

## **An Introduction To Modernism & Postmodernism**

Every literary period is modern in its own eyes. The ancient Greeks of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athens thought they were modern. The Romantics in their day thought they were modern. The writers of Realism saw themselves as modern in rejecting the Romantics. We just do not have a good term right now for the literary era in which we live. By default, we call most literary works written after World War I "modern."

It is difficult to look at our own times and see what literary era we are living in and come up with a good name for it. "Modern" is the best that we can do for now.

### **Some of the cultural and historical great events of the modern era include**

#### **Historical, Social, & Cultural Highlights of the Modern Era**

- two devastating almost-global wars: World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1941-1945)
- huge changes in industry and technology as compared to the 19th century
- the rise in power and influence of international corporations
- interconnectedness across the globe: cultural exchanges, transportation, communication, mass (or popular) culture from the West (with "West" being considered Europe and North America)
  
- the "Westernization" of many formerly traditional societies and nations and a resulting change in their values (often their the detriment of the formerly traditional society and nation). These "modern" values include a belief in the desirability of industrialization, individual political rights, democracy, mass literacy and education, private ownership of the means of production, the scientific method, public institutions like those in the West, middle class Western value systems, a disbelief in—or at least a questioning of—the existence of God, and (sometimes) the emancipation of women

The literature of the modern period has its roots in the literature of Europe and grows out of a reaction to Realism and Naturalism. As a reaction against Realism and Naturalism, some critics see in Modernism at least four "isms" or literary movements that make up the literature of the Modern era: **impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, and nihilism.**

#### **Four Literary "isms" Inside Modernism**

1. Whereas Realism attempted to portray external objects and events as the common or middle class man sees them in everyday life, *impressionism* tries to portray the **psychological impressions these objects and events make on characters**, emphasizing the **role of individual perception** and **exploring the nature of the conscious and unconscious mind.**
2. Whereas Realism tried to focus on these external objects and events, *expressionism* tried to express **the inner vision, the inner emotion, or the inner spiritual reality that seem more important than the external realities of objects and events.**
3. Whereas Realism focused on external objects and events as they are (verisimilitude), *surrealism* tried to liberate the subconscious, to see connections overlooked by the logical mind, *to deny the supreme authority of rationality* and so **portray objects and events as they seem rather than as they are.**
4. Whereas Realism tried to show the supreme importance of rationalness and reason, *absurdism* tried to duplicate in literature **the absurd conditions of contemporary life: nameless millions dying in wars**, commonplace horrors such as the Holocaust, a world in which **"God is dead"** cast mankind afloat in a chartless and **unknowable world void of a spiritual center**, the ultimate absurd circumstances in which contemporary humankind found itself.

## Modernism shares with Realism

- a focus on the **psychology of the individual**
- **sees the work of art as a coherent whole worthy of study.**

Some of the characteristics of Modernism are that those pieces of literature we call Modern often

### Characteristics of Modernism in Literature

- uses images ("word pictures") and symbols as typical and frequent literary techniques
- uses colloquial language rather than formal language
- uses language in a very self-conscious way, seeing language as a technique for crafting the piece of literature just as an artist crafts a piece of art like a sculpture or a painting
- uses language as a special medium that influences what that piece of literature can do or can be
- saw the piece of literature as an object crafted by an artist using particular techniques, crafts, skills (recall how the Romantics thought the piece of literature was a work of genius that somehow appears full-blown from the imagination of the genius). Form, style, and technique thus become as important--if not more so--than content or substance.
- often, the intention of writers in the Modern period is to change the way readers see the world and to change our understanding of what language is and does

## From Modernism to Postmodernism

"Postmodern" is the term used to suggest contemporary literature of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It differs from Modernism in several ways

### Characteristics of PostModernism in Literature

1. Whereas Modernism places faith in the ideas, values, beliefs, culture, and norms of the West, **Postmodernism rejects Western values and beliefs** as only a small part of the human experience and often rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms.
2. Whereas Modernism attempts to reveal profound truths of experience and life, **Postmodernism is suspicious of being "profound" because such ideas are based on one particular Western value systems.**
3. Whereas Modernism attempts to find depth and interior meaning beneath the surface of objects and events, **Postmodernism prefers to dwell on the exterior image and avoids drawing conclusions or suggesting underlying meanings** associated with the interior of objects and events.
4. Whereas Modernism focused on central themes and a united vision in a particular piece of literature, **Postmodernism sees human experience as unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, fragmented, discontinuous, "jagged," with no one specific reality possible.** Therefore, it focuses on a vision of a contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous, indeterminate, unfinished, "jagged" world.
5. Whereas Modern authors guide and control the reader's response to their work, **the Postmodern writer creates an "open" work in which the reader must supply his own connections, work out alternative meanings, and provide his own (unguided) interpretation.**