

Modernist poetry is characterized by themes of disillusionment, fragmentation and alienation from society. These characteristics are widely believed to be feelings brought on by the Industrial Revolution and the many social, political and economic changes that accompanied it. This multinational cultural movement began in the late 19th century and maintained its prevalence in art throughout World War I and the immediately subsequent years. Many modernist poems have speakers that seem to be struggling with their own definition of self and placement in society.

The rapid rise of cities in the late 19th century was brought on by the shift from a largely agricultural economy to a largely industrial one. Massive waves of immigrants from Europe seeking economic opportunities flocked to major cities. This left many artists and poets feeling alone and isolated in the midst of busy, populated cities. The poetry of the period reflects feelings of disenchantment, anxiety and hopelessness, especially in the work following the devastation of World War I. Modernist poets are also noted for their rejection of Romantic ideas and artistic styles, preferring to approach language with more suspicion, resulting in fragmented sentence structure.

While living in Paris before the war, Gertrude Stein explored the possibilities of creating literary works that broke with conventional syntactical and referential practices. Ezra Pound vowed to “make it new” and “break the pentameter,” while T.S. Eliot wrote The Waste Land in the shadow of World War I. Shortly after The Waste Land was published in 1922, it became the archetypical Modernist text, rife with allusions, linguistic fragments, and mixed registers and languages. Other poets most often associated with Modernism include H.D., W.H. Auden, Hart Crane, William Butler Yeats, and Wallace Stevens.

Modernism also generated many smaller movements; see also Acmeism, Dada, Free verse, Futurism, Imagism, Objectivism, Postmodernism, and Surrealism. Browse more Modern poets.