



# Modernism. An Introduction

# Pre – requisites for Understanding

- Neoclassicism dominates literary production up to the Romantic period in literature
- Neoclassicism has its roots in the Classical period (Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Sophocles).
- Much more of Plato than any other Greek fellow is to be found in literature.

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- Neoclassical Literature is orderly, logical, and fact-based, produced by authors who are detached and unemotional in their writing.
- This style of literature can be seen in the writings of Realism (roughly the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) ⇒ writers depicted life as they believed it really was.

# MODERNISM

- Modernism (roughly 1910 – mid 1930s) is an aesthetic movement recording **a radical break** with and from the past.
- **It is a cosmopolitan movement**
- multi-national and multi-disciplinary (i.e.: present in culture, philosophy, science, literature, art).
- It represents a **reaction to traditional standards**
- Specific to the literary movement is a major and **self-conscious break** with the American and European literary tradition.

# FACTORS

- 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, ⇒ expansion of the world
- brutal wars fought
- unrest in the churches that had held ground for centuries
- the return of Man at the center of thought and exploration
- society becomes more secular (though 95% of its citizens claim a belief in God)
- WWI: as technology gets better and better ⇒ more powerful weapons

# The social landscape of the time

- Rise of cities, advancing technology,
- Dehumanization resulting from mechanization
- Anonymity (aftermath of WWI, industrialization)
- Changing class structure (economic boom and swing)
- A. Einstein, quantum physics, uncertainty principle
- The Unconscious (Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*)
- The Stream of Consciousness (Bergson, W. James)
- Racial Memory (C. Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious*)
- Anthropology (Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, J. Weston, from *Ritual to Romance*)

# Friedrich Nietzsche's Message

- F. Nietzsche: "God is dead"
- morality is being slowly replaced with materialism and the quest for riches,
- man can no longer look at the structure and functioning of society around him
- He cannot "see" God's presence



**Charles Darwin's  
Theory of Natural Selection**

# What does Modernism look like?

- **anti-Romantic** (meaning is no longer in the act of art but in the art itself)
- **meaning is subjective** and no longer *needs* to be present—we do not look to art to see ourselves
- **deliberate break from the past** (in style, form, content, as well as historical location)
- **alienation** from society, **loneliness**
- procrastination, **inability to act**
- **agonized recollection of the past**, causing man to create own myths in his mind to fall back on



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- fear of death with a **constant awareness of death**
- **inability to express or to feel “real” love**
- ironic: attenuated emotion yet a **sense of excitement about the future** (that, incidentally never amounts to anything - a tragic struggle against disappointment)
- **world as a wasteland**
- **inability to see self reflected in the surrounding world, in others**

# THE WRITER WILL

- locate meaning from the viewpoint of the individual ⇒ **interior monologue**
- narrators located within the action of the fiction
- show events from a personal and particular (as opposed to an omniscient and/or “objective”) perspective ⇒ **shift of point of view**
- use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective
- the reader sees the story from many different “perspectives” ⇒ **multiple perspective**
- the omniscient narrator is **eclipsed**, especially as the ‘spokesperson’ for the author
- **Free indirect style**

# TIME

- Moves into the inner side of characters ⇒ **subjectivity**
- time becomes psychological time
- symbolic time rather than historical reality
- time as a structuring device through a movement backwards or forwards
- **Juxtaposition of events referring to different times**
- **Art attempts to “imitate” or “re-present reality”**
- Understanding of what constitutes reality changes
- Study of how reality can best be re-presented ⇒ presented to the mind and sense most faithfully and fully ⇒ **aesthetical research**

# FICTION WILL

- represent various typical themes: question of the reality of experience
- the **search for a ground of meaning in a world without God**
- the **critique of the traditional values of culture**
- the **loss of meaning and hope** in the modern world
- an **exploration of the ways the loss may be faced**
- show the surface disorder of the world/society and **nevertheless imply there exists a certain underlying unity**
- depict the myriad ways characters *can become* honorable and dignified in a world seemingly lacking both honor and dignity.

# What's the point of all this?

- Complete a search, or undertake a search and so be “battered” and educated by it,
- Look for an understanding of the self in the context of the world/society
- Simple search for meaning
- Make meaning out of experience to render living purposeful

# Modernist characters

- are generally on some type of **quest**, preparing to reward themselves (and often recreate themselves in a fashion that is understandable to them)
- **undertake the quest** so as to live all they can
- **find meaning in a disordered and confused world**
- do not know or understand a world of rationality and staunch morality

## THEY SEE

- a world characterized by loose morality
- people are easily seduced by transitory pleasures,
- people who exhibit little ambition or motivation or regard for the consequences of their actions.

# IN SHORT MODERNISM

- arises from a **sharp and biting sense of loss** on ontological grounding
- may be a response to a sense of social breakdown
- may be considered a reaction to WWI
- **sees the world as fragmented, unrelated in its pieces**
- perceives the connective threads of existence previously present as missing (i.e. **morality, religion, common goals and experiences**)
- **is ironic, but not unfeeling**
- **questions the purpose of art because it perceives the world as falling apart**