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## Modern English Literature II

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*Modern English Literature (Literature Survey Course)*

# Modern English Literature II

Peter Bocsor

## SUMMARY:

This lesson offers a general overview of the *beginning* and the *explosion* of modernism as a *cultural movement* with references to the development of scientific thinking along with some of the features of *modernist literature*.

## TOPICS INCLUDE:

- The Beginning of Modernism;
- The Explosion of Modernism.

# 1 THE BEGINNING OF MODERNISM

As we have seen in the previous lesson, the modernist movement aimed at a reinvention of culture and therefore, it is no surprise that its beginning was marked by a general questioning of traditional means of organizing literature, visual arts and music.

□ In his book about the history of science, [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#) published in 1962, Thomas S. Kuhn introduces the idea of *paradigm shift*, a prerequisite of scientific revolutions. The following [excerpt](#) from the book emphasizes the importance of radically new goals and methods in great scientific discoveries.

*The man who is striving to solve a problem defined by existing knowledge and technique*

*is not, however, just looking around. He knows what he wants to achieve, and he designs his instruments and directs his thoughts accordingly. Unanticipated novelty, the new discovery, can emerge only to the extent that his anticipations about nature and his instruments prove wrong. . . There is no other effective way in which discoveries might be generated.*

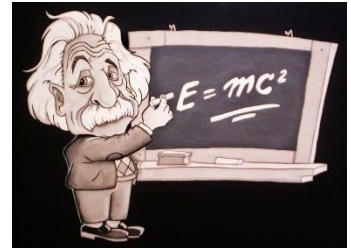
discourses, such as psychoanalysis or semiotics. Sigmund Freud's formulations about the dynamics of the human mind not only shed light on a yet unseen and utterly uncontrolled terrain of human existence, i.e. the sub- or unconscious, but they also projected a heterogeneous image of the human subject, which was no longer seen as a universal entity, unaffected by cultural or historical change.

□ [Sigmund Freud](#) first used the term [subconscious](#) in 1893 to describe associations and impulses that are not accessible to consciousness. He later abandoned the term in favour of unconscious, noting the following:

*If someone talks of subconsciousness, I cannot tell whether he means the term topographically – to indicate something lying in the mind beneath consciousness – or qualitatively – to indicate another consciousness, a subterranean one, as it were. He is probably not clear about any of it. The only trustworthy antithesis is between conscious and unconscious.*

[Sigmund Freud: Studies in Hysteria](#)

However, this progressive attitude, sometimes seen as a hostility towards what was holding back progress, was not the privilege of artists: the turn of the century witnessed a series of paradigm shifts in other areas of culture as well, including the academia. Perhaps comparably to the

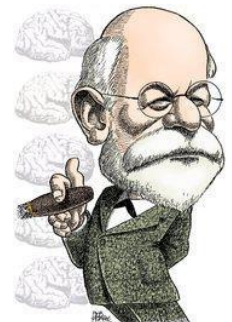


*Caricature of Albert Einstein*

ground-breaking

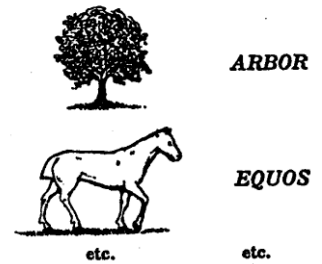
discoveries in natural sciences, various novel approaches appeared in the field of social sciences and offered a renewed understanding of the human person.

By stepping beyond their regular scope of investigation, disciplines like psychology and linguistics gave birth to new academic



*Caricature of Sigmund Freud*

A similarly novel approach was taken by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure, who discussed the linguistic sign as a connection between the signifier and the signified, and suggested the name *semiology*, for what became known as semiotics, a general study of the life of signs in a society, with a focus of attention reaching far beyond the confines of natural languages.



Saussure's illustration of the linguistic sign

□ & □ Read the beginning of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* published in 1939 and see how much you can “translate” into meaningful words or sentences:

*riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs. (...)*

*The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronk-  
onnbronntonerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounaw  
nshawntoohooorderenthurnuk!) of a once  
wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later  
on life down through all christian minstrelsy. The  
great fall of the offwall entailed at such  
short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan, erse  
solid man, that the humptyhillhead of himself  
promptly sends an unquiring one well to the  
west in quest of his tumptytumtoes: and  
their upturnpike-pointandplace is at the  
knock out in the park where oranges have  
been laid to rust upon the green since  
devlinsfirst loved livvy.*



James Joyce in 1915

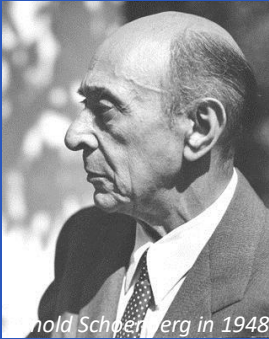
The beginnings of modernist literature show similar efforts to both change the focus of attention and reinvent the means of literary representation. In the genre of fiction authors like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce experimented with new methods of subjective narration, in a way offering a literary equivalent of Freud's insights into the operation of the human mind.

Others, like Joseph Conrad or D.H. Lawrence discussed novel topics, such as the issues of cultural or sexual identity, while Theodore Dreiser explored contemporary American culture by naturalistic means, and Willa Cather created narratives with ambiguous gender relations.

□ Literary naturalism emphasizes observation and the scientific method in the fictional portrayal of reality. Other characteristics of literary naturalism include: detachment, in which the author maintains an impersonal tone and disinterested point of view; determinism, the opposite of free will, in which a character's fate has been decided, even predetermined, by impersonal forces of nature beyond human control; and a sense that the universe itself is indifferent to human life. The novel would be an experiment where the author could discover and analyze the forces, or scientific laws, that influenced behavior, and these included emotion, heredity, and environment.

## 2 THE EXPLOSION OF MODERNISM

□ [Listen](#) to *String Quartet no. 2 Op. 10* by Arnold Schoenberg as a characteristic example of atonality in music.



The period referred to as the explosion of modernism took a further step towards the embracing of disruption, and a rejection of realism in literature and art, and of tonality in music. After the experience of World War I, the failure of the previous status quo seemed obvious, while the extent of destruction brought about by the phenomenon of machine warfare put an end to the uncritical embracing of



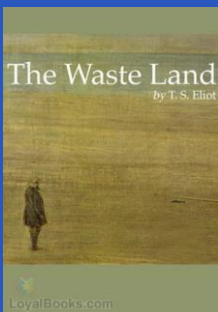
Marcel Duchamp:  
*Fountain*, 1917

modern technology.

The movement of Dadaism was characterized by nihilism, irrationality, and disillusionment, while it experimented with chance, and randomness. Avant-garde poetry was also experimenting with Dadaist techniques, such as the cut-up method developed by Tristan Tzara.

Another movement of modernist poetry is imagism, which focused on the precision of imagery and a clear language. This tradition influenced the

□ [Listen](#) to a reading of Eliot's "The Waste Land" by Nathaniel Krause.



□ & □ Read the excerpt from the [Dada Manifesto On Feeble Love And Bitter Love](#) written by Tristan Tzara in 1920 and try to write a poem according to his instructions:

*TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM*

*Take a newspaper.*

*Take some scissors.*

*Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.*

*Cut out the article.*

*Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.*

*Shake gently.*

*Next take out each cutting one after the other.*

*Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.*

*Them poem will resemble you.*

*And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.*

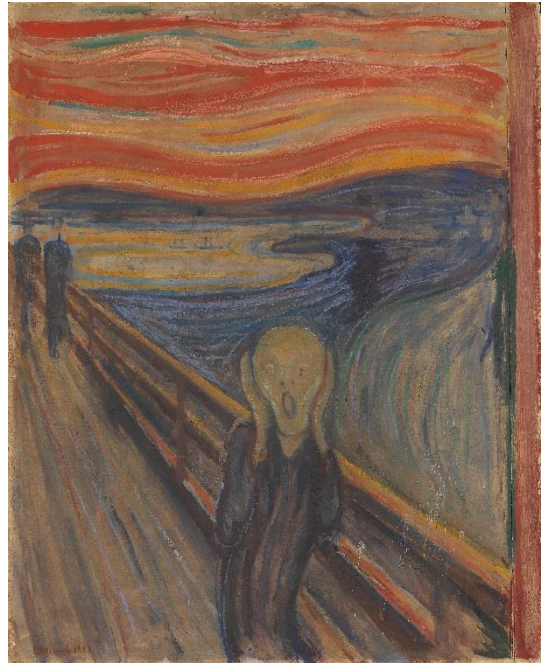




writing of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”, which is generally seen as a central work of modernist literature.

T.S. Eliot was also involved in another poetic movement, expressionism, which intended to present the world from a subjective perspective in order to evoke emotional effect. Members of the movement were inspired by various works of visual arts, such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* from 1893.

In cinematography, the explosion of modernism brought about the arrival of talkies, which allowed directors to combine speech, noise and music in order to enhance the effect of the film. Shortly after the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the attention of modern film-makers turned towards the experience of war. Based on a novel by Erich Maria Remarque, Louis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) used the new medium of sound to illustrate the horror experienced in the trenches by the soldiers fighting in WWI.



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil, tempera and pastel on cardboard

Compare the enthusiasm in the beginning with the trauma of war depicted at the end of Louis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* from 1930.



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

### 3 SUGGESTED READINGS

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

Perkins, David, *A History of Modern Poetry, Volume II: Modernism and After*. Harvard UP,  
1987. ISBN: 978-0674399471

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