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Modern English Literature

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Modern English Literature (Literature Survey Course)

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Peter Bocsor

SUMMARY:

This lesson introduces some of the concepts relevant in discussing the development of the modernist movement in general, and modern literature in particular. We discuss the general characteristics and the important precursors of modernism along with the most important thematic and formal features of modernist literature.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- General Characteristics of Modernism;
- Precursors of Modernism;
- Thematic Characteristics of Modern Literature;
- Formal Characteristics of Modern Literature.

MODERNISM

Modernism is a progressive cultural movement that affected all areas of art and architecture, music and literature. It emerged before WWI and lasted until the period after WWII. Its beginnings were characterized by a general hostility against the historicist and academic traditions of the 19th Century, while later it increasingly affected all areas of social life and aimed at a general reinterpretation of culture as such. The idea of progress served as a shared and central value for all areas of art and social co-existence, and therefore, what was new

was considered better and also more beautiful.

In his essay, [Ornament and Crime](#) published in 1908, Adolf Loos developed a radical aesthetics of purist architecture. Read the beginning of the essay to see a clearly modernist argument against the use of ornamentation in art.

The human embryo goes through all the phases of animal life while still inside the womb. When man is born, his instincts are those of a newborn dog. His childhood runs through all the changes corresponding to the history of mankind. At the age of two he looks like a Papuan, at four like one of an ancient Germanic tribe, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire. When he is eight years old, he becomes conscious of violet, the colour discovered by the eighteenth century, for until then violets were blue and purple-fish were red. The physicist today points out colours in the spectrum of the sun that have already been named, but whose comprehension has been reserved for future generations.

The child is amoral. So is the Papuan, to us. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is no criminal but if a modern man kills someone and eats him, he is a criminal or a degenerate.

The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his rudder, his oars; in short, everything he can get his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the prisoners are tattooed. Tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder.

The urge to decorate one's face and everything in reach is the origin of the graphic arts. It is the babbling of painting.

All art is erotic.

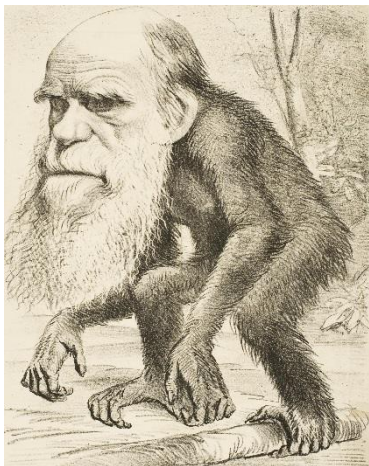
The movement of modernism, however, was not without a series of important precursors that paved the way for its arrival at the turn of the 19th to the 20th Century. These include a set of diverse approaches from philosophical systems and political ideologies to social or aesthetic theories.



The Seagram Building in New York is a typical example of modernist architecture.

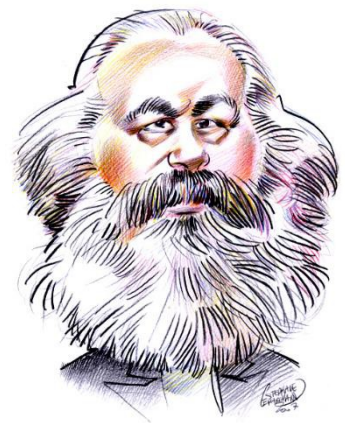
As a similarly comprehensive cultural movement, romanticism is an especially important precursor of modernism. It brought into the centre of attention the validity of individual, subjective experience, which later becomes the starting point for some of the experiments in modern literature, such as the narrative technique of stream of consciousness. While romanticism's focus on the supremacy of nature as the standard subject for art was seen as an outdated idea by modernists, the willingness to radically extend the limits of expression, as well as to celebrate individual liberty both characterized the romantic and the modern artist.

□ Stream of consciousness, narrative technique in nondramatic fiction intended to render the flow of myriad impressions—visual, auditory, physical, associative, and subliminal—that impinge on the consciousness of an individual and form part of his awareness along with the trend of his rational thoughts. The term was first used by the psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). Some writers attempted to capture the total flow of their characters' consciousness, rather than limit themselves to rational thoughts. To represent the full richness, speed, and subtlety of the mind at work, the writer incorporates snatches of incoherent thought, ungrammatical constructions, and free association of ideas, images, and words at the pre-speech level.



Caricature of Charles Darwin

The philosophical theory of positivism, another precursor of modernism, was built around the belief in the possibility to acquire value-free knowledge. While this belief fuelled modernism's enthusiasm for technological and social development, it also functioned as a target of criticism for some of the artists experimenting with the limitlessness of subjectivity. Another philosophical precursor of modernism is realism, which claimed that properties, called universals, exist independently of the things that manifest them



Caricature of Karl Marx

(an antithesis of nominalism, which asserts that universals do not exist, they are mere words). In addition to philosophical ideas modernism was also influenced by scientific theories, such as Darwinism, a theory of evolution by natural selection, or political ideologies, like Marxism, which asserted that economic problems of the capitalist system, such as the social divide between the classes, are not temporary conditions, and therefore, they can only be eliminated by radical social change.

Modernism's precursor in visual arts is the impressionist movement that emphasized the importance of subjective sensory perceptions and the deceptive nature of our mind, when interpreting those.

In a way parallel to impressionism in painting, symbolism in literature also focused on its material, i.e. language, and claimed that it is clearly symbolic in its nature, and therefore, poetry and writing should follow the connections the mere sound and texture the words create.



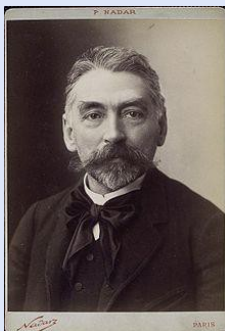
Monet: The rose-way in Giverny (Oil on canvas)

One of the major representatives of French symbolism was Stéphane Mallarmé. His poem, *Mysticis Umbraculis*, is an example of a line of associations fueled by the symbolism of language.

*She slept: her finger trembled, amethyst-less
And naked, under her nightdress:
After a deep sigh, ceased, cambric raised to her waist.*

*And her belly seemed of snow on which might rest,
If a ray of light re-gilded the forest,
A bright goldfinch's mossy nest.*

[Translated by A. S. Kline](#)



Mallarmé around 1890

Modernism, however, was not only influenced by ideas but also by the changing urban landscape of the second half of the 19th Century. Industrialization brought about changes in the way we perceive our environment and created buildings by combining art and engineering in new industrial materials, such as cast iron, which allowed us to build railroad bridges and glass-and-iron train sheds.



Budapest-Nyugati Railway Terminal built by the Eiffel Company.

2 THEMATIC & FORMAL FEATURES OF MODERN LITERATURE

The concerns and interests of the modernist movement naturally found their way to the pages of contemporary literary works of art. One of the most significant characteristics of modern literature is its shifting of focus of attention to themes formerly ignored by writers and



Pablo Picasso: Guernica (Oil on canvas)

poets. These include the experiences of most often the alienation of the individual among the changing social and cultural norms, under the burden of their malfunctioning community or the threat of an unknown future. As a reaction to 19th Century historicism, modernism generally rejected the idea of consensus about a historical past, and it also often portrayed the individual in

an urban setting.

& Read [Carl Sandburg's poem, Fog](#) written in free verse. Try to find the structural elements of the poem without the help of meter and rhymes.

*The fog comes
on little cat feet.*

*It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.*



The [cut-up technique](#) (or *découpé* in French) is an aleatory literary technique in which a written text is cut up and rearranged to create a new text. The concept can be traced to at least the Dadaists of the 1920s, but was popularized in the late 1950s and early 1960s by writer William S. Burroughs, and has since been used in a wide variety of contexts.

In accordance with its novel choice of topics, modernist literature experimented with a series of formal solutions, including the free verse or the cut-up technique. Modern novels and short stories experimented with discontinuous narrative and various forms of subjective narration, such as the stream of consciousness technique. The textual world of the modern literary work of art is also characterized by juxtapositions of classical allusions, other cultures and languages, and the open use of intertextuality.

[Intertextuality](#) is the shaping of a text's meaning by another text. It is the interconnection between similar or related works of literature that reflect and influence an audience's interpretation of the text. Intertextuality is

a literary device that creates an 'interrelationship between texts' and generates related understanding in separate works.

& Read the excerpt from [Tradition and the Individual Talent](#) written in 1919 by [T. S. Eliot](#) and find the characteristics of his reinterpretation of the idea of tradition.



T.s. Eliot in 1934.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

As we have seen, the modernist movement had a significant impact on various art forms and social theories in the first half of the 20th Century. There was, however, one form of art that did not have to adapt to the novel theories and the changing perspectives offered by an increasingly technological world because it was born along with modernism, i.e. cinematography. From its genesis the modern film was highly experimental and due to its potential to combine the modern tools of visual arts, music and storytelling by means of a truly modern technology, it became the emblematic form of representation of the modernist movement.

Watch [Luis Buñuel](#)'s famous Avant-Garde film, *An Andalusian Dog* from 1929.



Test your knowledge with the following [quiz](#).

3 SUGGESTED READINGS

Levenson, Michael, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
ISBN: 978 0 521 28125 6

Poplawski, Paul, *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism*. Greenwood Press, 2003.
ISBN: 978-0313310171