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Faculty of Letters and Languages

English Department

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Modernism: Historical and Cultural Contexts

"The world broke into two in 1922 or thereabouts."

Willa Cather

Introduction

The turn of the nineteenth century was a period of profound transformation, driven by a confluence of new historical, cultural and political forces. The eruption of the Great War, the rapid industrialization and urbanization, the radical transformation of the social hierarchy and the break with obsolete principles were mainly the circumstances that fundamentally reshaped the world. The twentieth century is indeed defined by the loss of faith in tradition and ideals that could not prevent the occurrence of World War I which caused an immense human cost, resulting in millions of deaths and injuries. This shock led to alienation, fragmentation and disillusionment, which represent the prevailing themes of modernism, an artistic mode of expression in the early decades of the twentieth century. Culturally, the emergence of groundbreaking ideas altered the perception of reality: Freudian psychoanalysis, Einstein's theory of relativity and Darwin's theory of evolution continued to change people's attitude towards the turbulent world. Within these upheavals, modernism came to existence.

I. Historical Circumstances

Modernism is typically associated with the post-World War I era. The huge devastation of the war had undermined mankind's trust in the ideals that founded the Western society and culture. The shift towards an industrial and urban world had already affected the lives and attitudes of people in Europe and America. The new experience whether building or ruining caused shock to the citizens who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, literary modernism was the result of historical circumstances.

1. The Shock of the New: Industrialization, Urbanization and Technology

By the late 19th century, Europe and North America were reshaped by the Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914). Electricity, steel, chemicals, automobiles, and communication technologies revolutionized daily life. Cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and New York expanded rapidly; populations exploded due to rural migration and immigration. Urban life brought speed, mechanization, mass production, but also alienation, anonymity, overcrowding, and poverty. The cultural landscape was indeed shaped by rapid urbanization and the growth of modern cities which became sites of both cultural vibrancy and alienation. The city offered a space where diverse classes, ethnicities, and cultural influences collided, producing both excitement and disorientation. Writers turned to the city as both setting and symbol: vibrant, fragmented, and dehumanizing. For instance, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) captures the simultaneity of urban life in Dublin in one day. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) mirrors the rhythms of London through stream of consciousness. Twentieth century literary works focused on the paradoxes of the modern world.

Industrial capitalism created a new urban proletariat thereby labor unions and socialist parties gained momentum. The middle classes expanded but faced anxiety about status and identity. Urban alienation grew: individuals felt lost in bureaucracies, cities, and machines. Strikes, protests, and the spread of socialist ideology shook traditional hierarchies. Modernist texts often explored ordinary lives under social and economic strain.

This capitalism had enormous impact on women, leading to their emancipation and changing gender roles. With the Suffrage victories, New Zealand in 1893, USA in 1920 and the UK in 1918 and 1928, women gained more rights and power. WWI drew millions of women into factories, offices, and hospitals, expanding roles beyond domestic spheres. Feminist movements campaigned for equality in law, education, and labor. Gender norms were destabilized, provoking both liberation and backlash. Modernist women writers experimented with new literary techniques to capture female subjectivity.

2. The Political Collapse: World War I

World War I was a monumental factor for the modernist literary movement. The war, spanning from 1914 to 1918, caused 20 millions of deaths. In this global military conflict, described as « the war to end all wars,» new technologies were used such as machine guns, tanks, airplanes industrializing death. The massive destruction created deep wounds, traumas that shattered people's lives and minds. Faith in progress, reason and civilization faded and writers consequently depicted this sense of disillusionment and collapse in their fragmented narratives.

The decline of empires and old authorities changed the world and imposed new political and social orders. Colonialism and its crisis is indeed regarded as a central event that moulded literature in the twentieth century. At its height, the early 20th century, European empires controlled much of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This colonial hegemony however was met with widespread resistance: Gandhi's campaigns in India, the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, and anti-colonial movements in Africa and the Caribbean. In Ireland, independence struggles challenged British imperial dominance, shaping writers like James Joyce and W. B. Yeats. All these internal and external uprisings discredited the imperial ideology. The colonial crisis finds its echo in the then fiction ; as a matter of example, writers critiqued colonialism, exposing imperial brutality and questioned western superiority.

II. Cultural Factors

This development in literature and the arts that spanned from the late 19th century to the 1950s was a response to the shift in thought and belief launched by intellectual upheavals associated with such philosophers and scientists as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzche, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) uprooted the traditional view of "man made in the image and likeness of God," replacing it with one of man as the descendant of an ape. Marx's view of the economic determinism that governed western history and culture directly challenged the idealist philosophy of its time. Nietzsche's declaration of "the death of God" summarized the dismissal of the very ground of the Hebraic/Christian tradition, while Freud's representation of the significance of the « unconscious » called into question the notion of rational free choice, and Einstein's conception of

space/time uprooted the straightforward chronological narative forms of the 19th century. Modernist writers responded to these new ideologies and groundbreaking ideas.

1. The Crisis of Faith: Secularization

The late 19th century saw the decline of religious authority and certainty in Europe and North America. Darwin's theory of evolution, in 1859, challenged the biblical creation narrative. Subsequently, F. Nieztsche's declaration of the death of faith, challenging the Christian notion of God, was a groundbreaking idea that some modernists voraciously adopted. Nonetheless, this philosophical perception of religion was not literal atheism, but cultural observation: traditional Christian values and metaphysical certainties no longer held authority in modern Europe. The result was a vacuum of meaning, leaving individuals to create their own values. Secularism and scientific rationalism weakened the church's cultural dominance. In literature, there was an interest in existential, psychological and mythic substitutes for meaning.

This secularization along with nihilism served to change to some extent people's perception of the world. Nihilism denotes a radical or extreme radical attirude which denies all traditional values and moral values as well. It was first used in 1817 by the German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi**,** who employed it to criticize certain Enlightenment philosophies, especially rationalism and materialism, that he thought reduced existence to "nothing." Later, in Russia during the 1860s**,** the word gained wider cultural currency through Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862)**.** In this novel, the character Bazarov calls himself a "nihilist," meaning someone who rejects authority, tradition, and established beliefs. This popularized the term in literature and politics. The figure that stands at the center of modern nihilism is the 19th-century philosopher F. Nietzsche, who diagnosed the search for "truth" as an illusion and links nihilism to the collapse of religious and moral certainties in modern Europe. Reduced at times to utter despair and ultimately to madness, the philosopher nevertheless attempted to overcome his nihilistic vision by affirming the strength of the human will and the power of creative art. Thus, Nietzsche embodies the fundamental contradiction of nihilism: it usually results in some paradoxical affirmation of life.

Much of modern literature exhibits an attempt either to overcome or to validate this nihilistic vision. Some modern writers defiantly assert their nihilism, while others view it as the ultimate challenge, the experience of total negation that must be endured in order to emerge with an affirmation of life. The rejection of conventions entails the adoption of new ways of living, thinking and writing. It is as Ezra Pound, an English modernist critic and writer, recommended « make it new.» Despite its popularization, nihilism was criticized by some modernists themselves as it was diagnosed as an illness to be overcome not a philosophy to be embraced.

2. Exploring the Mind: Psychoanalysis

The theories of Sigmund Freud, who introduced concepts of the unconscious, repression, and dream symbolism form another central cultural transformation that occured in the post-war period. Freud's insights reshaped understandings of the human mind, suggesting that behavior and identity were not wholly rational but driven by hidden psychological forces. His model of the psyche—divided into the id, ego, and superego—provided a framework for exploring inner conflict and psychological fragmentation. Modernists absorbed these ideas and reflected them in their narratives, adopting experimental techniques to represent the complexities of consciousness. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) employed the stream-of-consciousness technique to mirror the associative, nonlinear workings of the human mind. Virginia Woolf similarly explored subjectivity and inner consciousness in novels like *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). By using psychological depth and fragmented perspectives, modernist literature dramatized the complexity of human identity in a rapidly changing world.

3. Artistic and Cultural Shifts beyond Literature

Modernism in English literature must be understood as part of a larger cultural revolution across the arts. In painting, Cubism, pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, broke objects into geometric fragments, rejecting single-point perspective in favor of multiple viewpoints. This visual fragmentation resonated with literary experimentation: writers such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound mirrored the Cubist impulse by dismantling linear narrative and reconstructing meaning from disjointed perspectives and allusions. Similarly, Surrealism, with its emphasis on

dreams and the unconscious, aligned closely with Freud's psychoanalytic theories and inspired literary explorations of irrationality and subconscious desire, as in Woolf's dreamlike interior monologues. Expressionism, by contrast, emphasized heightened emotion and subjectivity, influencing the intense psychological focus of works like Eliot's poetry and Lawrence's novels.

Music, too, provided a model for Modernist innovation. The atonality of Arnold Schoenberg or the syncopated rhythms of jazz challenged traditional harmony and rhythm, encouraging literary parallels in free verse, fragmented syntax, and experimental structures. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* often employs shifting voices and rhythms reminiscent of musical montage, while Pound's *Cantos* operate almost like orchestral compositions, weaving together disparate cultural fragments into a complex symphony of meaning.

The influence extended beyond stylistic techniques to cultural ethos: the avant-garde arts promoted a spirit of experimentation and rejection of Victorian realism and moral didacticism. Modernist literature absorbed this ethos, prioritizing ambiguity, abstraction, and multiplicity over clarity and linearity. Thus, English Modernism was not an isolated literary phenomenon but part of an interconnected cultural moment in which literature, visual art, and music collectively sought to represent the fractured, uncertain experience of modern life.

Conclusion

The dawn of the nineteenth century was a new phase in the history of humanity. The rapid industrialization and urbanization radically changed the modes of life and thinking. Politically, the world was fragmented by the atrocities of World War I. Indeed, those who lived were no better than those who were killed in the fiercest war humans ever faced. This shock caused psychological and mental instabilities, traumas that led to the development of modern psychoanalysis, founded by S. Freud. Another shock, caused by the philosopher Nietzsche's declaration of the death of faith, was the collapse of the foundational beliefs of western culture. All these circumstances led to the emergence of a new artistic movement named Modernism.