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Faculty of Letters and Languages

English Department

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Modernism: Definition and Major Modernist Theorists

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

Karl Marx

Introduction

Modernism in English literature emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a radical artistic and intellectual response to the profound changes transforming Western society. The movement developed out of a deep sense of crisis—spiritual, cultural, and linguistic—brought about by industrialization, urbanization, scientific discovery, and the disintegration of traditional certainties. The devastation of World War I intensified this crisis, convincing many writers that inherited modes of expression could no longer capture the complexities of modern life. In rejecting the linear narratives and moral assurances of Victorian realism, Modernist writers sought new aesthetic forms capable of representing the fragmentation, alienation, and psychological depth of the modern consciousness. Figures such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound revolutionized literary technique through experimentation with narrative perspective, interior monologue, symbolism, and mythic structure. Their works reflect a preoccupation with time, memory, and subjectivity, as well as a persistent search for order within chaos. Influenced by contemporary developments in philosophy and psychology—particularly the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud—Modernism questioned the stability of truth, identity, and language itself. As a result, literature became self-conscious and reflexive, exploring the act of creation as much as the created world.

I. Modernism: Definition and Key Concepts

The terms, modernism and modernity, despite being deeply related, should neither be considered as one nor be used interchangeably. Modernity is the condition of being “modern,” the state of society, culture and experience brought about the major economic, technological and social shifts that began around the Renaissance and continued in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is an era of industrialization and urbanization, technological revolution and scientific advancement, Capitalism and consumerism, secularization and social changes. Modernism, however, is the wave of artistic and intellectual movements that arose to describe and make sense of this new modern world. It is the use of a new set of stylish tools to portray the disillusionment and despair felt by most people after the most destructive military conflict in the history of humanity and the cultural shifts.

II. Modernism: Major Theorists

1. Sigmund Freud: The Unconscious and the Fragmented Self

Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory revolutionized early twentieth-century conceptions of the human mind and had a profound impact on Modernist literature. His exploration of the unconscious, repression, and dream symbolism—as articulated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)—offered writers a new psychological vocabulary for depicting interior life. Modernist authors, disillusioned with objective realism, turned inward to explore the fractured nature of consciousness. Freud’s model of the divided psyche, in which hidden desires and memories shape human behavior, inspired literary experiments with interior monologue and stream of consciousness. Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence all drew upon psychoanalytic ideas to portray the fluidity of thought and emotion. Freud’s insistence that rationality is undercut by unconscious drives mirrored the Modernist conviction that beneath surface order lies disarray. Thus, his theories provided the intellectual foundation for Modernism’s exploration of psychological depth, alienation, and the instability of identity.

2. Henri Bergson: Time, Memory, and Creative Consciousness

Henri Bergson's philosophy of time and consciousness profoundly shaped Modernist narrative technique and perception. In *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson distinguished between chronological time—objective, measurable, and mechanical—and *durée réelle* (real duration), the subjective, lived experience of time as it unfolds through memory and consciousness. This concept liberated Modernist writers from linear storytelling, encouraging them to represent psychological rather than sequential reality. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, embody Bergsonian time by weaving past and present through the flow of thought and recollection. For Bergson, intuition, not reason, grants access to reality's essence, and this belief in intuitive perception resonated with Modernism's emphasis on artistic insight over empirical truth. By translating Bergson's temporal fluidity into literary form, Modernist writers captured the multiplicity and simultaneity of human experience, rejecting static representation for dynamic interiority.

3. Virginia Woolf: Consciousness, Reality, and the “Moment of Being”

Virginia Woolf stands as both a practitioner and theorist of Modernism. In her essays—such as *Modern Fiction* (1919)—she rejects the rigid conventions of Victorian realism and calls upon writers to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind.” Influenced by both Freud's psychoanalysis and Bergson's philosophy of time, Woolf sought to represent consciousness as an ever-shifting current rather than a coherent, rational sequence. Her use of the *stream of consciousness* technique in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931) reveals her preoccupation with the fluidity of thought and the porous boundary between self and world. Woolf's notion of the “moment of being”—those rare instances of heightened perception that disclose the pattern beneath ordinary experience—embodies the Modernist tension between fragmentation and unity. For Woolf, as for her contemporaries, the modern writer's task was not to impose order on experience but to render its complexity truthfully, even if that truth is fractured and elusive.

4. T. S. Eliot: Tradition, Myth, and the Search for Order

T. S. Eliot was both a central poet and a major critical theorist of Modernism. In his influential essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot argued that genuine innovation arises not from the rejection of tradition but from an active dialogue with it. He proposed that the modern poet must internalize the entire literary heritage and reshape it to express the dislocation of contemporary life. This philosophy finds expression in *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem that encapsulates post-war cultural despair through fragmentation, allusion, and myth. Eliot's use of the "mythic method"—drawing on classical and religious narratives to impose structure on modern chaos—was his response to the spiritual emptiness of the age. His theory of the "impersonal" nature of art, in which the poet's emotions are transformed through form and discipline, contrasts sharply with Romantic subjectivity. In both his criticism and poetry, Eliot articulated the Modernist desire to reconstruct meaning through aesthetic order amid historical and moral disintegration.

5. Ezra Pound: Aesthetic Innovation and the Spirit of Modernism

Ezra Pound's influence on Modernist literature was both practical and theoretical. As a poet, critic, and mentor to fellow writers, he championed artistic experimentation and precision. His famous injunction to "Make it new" encapsulates the Modernist ethos: a commitment to linguistic economy, clarity, and innovation. Pound's Imagist movement called for direct treatment of the object, the use of concise language, and the avoidance of superfluous words—principles that shaped much of Modernist poetry. Beyond Imagism, Pound's epic project *The Cantos* embodies the fragmentation and cultural multiplicity of modern experience, blending historical, literary, and mythical references into a collage-like form. He shared with Eliot the conviction that the modern artist must reconstruct civilization's broken inheritance through allusion and synthesis. Pound's aesthetic radicalism and cosmopolitan vision gave Modernism its experimental energy, redefining poetry as a site of intellectual and cultural renewal.

Conclusion

Modernism in literature arose out of a historically turbulent age: industrial and urban transformation, collapse of empires, the trauma of WWI, social upheavals, women's emancipation, revolutionary politics, colonial crises, and the rise of mass media. Each historical rupture destabilized old certainties, compelling writers to invent new literary forms, fragmented, experimental, subjective, and self-conscious, to capture the fractured reality of modern existence. Freud, Bergson, Woolf, Eliot, and Pound collectively represent the psychological, philosophical, and artistic dimensions of Modernism. Freud revealed the unconscious as the hidden architecture of human behavior; Bergson redefined time as fluid and subjective; Woolf transformed these insights into narrative experimentation; Eliot sought spiritual and formal order amid cultural fragmentation; and Pound demanded perpetual innovation in language and art. Together, they forged a literary revolution that reflected the complexities of the modern age—its disillusionment, its search for meaning, and its fascination with the processes of thought itself. Modernism, through their combined influence, became not merely a style but an intellectual movement: an ongoing dialogue between chaos and form, loss and creation, fragmentation and the longing for unity.