dozens of different smaller movements: the Lost Generation, the Dadaists, the Imagists, the Vorticists, the Objectivists, the Surrealists, and many others. What is identified as the characteristic themes or concerns of the modernist period (a general pessimism about the state of the world, a rejection of society's certainties, a sense that only the rebel artist is telling the truth about the world) were simply ''in the air'' of the times; everyone was thinking and writing about the same ideas, so it did not seem necessary to name their commonalities. Literary critics of the early twentieth century were generally hostile to the writers now called modernists. The Victorian ethos held that literature's purpose was to identify ''sweetness and light'' and ''the best that has been thought and said'' (in the words of Matthew Arnold, one of Victorian England's most important critics) in

order to make better citizens. Literature and art, for the Victorians, were meant to be ‘‘edifying’’—educational. Literature was read to learn how one should behave. By that same token, literature that did not put forth edifying models was simply bad literature. This attitude is shown especially well in the hostile response to Gustave Flaubert’s 1857 Madame Bovary, a novel that depicted, without comment or condemnation, the adulterous behavior of a middle-class woman. For some critics, modernist literature was both incomprehensible and dangerous. As a result, Modernism had to create its own critics and to a remarkable extent it succeeded. T. S. Eliot became Modernism’s leading critic. Eliot advanced his own vision of good literature. He denigrated the neoclassicists and the romantics and praised the Elizabethans; he argued for a literature steeped in the ‘‘Tradition’’; he valued tension, ambiguity, and allusion.

After Eliot defined a modernist aesthetic, other critics began to agree with him. Difficulty, resistance, ambiguity, irony, and the sense of an ending to something were all qualities praised by critics ranging from the political right wing (the New Critics) to the far left (the New York Intellectuals). By the 1930s and 1940s the modernist aesthetic was taking over Anglo-American literary criticism. The old guard of critics defending the edifices of Western civilization seemed less and less relevant after a war, a depression, and another war. The pessimistic modernist view of the world began to seem correct. By the 1950s, Modernism and its aesthetic standards were almost unquestioned in American criticism and education.

CRITICISM

Greg Barnhisel directs the Writing Center at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. In this essay, Barnhisel describes the process by which Modernism became the dominant literary movement of the twentieth century. In its heyday (the 1910s and 1920s), Modernism did not exist. That is to say, the word ‘‘Modernism’’ did not have the meaning that it has today. Modernism referred to technology, to an openness to the new commercially-driven society that was coming about, and to changes in Catholic theology. The literary themes and concerns and stylistic innovations that today are called modernist belonged, in their time, to dozens of different writers who lived in different places, spoke different languages, were members of different

groups, and very often were hostile toward each other and their work. It was only in the 1950s and 1960s, years after the movement ended, that the term Modernism came to designate a group of writers preoccupied with alienation and the destruction of old certainties. It can be instructive to look at the ways that large trends in literature and culture are examined, classified, and codified into a movement by readers and critics. Modernism was produced long after the movement's height by critics; Modernism was not produced by the modernist artists themselves. In a very real sense, there is no one Modernism; there are many modernisms. Some critics have identified Modernism as far back as the French writer Gustave Flaubert, who wrote in the 1850s, and many critics see a number of works of the 1970s (Thomas Pynchon's novel Gravity's Rainbow, for instance) as late examples of Modernism. The themes now understood as characteristically modernist existed in many works of the nineteenth century. By the early 1900s, an explosion of artistic subgroups whose members crossed between music, painting, sculpture, dance, photography, and literature rapidly coalesced and just as quickly disappeared. Almost all of these groups—the Surrealists, the Imagists, the Cubists, the Vorticists, the Dadaists, the Futurists, and many others— are considered components of Modernism. It was only near the end of the movement that critics came to a consensus about what constituted Modernism in literature, and these critics set the rules for who should be considered a central member of the movement and who would remain only a minor figure. Perhaps more important in the long run, these critics codified a way of reading and criteria for evaluation of literature, both of which, not coincidentally, were particularly friendly to Modernism. These critical developments of the 1950s were a direct reaction against the climate of earlier decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, art and politics were linked together very closely. Artists were expected to weigh in on the political issues of the day, and especially in the 1930s they allied themselves with left-wing causes. Dozens of artists and writers joined the Communist Party, feeling that only a worker-centered movement could save America from the Depression and from vast concentrations of wealth. Other, albeit fewer, writers and artists allied themselves with the other side: of these, the most notorious were the English painter and novelist Wyndham Lewis, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun (who praised Hitler), and the American poet Ezra Pound, who admired Mussolini and held anti-Semitic

beliefs. T. S. Eliot, although he never supported fascism, had extremely conservative political views as well. Writers have never become famous only by their own efforts. It takes dozens of people to bring a work from the mind of the writer to the hands of the reader. And in an age such as the mid-twentieth century, when thousands of works of literature were published every year, the role of the critic became especially important in establishing whether a writer was important and why. In the 1930s, when the modernist writers had already produced a solid body of work to be explained and evaluated, two groups of critics with drastically different backgrounds and political inclinations set their sights upon Modernism. Together, these groups defined the sprawling movement, telling readers what it meant and, most importantly, arguing that Modernism should be read without concern to any political beliefs expressed in the works or held by the writers. Their consensus about Modernism eventually made the movement the great movement of twentieth-century literature. The first of these two groups came together in the American South in the 1920s. This ‘‘Fugitive’’ or ‘‘Agrarian’’ group included writers as Cleanth Brooks, who was inspired by the antebellum and its Elizabethan English heritage. Eventually, these writers obtained academic posts and developed a method of literary analysis called ‘‘New Criticism.’’ The New Criticism valued such formal devices as tension, ambiguity, wordplay, and irony. It had absolutely no interest in questions of what a work can tell about history or about an author’s life or what political meaning a work holds. People who read works for what they had to say about society were Philistines to the New Critics; the goal of reading literature was to refine one’s sensations and to make ever-finer distinctions about the excellence of language.

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