

Modernist Poetry

Modernism was an international movement, but it was different in each country. The concept of modernism appeared in Germany in the 1890s, and the end of modernism - late 1930s.

Great modernists: Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, artists - Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, composer - Igor Stravinsky (His music featured dissonance and discontinuity rather than neat formal structure and harmony. His composition *The Rite of Spring* provoked a riot in the Paris concert hall where it was premiered.)

Modernism was a European and transcontinental movement, and its principal centers of activity were the capital cities. American writers in large numbers fled their native land and settled in London and Paris. Still other writers fled from the small towns of their birth, not to Europe or other foreign places, but to the large American cities, especially Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City. Many deliberately headed for Greenwich Village or Harlem, centers within centers.

Modernism affected all branches of art - literature, architecture, painting, music. Many artists had a desire to integrate several kinds of art. Modernism meant a break with the past, artists wanted to shock their audience.

Modernists wanted to depict the whole experience of modern life. Western civilization reached a point of crisis and modernists judged the society: Why did it happen? They tried to define the relationship between the past and the present.

What modernists criticized:

- dehumanizing effect of society
- mechanization of human society
- impersonal, bureaucratic relations
- fragmentation of the individual, a loss of the sense of wholeness
- the commercialization of life

Kinds of techniques that modernists favoured:

- experiments in form and style: stylistic innovations, experimentation, willingness to disrupt traditional syntax and form, mixing together modes or levels of writing that had often been kept separate (colloquial and slang expressions, popular culture). The traditional educated literary voice lost its authority - this is what Ernest Hemingway had in mind when he claimed that the American literary tradition began with *Huckleberry Finn*.

The principle of experimentalism had to be defended, in the view of most modernists, because it could keep art from turning into something stale and pious.

Ezra Pound is generally regarded as the chief spokesman for experimentation. His famous slogan "Make it New" was quoted often by many writers who agreed with its aims.

- references to earlier literature (they used it as an integrating method - to integrate the present and the past)

- parodies of earlier literature

- stream of consciousness method (a term coined by William James; people think in associations; describing numerous thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind)

- references to Shakespeare, Dante and other classics (readers had to have a knowledge of these works otherwise they did not understand; modernists wanted to show that literature had a long tradition, it gradually develops, and if we want to understand literature, we should know it completely, in its wholeness)

All the references and allusions to literary, historical, philosophical, and religious details of the past were to remind readers of the old, lost coherence. It is clear that the references required highly educated audience.

Central themes of modernist literature:

- (avoiding pompous themes)

- analysis of human conditions in the world where God is dead (Franz Kafka)

- expressing the artist's individual perceptions, celebrating the ordinary things and rhythms of life in an extraordinary way (it is better to focus on a red wheelbarrow than on some classical monument)

- quite often the subject matter of modernist writing was often the poem or literary work itself

Compared to earlier writing, modernist literature is notable for what it omits - the explanations, interpretations, connections, perspective, and security in traditional literature. A typical modernist work seem to begin arbitrarily, to advance without explanation, and to end without resolution. Its tone is often ironic. It suggests rather than asserts, makes use of symbols and images rather than statements. The final effect is surprising, shocking, and unsettling. The experience of reading is challenging and difficult. This is why the reader of a modernist work is often said to participate in the actual work of making the poem or story. Often, the modernist work is structured as a quest for the coherence of the work.

The search for meaning, even if it does not succeed, becomes meaningful in itself.

The difficulty of this new type of writing limited the appeal of modernism and the number of the readers. Nevertheless, over time, the principles of modernism became increasingly influential.

glorification of the artist and art

In the modernist movement **art** became a very important element for the development of the society. Artists emphasized values found in art. We should trust in the power of art because art can save us from the deadening features of everyday life. This stress on the significance of art led sometimes to *elitism*. Wallace Stevens claimed that works of art have a life of their own and that they are the center of the society.

The role of the artist was to be the prophet. Modernists believed that the artist is generally less appreciated but more sensitive, even more heroic, than the average person. The isolated and privileged position for the artist also entailed a separation from normal or "mass" society. American modernists did not speak for the society, they spoke for themselves. This is the reason why modernism was not wholly embraced by African-American, Native American, or immigrant authors.

Modernism was from the outset closely connected with the theories of structuralism. Broadly speaking, structuralism is concerned with language in a very general sense. It is concerned with signs, signification, and all codes of communication - language, body language, clothes, status symbols and so on. It is to do with the means by which human beings convey information to each other.

Structuralism began in the science of linguistics, in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. In the theory of structuralism, everything is the product of a system of signification. All signs are arbitrary and without them we cannot comprehend reality. Saussure claimed that each *sign* in language is a union of *signifier* (i.e. the sound image or its graphic equivalent) and *signified* (i.e. the concept). The letters h-o-u-s-e form a signifier which evoke the signified "house". There is no reason why the letters should mean "house". The association of signifier and signified is the product of linguistic convention and not of any natural link.

As far as literature and literary criticism are concerned, structuralism challenges the old belief that a work of literature reflects a given reality. A literary text is, rather, constituted of other conventions and texts.

Within modernism we can find a number of more specific movements and schools:

cubism - painters believed that so-called representational paintings conveyed not what people actually saw, but rather what they had learned to *think* they saw. The cubist wanted to reproduce a pure visual experience unmediated by cultural ideas. They painted things and humans reduced to various geometrical shapes as they might be seen from different angles when the model moved or the observer changed position. The degree to which their paintings shocked an audience measured the degree to which that audience had lost its original perceiving power. (Gertrude Stein)

dadaism - the term was meant to signify total freedom, anti-rules, anti-traditions. The basic word in the Dadaist's vocabulary was "nothing". The basic form of dadaistic literature and art was a collage: the arrangement of unrelated objects and words in a random fashion. In America its influence is discernible in the poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot.

imagism - movement in poetry. Imagists believed that a hard, clear image was essential. They also believed that poetry should use the language of everyday speech and have complete freedom in subject matter. Imagism was influenced by oriental poetry, esp. Japanese haiku. (Ezra Pound, H.D.)

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) T(homas) S(tearns)

poet, literary critic, dramatist, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. He is best known for his poem *The Waste Land*, one of the most widely discussed literary works of the early 20th century.

Eliot was born in Saint Louis, Missouri, into a distinguished New England family. He was educated at Harvard University, the Sorbonne, and the University of Oxford. He settled in London in 1915 and became a British citizen in 1927.

basic features of Eliot's poetry:

- completely fragmented narrative
- heavy role of symbolism in keeping the poem together (when there is no narrative line)
- frequent references to the old literary works
- a mosaic form of a poem

his first volume of verse - *Prufrack and Other Observations* (1917). The poems have no fixed verse form or regular pattern, and rhyme is used only occasionally.

The Waste Land (1922) - a long poem in 5 parts; Eliot expressed his conception of the sterility of modern society in contrast with societies of the past. The organizing principle of the poem is the myth of death and rebirth. Eliot used symbols such as desert, water, fertility. The theme of the poem is the quest for regeneration in a landscape of sexual disorder and spiritual desolation.

Eliot began working on *The Waste Land* in 1921 and finished it in a Swiss sanatorium while recovering from a mental collapse brought on by overwork, problems in his marriage, and general depression. He cut large parts out of the poem on Pound's advice. Although it is true that Pound's work on the poem was mainly removing bits and parts, study of the manuscript before and after Pound's suggestions has led some critics to suggest that we should think of *The Waste Land* as jointly authored. When the poem was published for the first time, it was without footnotes. Later on, these were added, and they added yet another layer to the poem.

Beginning in the 1930s Eliot became very conservative, religious and his poetry serious.

Four Quartets (1943), expresses in moving verse a transcendental sense of time and the process of arriving at belief (Eliot wrote this poem after his conversion to Christian faith.)

Eliot's methods of literary analysis have been a major influence on English and American critical writing. In essays on such subjects as the Elizabethan dramatists, the English metaphysical poets, and Italian poet Dante, Eliot profoundly influenced the principles of literary criticism.

collection of essays - *The Sacred Wood* (1920)

Eliot also wrote several plays. He attempted to revive poetic drama for the contemporary audience. His best known play is a long verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), based on the 12th-century martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket.

By the time of his death, Eliot became a living classic.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

avant-garde poet, critic, and translator.

Pound travelled a lot. For some time he lived in London, in Paris, in various cities of Italy. Pound influenced many writers around him. In London he edited the works of T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and other avant-garde authors writing in England. He was also a leading figure of the imagist movement. He coined the word *imagism*.

He delighted to be in the middle of intellectual excitement, to play a role in new movements, to know everybody in the literary world, and to know what was going on.

He was generous and willing to assist to other writers in their work and in their attempts to get published. He was helpful to H.D., T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, and many others.

In Paris Pound became a leader of the American expatriate literary circle that included Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway; he also worked for the American literary magazine *Dial*, translated from Italian, Chinese, and Japanese literature, and completed several books of literary criticism.

In 1924 he settled in Rapallo in Italy, he became more extreme in his views. He admired the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and when World War II started, he offered his services to the Italian government and made numerous radio broadcast in English, aimed at American troops. In these broadcasts he criticized Jews, Franklin Roosevelt, and American society. He was charged of treason and at the end of the war he was made a prisoner by Americans. He had to spend six months in an open-air wire cage at the prison camp near Pisa, which shattered his mental health. He

was brought back to the United States in 1945 for trial. There he was found insane and mentally unfit to be tried. From 1946 to 1958 he was a patient and a prisoner in a hospital for insane criminals in Washington, D.C. During these years he received visits, wrote letters, composed cantos, and continued to criticize American society. He wrote his Pisan Cantos in the hospital, and in 1949 the Library of Congress awarded the Bollingen Prize for poetry for this book. After this, Pound became the center of controversy: Can someone's life and views be separated from his poetry? What is the relation between poetry and politics, modernism and fascism?

Pound stayed in the hospital another 10 years until the efforts of Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, and others led to his release in 1958. Then Pound returned to Italy, where he died in 1972 in Venice.

his poetry:

Pound's best poems reflect an ironic view of the contemporary western world. He believed that authors should experiment, have to adapt to the sense of change and speed of the century. Poets should draw attention to the language. His phrase "make it new" became a modernist slogan.

His technique: chopped-up sentences; old spelling; moving away from normal, colloquial way of speaking

Pound's major work, Cantos, were first published in 1925; the first complete English edition of all the published segments was issued in 1970 as *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Pound drew his themes from Confucian ethics, classical mythology, economic theory, and other seemingly disparate sources in his effort to interpret cultural history. The cantos were separate poems of varying lengths, combining meditation, description, and transcription from the books Pound was reading. Ultimately, Pound wrote 116 cantos.

H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886-1961)

American poet of the imagist movement.

She was born in Pennsylvania, and lived in England after 1913. For a short time she was a lover of Ezra Pound and a very close friend of D. H. Lawrence.

H. D. was interested in old myths and also psychoanalysis. She spent 2 years in Vienna (1933-4) and underwent analysis by Sigmund Freud. They became friends

and H.D. helped to get him safely to London when the Nazi regime took over in Austria.

Her poetry:

Doolittle signed her work with the initials H.D. (which was Pound's idea). As an imagist, H.D. wrote characteristically short, precise verse in extremely free form. Like most of the imagists, she eventually abandoned imagism and sought a new style; she chose mythic, psychologically oriented subjects, and later withdrew from all modernist styles.

Sea Garden (1916) - a collection of imagist poems

Helen in Egypt (1961) - a meditative epic poem of more than 14 hundred lines. H.D. became attracted to the image of Helen, the cause of the Trojan War. H.D. was struck by the fact that the legend (Homer's Iliad) was related entirely from the male point of view. Helen never had a chance to speak. Out of these broodings, and helped by her study of symbols, H.D. wrote this poem.

Wallace Stevens (1875-1955)

was very inventive modernist poet. After his studies, he worked as a lawyer, writing his poetry at nights and during summers. He separated his life as a poet and his profession as a lawyer. His colleagues did not know that he was a major poet.

Stevens's most notable poems include "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "Sunday Morning," "Anecdote of the Jar," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In his poems he often studied the interrelationship of reality and imagination. His poems are about imagination, about poetry, about how we respond to art.

Stevens's poetry is not logical. He believed in the power of metaphor which interprets the world. According to Stevens, reality has no meaning, people put meaning into it. Therefore he claimed that "poetry does not need to have a meaning."

- "not ideas about the thing, but the thing itself"
- "Imagination is man's power over nature."
- "Life is the reflection of literature."

Williams Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

poet, novelist, and physician, who wrote in ordinary speech about everyday situations.

Williams and Stevens were friends, they influenced each other. They were trying to do similar things, but through different ways.

All through his life, Williams simultaneously followed 2 full-time careers - practicing medicine (as a family doctor and general practitioner) and writing poetry, fiction, and criticism. First he was influenced by the imagist poetry school, which rejected sentimentality, and vagueness and relied on the language of common speech, and a concentration on concrete things or experience. ("No ideas but in things"). In his poems Williams described very specific, concrete situations. He is famous mainly for his lyrical poetry, observing with great detail the world around him.

his technique:

- Williams developed so-called "variable foot"
- colloquial language
- minimalistic aspect of his poetry
- local, concrete images

In the late 1930s Williams began to write a long poem dealing with the American life in the period of the depression - Paterson (1946-58).

e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

American poet and painter, one of the most radically experimental and inventive writers of the 20th century.

Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard University. During World War I he was an ambulance driver in France, after World War I he studied art in Paris.

His first volume of poetry, Tulips and Chimneys, appeared in 1923. During the 1920s and 30s he lived alternately in France and the United States, finally settling in New York City.

His works include:

XLI Poems (1925)

him, a play in verse and prose (1927)

CIOPW (1931), a collection of drawings and paintings taking its title from the initial letters of the materials used—charcoal, ink, oil, pencil, and watercolor

i: six nonlectures (1953)

Cummings's style is characterized by eccentric and playful typography, deliberate capitalization and punctuation (including that of his own name: e e cummings), unusual exploitation of language and syntax, and a frequent use of jazz rhythms and slang. His verse abounds in wit, irony, and sarcasm. But cummings was also a lyrical poet with a surprisingly romantic attitude toward love, death, pleasure, and natural beauty.

Visual aspect of his poetry is very important.

Modernist community

Ezra Pound - gave advice to many writers, H.D. - his lover

Pound and Eliot - collaboration on the Waste Land

in Paris - Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, writers and painters

Williams and Stevens - friends

Ezra Pound kept in a hospital - Hemingway and Frost protested