

MBU of M'sila
Department of English
Teacher: Mr. Sahed
Level: 3rd Year
Module: Literary Text

MODERNISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

MOVEMENT ORIGIN c. 1900

“On or about December 1910 human nature changed.” The great modernist writer Virginia Woolf wrote this in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in 1924. “All human relations shifted,” Woolf continued, “and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” This intentionally provocative statement was hyperbolic in its pinpointing of a date, but almost anyone who looks at the evolution of Western culture must note a distinct change in thought, behaviour, and cultural production beginning sometime in the late nineteenth century and coming to fruition sometime around the Second World War. This change, whether in art, technology, philosophy or human behaviour, is generally called Modernism.

Modernism, like Romanticism, designates the broad literary and cultural movement that spanned all of the arts and even spilled into politics and philosophy. Like Romanticism, Modernism was highly varied in its manifestations between the arts and even within each art. The dates when Modernism flourished are in dispute, but few scholars identify its genesis as being before 1860 and World War II is generally considered to mark an end of the movement's height. Modernist art initially began in Europe's capitals, primarily London, Milan, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and especially Paris; it spread to the cities of the United States and South America after World War I; by the 1940s, Modernism had thoroughly taken over the American and European academy, where it was challenged by nascent Postmodernism in the 1960s.

Modernism's roots are in the rapidly changing technology of the late nineteenth century and in the theories of such late nineteenth-century thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche. Modernism influenced painting first (Impressionism and Cubism are forms of Modernism), but in the decade before World War I such writers as Ezra Pound, Filippo Marinetti, James Joyce, and Guillaume Apollinaire translated the advances of the visual arts into literature. Such characteristically modernist techniques as stream-of-consciousness narration and allusiveness, by the late 1930s, spilled into popular writing and became standard.

The movement's concerns were with the accelerating pace of society toward destruction and meaninglessness. In the late 1800s many of society's certainties were undermined. Marx demonstrated that social class was created, not inherent; Freud reduced human individuality to an instinctive sex drive; Darwin provided fossil evidence that the Earth was much older than the estimate based on scripture; and Nietzsche argued that even the most deeply held ethical principles were simply constructions. Modernist writers attempted to come to terms with where humanity stood after its cornerstones had been pulverized. The modernists sifted through the shards of the past looking for what was valuable and what could inspire construction of a new society.

REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS

T. S. ELIOT (1888–1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888. He attended Harvard, the Sorbonne, and Oxford, studying philosophy and writing a dissertation on the logician F. H. Bradley. While in college, Eliot began writing poetry, but in 1908 he discovered French symbolist poetry and his whole attitude toward literature changed. Ezra Pound read some of Eliot's poetry in the 1910s and immediately decided that Eliot would be a member of his own literary circle. Pound advocated for Eliot with Harriet Monroe of *Poetry* magazine and got Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" published in that journal in 1915. Eliot had settled in London at the same time and married the emotionally unstable Vivian Haigh-Wood. Eliot struggled to make a living, working as a teacher and later at Lloyd's Bank until 1925.

In 1922 Eliot broke through with his brilliant and successful poem "The Waste Land," although the manuscript of the poem demonstrates that Ezra Pound played a large role in the editing of the poem. "The Waste Land" brought Eliot fame and a place at the centre of the burgeoning modernist movement. For the rest of the 1920s and 1930s, Eliot used his fame and his position as editor of a prominent literary journal (*The Criterion*) and as managing editor of the publishing house Faber & Faber to argue for a new standard of evaluating literature. In critical essays and his own poetry, he denigrated the romantics and neo-classicists and celebrated Dante and the Elizabethan "metaphysical" poets. He argued for the central role of "Tradition" in literature and downplayed the cult of individual genius created by the romantics.

For the remainder of his life, Eliot occupied the role of literary elder statesman. He continued to produce poems such as the *Four Quartets* but was never prolific. He became the model of the conservative, royalist, High Church English gentleman. He died January 4, 1965, the very embodiment of the literary establishment.

WILLIAM FAULKNER (1897–1962)

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897, to a family with deep Mississippi and Confederate roots. He grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, and briefly attended the University of Mississippi before leaving the state to seek his fortune as a writer. Settling briefly in New Orleans, Faulkner came under the tutelage of Sherwood Anderson and published his first book, *The Marble Faun*, a collection of short stories, in 1924. In 1929 he published the novel *Sartoris*, his first work set in the fictional Mississippi county of Yoknapatawpha. Others followed, including his masterpieces *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Faulkner received a great deal of critical attention for his works, but he never obtained the kind of financial success that he sought. Attempting to remedy this, he wrote two sensationalistic books (*Sanctuary* and *Requiem for a Nun*) and briefly moved to Los Angeles to work as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Faulkner died on July 6, 1962, in Byhalia, Mississippi.

Faulkner's novels

Much of Faulkner's best work recreates life in north Mississippi, renamed for prose fiction purposes Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner has been criticized as merely a regional novelist, but few doubt the wide-ranging nature of his symbolism, or that his books have a relevance far beyond the physical confines of the country he recreates with such vividness. Faulkner has been seen as one of the 'lost generation', but the world-weariness that typified this group is only a small element in his work, though visible. There is a brutal, almost sadistic element in his work, a very great idealism about the essential

perfectibility of man (something he expressed succinctly when accepting the Nobel Prize) and a tragic sense of unfulfilled potential. This latter theme is associated in much of his work with the South in the United States and its failure to avert its own destruction or recognise human values in the Negroes it enslaved. Failed humans in Faulkner's work are those who cannot love, and this inability dooms them. Sometimes they rise to near tragic status when it is perceived that their potential for love (and hence salvation) is stopped not by their own weakness but by the prejudice and malformed thought of the (Southern) society around them. Faulkner is equally opposed to the quest for self-aggrandisement, the non-idealistic human who cannot conceive of the finer emotions. Love and racial prejudice are the two main themes in Faulkner's greatest work, even if he never quite comes to terms with the inheritance of prejudice.

Faulkner's technique, sometimes aggressively modernist, has also attracted attention. Deliberately confused narrative lines, stream of consciousness, numerous narrators and intricate and elaborate style are common in his work. In some areas critics have sought to justify this experimentation time and chronology are rarely straightforward in a Faulkner novel, but it has been said that this merely reflects Faulkner's thematic belief that past and present flow in to each other, and do not exist in neat, separate compartments.

EZRA POUND (1885–1972)

In many ways, Ezra Pound was the father of literary Modernism. If nothing else, he almost single-handedly brought the techniques of Modernism to U.S. poets, while at the same time bringing the talents of American modernist poets to the notice of the avant-garde establishment. Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, on October 30, 1885, but soon after his birth his family moved to the suburbs of Philadelphia. He grew up in that area and attended the University of Pennsylvania (where he met William Carlos Williams and another important American modernist poet, Hilda Doolittle) and Hamilton College. After a short stint teaching at a small college in Indiana, Pound grew tired of what he saw to be American small-mindedness and moved to Venice, Italy.

In Venice, Pound resolved to become a poet. He published a book there, but soon relocated to London. In the decade he spent in London, Pound, through the strength of his own will, created movements and forced himself into the centre of those movements. Probably the most important of those movements was Imagism, a school of poetry that explicitly rejected Victorian models of verse by simply presenting images without authorial commentary. In 1920 Pound left London for Paris, where he spent a few years before becoming frustrated by the dominance of Gertrude Stein in the avant-garde scene there. In 1925 he moved to Rapallo, Italy, where he developed a strong affinity for Mussolini and Italian fascism. At this time he also began working in earnest on *The Cantos*, the epic poem that would become his life's work. In composing *The Cantos*, Pound also undertook translations, including Anglo-Saxon works such as "The Seafarer". As examined by Lee Garver, Pound's translations have not received much critical attention, but they did influence his politics and his writing.

Pound stayed in Italy for more than twenty years. During World War II he spoke on Italian state radio broadcasts aimed at U.S. soldiers; in 1943 he was indicted for treason as a result of these activities and, in 1945, returned to the United States to face trial. Found mentally unfit to defend himself, Pound was incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Washington, D.C. for thirteen years. Because of the intercession of such luminaries as T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Ernest Hemingway, in 1958 Pound was released from his incarceration and allowed to return to Italy. Settling in Venice, he published a few more books but by the mid-1960s he fell into a silence. He died in Venice, Italy, on November 1, 1972.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Hemingway was a reporter who saw service and was wounded in the First World War, as a member of a volunteer ambulance unit. His first great success was *A Farewell to Arms* (1919). Other well-known novels were *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), *To Have and To Have Not* (1937), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *The Old Man and Sea* (1952). He was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1954. He committed suicide by shooting himself, having been seriously ill for some time prior to his death.

Hemingway's novels

Hemingway symbolizes the 'lost generation' mentioned above. These were the men who had fought and served in the First World War and lost all faith and hope, both in themselves and in the institutions that went to make up society. All that was left was acceptance, and a retreat to what is sometimes referred to as a primal state, a state where only the basic emotions and attitudes are recognized, basic being defined as necessary for survival. The extent of this influence on Hemingway is arguable; the fact that he was obsessed with violence and brutality is not. He had spent much time hunting when he was young, and violence fascinated him. He sought to cauterize his own fear of death, brought about by his being wounded in 1918, by confronting physical danger whenever possible. His espousal of primitive virtues — fighting courage, resistance to pain, oneness with the natural environment — leads to what can be seen as an idealized portrait of what a true Romantic might recognize as a noble savage. Yet in Hemingway's best work there is far more than a portrayal of macho man. The lean, spare style of the 'lost generation' novels tends to hold emotion at arm's or rifle's length, but Hemingway can create a rich emotional pattern within the clipped, factual style he adopts. *The Torrents of Spring* is a very surprising novel, richly comic and in the final count self-mocking and heavily satirical on the cult of American masculinity.

What gives Hemingway his lasting value is his nihilism. His fear of death is partially also a fear that at the centre of life and death is Conrad's 'heart of darkness', a blank nothingness. That is what awaits us, the alternative being a cruel and rough world of violence and struggle. Hemingway is sometimes clumsy, but he confronts a fear at the heart of modern living, the fear that after all there may be nothing worth doing and nothing worth living for. It is the vision of the drama of the absurd, wrapped in fiercely realistic writing. It explains his love of richly physical experience, this giving at least some meaning to the passing of time, and it explains his conviction that we have only ourselves to rely on, and the recurrent theme in his novel of unfulfilled love. For Hemingway's characters to share their loneliness would be an easing of pain that he dare not admit to very often, for fear of wanting it too much. Both life and death are terrifying for Hemingway, and war often a potent symbol of life. A distinguishing feature is his ability to hold onto a certain faith in humanity, despite the fullness of his knowledge of its horrors.

John Steinbeck (1902-68)

John Steinbeck came from a humble middle-class background, and attended Stanford University to study marine biology. He left without graduating, intending to be a writer, and faced quite severe hardship in his early days until he found success with *Tortilla Flat* (1935). He followed this with the equally successful *Of Mice and Men* (1937). His most famous work, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, was *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Three later novels that are still widely read are *Cannery Row* (1944), *East of Eden* (1952) and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). A modest but lonely man, usually dismissive of his own work, he was married three times, and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

Steinbeck and the critics

Steinbeck's reputation has been preserved by the fact that his books have continued to sell in large numbers, although in the past he has been viewed with some uncertainty by the critical establishment. He has been accused of superficiality, sentimentality; uneven style, melodrama and muddled thinking. He has also been called a 'regional novelist', in a manner that suggests his work is parochial and limited in meaning and scope. Conservatives have criticised his work for being communist, communists criticised it for not going far enough and for ignoring the obvious need for a revolution that his work suggests.

Many of these supposed criticisms suggest indirectly the strengths and lasting qualities of his work. There are no great intellectual surprises in what he writes, and he had few pretensions, to being a critic or great thinker. There is a deep and abiding sympathy in his work for ordinary men and women, and immensely powerful descriptive skills, particularly when it comes to evoking and recreating atmosphere and place. He is a master of dialogue, with an unerring ability to present colloquial and vernacular speech. He can describe nature superbly and wholly without sentimentality, and use those descriptions to powerful symbolic effect. He has a consistent eye for the creation of tense and dramatic situations, and for intimate description of the relationships within a tightly knit group of people. The epic migration of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not only a poignant picture of the depression in the United States; but also a symbol for the search for values.

Other novels and novelists

The Great Gatsby

One of the great classics of the twentieth century is *The Great Gatsby* (1925), by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940). It catches exactly the rotten-sweet blend of extravagance and corruption in America in the 1920s. It is a novel about futility, and based round a theme central to much American writing: a man and a woman seek to contain between them all that is needed to attain a dream of happiness and fulfilment, but that happiness and fulfilment are brutally snatched away from them as their own past, their own present actions and a hostile society destroy them and their dream. The poignancy is all the stronger because, as with a tragic hero, the source of their undoing is themselves, just as they are the source of their potential strength. At the same time, the hero of *The Great Gatsby* is not great at all, but a Prohibition bootlegger and criminal. The glamour of Gatsby's lifestyle is shown as a sham, a futile illusion.

Two other novels which are almost symbols for and of twentieth-century life are *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger (b. 1919) and *Catch 22* (1961) by Joseph Heller (b. 1923).

The Catcher in the Rye

The Catcher in the Rye tells the story of the adolescent Holden Caulfield, convinced that all around him is 'phony' and desperately trying to preserve his innocence and essential goodness in a world where even his old English teacher makes homosexual advances to him and the prostitute he did not sleep with gets him involved in a fight for more money. The novel shows the adult world as almost wholly hypocritical, and respects Caulfield's search for something better, something he is hardly allowed to find.

THE CANTOS

If *Ulysses* is the most successful and greatest work of the modernist movement, Ezra Pound's long poem *The Cantos* is perhaps its most characteristic. Its composition and contents mirror the ideas of the modernists. It is composed of fragments, of different voices from different times and places. It attempts to diagnose the ills of the modern world, comes up with an ultimately failed solution, and imagines a better world that existed once and could exist in fragmentary form again. Pound began writing his "poem including history," as he called it, in 1917, when he published early versions of three of the cantos in a literary magazine. He began working in earnest on the poem in the 1920s after he moved to Italy, and continued working on it, eventually publishing eight installments, until the late 1960s. The poem is an epic, attempting to tell "the tale of the tribe" (civilized humanity) from ancient to modern times.

Structured to mirror and include characters from two of history's great epics (Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*), the poem was originally planned to include 120 *cantos*, or shorter chapters. There is no plot per se, but the poem broadly moves from hell (literally but also in the sense of an utterly fallen civilization) to purgatory, where historical figures such as Confucius, Sigismondo Malatesta, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Mussolini are introduced. Pound wanted to highlight moments in history when a just and aesthetically appreciative society existed or could have existed. The poem veered sharply back to Pound's own life during the 1940s, when Pound found himself working for the Fascists and ultimately was incarcerated in a mental hospital in the United States. As Pound neared the end of his life and of the poem, he discovered and recorded glimpses of paradise on earth.

Public opinion of the work varies dramatically. Many readers can make no sense of the poem; others find that it contains some of the most remarkable passages in English-language poetry. Critics have been similarly divided. Although the poem is solidly in the canon of American literature and is considered one of the central works of modernist literature, many scholars and academics dismiss it as a failed, obscure, and ultimately fascist poem.

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Ernest Hemingway published *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929. He was already famous for his portrait of dissolute youth in Paris, *The Sun Also Rises*, but this novel was a great step forward in terms of sophistication and importance. It tells of Hemingway's own experiences as an ambulance driver during the last days of World War I; his wounding and convalescence and affair with a nurse. More important, though, was Hemingway's revolutionary technique. His prose was terse and journalistic, stripped of adjectives and any construction that might call attention to itself. Such narration achieved a numbness that reflected the mental brutalization the war visited upon the hero—and the author. Hemingway eschews abstract concepts such as glory, duty, and honour because, like his hero's, his own experience during the war showed him that these were weapons used by people in power to manipulate ordinary people.

After the popular and critical success of this novel, Hemingway became an international celebrity with literary credibility. He continued to write for much of the rest of his life and produced at least two great novels (*For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*) before committing suicide in 1961.

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

William Faulkner, a Mississippian, began his career as a writer heavily influenced by the regionalist Sherwood Anderson, with whom he worked in New Orleans (in the 1920s, the home of American Bohemianism). But Faulkner quickly outdid his teacher. He created an entire fictional world in which almost all of his fiction was set: Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. In this world the past always

impinges upon the present, and Faulkner's fiction is full of narrative devices intended to outflank language's need to be based in time. His 1929 *The Sound and the Fury* contains Faulkner's most successful experiments with time.

The novel is the story of the fall of the Compson family that culminates in the suicide of son Quentin. Told by a series of narrators, the stories in the book provide different perspectives on the same events and the reader must compare all of the different versions in order to understand what "really" happened. Most difficult is the narration of Benjy, a retarded boy who has no conception of time. In his narration there is no differentiation between what happened years ago, what happened yesterday, and what is happening now. Faulkner's experiments did not gain him a large audience in the United States (in search of income, he moved to Hollywood in a failed attempt to be a screenwriter) but his influence was vast among Latin American writers, especially such magical realists as Gabriel Garcia Márquez.

"THE WASTE LAND"

T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," published in 1922, is the single most important modernist poem. Essentially plotless, the poem instead attempts to capture historical development to the present day by use of allusion. Characters such as Tiresias, the Smyrna merchant, and an East London house-wife, wander through the poem. London, the "Unreal City" in the fog, becomes the synecdoche for the fallen world as a whole. The poem moves from Elizabethan times to the ancient world to the present and ends, finally, with a small failing voice speaking Sanskrit.

Interestingly, in its original version the poem was six times as long and titled "He Do The Police in Different Voices." When he was still a struggling poet, T. S. Eliot showed the poem to Ezra Pound, asking for his advice. Pound performed what he called a "Caesarean operation" on Eliot's manuscript, telling him to cut the links between the vignettes so that the poem appeared as a series of fragments. Eliot never called attention to Pound's central role in creating "The Waste Land" and it was not until the 1960s, when the original manuscript was found, that Pound's true role became publicly known.

Most critics have seen the poem as expressing a fundamental despair at the sense that, with the loss of all certainties, the world was nothing but "fragments" that are "shored against [our] ruin." It continues to vex students with its complexity, but even the most basic reading evokes a sense of desperation and loss.

THEMES

TECHNOLOGY

In very real terms, the entire world and the way that humans understood that world changed between 1860 (when the modernist period is generally understood to have begun) and 1940. In 1860 the idea of traveling at a mile a minute was but a dream, as was the notion of flight for human beings. The photograph was new; moving pictures, much less moving pictures that talked, were only fantasies. Electrical signals being sent through wires was a possible dream, but the idea that voices could be transmitted was fantastic. The idea that voices could be transmitted without wires, through the air, was utterly preposterous.

In 1940 the world was a different place. Machines allowed people to see moving, talking pictures; to travel at more than one hundred miles an hour; to fly through the air; to transmit both voices and images without wires; to talk, in real time, with someone at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Humans relied on machines to a much greater extent than they ever had. It is hard today to conceive of a world without powered machines, but in 1860 many people in the United States lived their entire lives without ever encountering a powered machine. By the 1940s machines had made it possible to communicate or travel—or destroy—with much greater speed and efficiency than anyone had ever dreamed in 1860.

The modernist writers, almost as a rule, feared the new technology and left it out of their writing. Joyce set his masterpiece *Ulysses* in 1904, before motorcars had become widespread. Eliot and Pound move easily between historical periods but rarely mention the technological advances that had permeated all aspects of urban life by 1920. Rather, they look back to the classical or medieval or Renaissance periods, fearing that dependence upon machines will cloud their minds, make them less able to understand what is truly important about being human. The only modernist writer who really engaged with technology, in fact, is the Italian futurist writer Filippo Marinetti. Marinetti was a Milanese who came to London to perform spoken-word pieces that celebrated machines. The glory of airplanes, cars, factories, and machine guns was always the subject of Marinetti's verse. Blinded by his fascination with the clean efficiency of machines, Marinetti ended up advocating the violence of World War I and, in the mid-1920s, became an apologist for Mussolini.

FREUD

Modernist novelists had no more important influence than the Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. Although he did not actually invent the discipline, Freud is considered the father of psychoanalysis. His writings propose a three-part model of the psyche consisting of the id (or the primitive drives), the ego (the sense of the self), and the superego (or the moral lessons and codes of behaviour people internalize). Freud believed that human behaviour and neuroses have causes of which people are unaware, causes that stem from childhood experiences or from the thwarting of certain basic urges. Psychoanalysis was predicated on the idea that an analyst could pick out certain ideas and reactions in a patient that would indicate the real problem.

Such writers as Woolf and Joyce took this idea and turned it into the basis for fiction. They were reacting against realist writers, who sought to simply record the unadorned facts of the world around. Doing so was impossible, the modernists believed; the psyche of the narrator will always be affected by unknown forces and thus is never able to capture reality without any kind of bias or alteration. Rather, people should attempt simply to record thoughts, for by this the reader can understand things about the narrator that the narrator him- or herself does not. Joyce's first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, records the thoughts of Stephen Dedalus from the time he is a "nicens little boy" to the time he is a college student. In her short story "The Mark on the Wall," Virginia Woolf captures a moment in time as a woman looks at a mark on the wall. The narration follows her mind as she extrapolates all of the possibilities of what the mark could be and follows all of the subconscious connections her mind makes with seemingly unrelated topics. Modernist writers felt that the "interior monologue" or the stream-of-consciousness technique gave readers access to the character's subconscious.

THE "UNREAL CITY"

In "The Waste Land" Eliot describes London as an "Unreal City," a city through which shades of the dead troop over the bridges. Modernism was the first literary movement to take urban life as a given, as a form of experience that was categorically different from any other kind of life. The French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire was fascinated by the "flaneur," the man who strolls the city aimlessly as a way of life. The anonymity of the city, its darkness, its mechanization, its vast power, all inspired the modernists; it attracted and repelled them in equal measure. Modernist writers (most of them, interestingly enough, from suburbs or small cities) gravitated to London and Paris, St. Petersburg and New York, where they found each other, formed movements, drank and fought together, and broke apart.

London was the first home of Anglo-American Modernism, but the city's essentially commercial character eventually sent most of the writers elsewhere. By the 1920s, Paris was the home of one of the

greatest concentration of artists in history. In the 1930s, with war looming in Europe, the artistic energy moved west to New York. But no matter what city, the city was almost always the subject of modernist literature. Although he could not stay there and moved between Paris, Trieste, and Zurich during his “exile,” everything James Joyce ever wrote was about the vibrant urban life of Dublin. The poet Hart Crane composed his epic poem “The Bridge” about the Brooklyn Bridge, the monument of engineering and architectural beauty that made New York City the centre of American urban life. Eliot’s melancholy poems point out the loneliness and lack of meaning city-dwellers often feel. The city, where technology and masses of people and anonymity come together, became the master trope of Modern-ism itself.

ALIENATION

Alienation is defined as the sense of being alien, or of not belonging, to one’s own milieu. It can also mean separation from something. If the city is the master trope (or image) of Modernism, alienation is its master theme. Almost all modernist writing deals with alienation in some form. The primary kind of alienation that Modernism depicts is the alienation of one sensitive person from the world. The stream-of-consciousness technique of narration is particularly well suited for this because readers can see the inner feelings of a person and witness his or her essential self along with the actions of the world outside. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s protagonist and stand-in, is alienated from his family, his friends, his religion, and his country because of devotion to art and his certainty that nobody can understand and accept him. Woolf’s heroines are doubly alienated from the world because of their status as women; because of their sex, they are not allowed to participate in the world of politics, education, or economics. Eliot’s narrators (most notably Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”) are confronted by a world that is just broken shards of a discarded whole; everyone else seems to walk through the world calmly but they cannot. And for Ezra Pound, it is the world itself that has been alienated, by the forces of greed, from what should truly be historical heritage.

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

Surrounded by the debris of all of the smashed certainties of the past, modernist writers looked at the contemporary world as a directionless place, without centre or certainty. These past certainties, although oppressive and constructed on specious values, were at least some kind of foundation for the world. The modernist age set out to break apart these certainties; World War I then finished the job and horrified the world by demonstrating what humanity was capable of. Writers in the modernist age often felt that they were at the end of history. Because of this, modernist poems and novels often incorporate and mix together huge swaths of history. Allusion brief references to people, places, things, or even languages and literatures—was the characteristic modernist technique for including history. Partly because of their profound uneasiness in the modern world, modernist writers alluded constantly to the past.

This is not to say that the modernists were uncritical admirers of the past. In his poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” Ezra Pound wrote that World War I’s vast slaughter was ultimately for the purpose of defending “an old [b——] gone in the teeth. . . a botched civilization. . . two gross of broken statues. . . [and] a few thousand battered books.” Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus says that “history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” and the Irishmen who live in past glories are portrayed as buffoons and fools. But both of these writers’ works are filled with allusions to the past. And almost all of the important modernist writers, as well, incorporate in their work the belief that the past exists in the present.

Pound, for instance, called his *The Cantos* “a poem including history” and the list of allusions in that poem has over ten thousand entries.

STYLE

NARRATION

Modernism sought to accurately portray the world not as it is but as humans actually experience it. Modernist literature, then, relied especially on advances in narrative technique, for narration (a voice speaking) is an essential way to convey the perceived or experienced world. Interestingly, the narrative techniques in modernist poetry and modernist fiction illustrate the same ideas about experience, but they do so in very different ways.

Modernist fiction tends to rely on the stream-of-consciousness or “interior monologue” techniques. This kind of narration purports to record the thoughts as they pass through a narrator’s head. The unpredictable connections that people make between ideas demonstrate something about them, as do the things they try to avoid thinking about. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom attempts not to dwell on his knowledge that his wife will cheat on him as he wanders the city, so thoughts of his wife, of Blazes Boylan (her lover), or of sex make him veer quickly in another mental direction. Also, a number of small ideas and images recur throughout the book: an advertisement for Plumtree’s Potted Meat, for instance, and the Greek word *metempsychosis*. These ideas crop up without any apparent pattern and get stuck in Bloom’s head, just as a song or a phrase might resonate through people’s minds for hours and then just disappear. This narrative technique attempts to record how scattered and jumbled the experience of the world really is, and at the same time how deeper patterns in thoughts can be discerned by those (such as readers) with some distance from them. That humans are alienated from true knowledge of themselves is the implicit contention of the stream-of-consciousness form of narration.

Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, by contrast, did not delve deeply into the individual consciousness. Rather, they attempted to model the fragmented nature of minds and civilization in their narratives. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” has dozens of speakers that succeed each other without warning: The poem opens with the voice of the dead speaking from underground, then shifts quickly to the unattributed voice of Countess Marie Larisch of Bavaria, then shifts just as quickly to a stentorian, priestly voice. The effect is a cacophony of voices, a mass of talking devoid of connection.

In Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* or William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, this array of voices is taken to its logical conclusion. The poet speaks in many different voices, but historical figures speak, artworks speak, ordinary people speak. In both of these long poems, the poets transcribed letters (Pound used letters of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, while Williams used the letters of his friends and admirers) and included them in the poem. The poet, in this case, is less a writer than a compiler of voices; it is the arrangement of pieces, not the content of each individual piece that is important. The effect is to “decentre” the reader. Readers are no longer sure where the poet (with his or her implicit authority over the text) exists in the poem.

ALLUSION

An allusion is a brief reference to a person, place, thing, idea or language that is not actually present. Because of modernist theories about the omnipresence of the past, allusions are difficult to avoid in modernist literature. Joyce, Eliot, and Pound—the three authors generally acknowledged as the leaders of the modernist movement in English—included allusion as perhaps the central formal device in their writing. The past is everywhere in the writing of these three, and indeed this is the case with most of the other modernist writers.

But it is in Joyce, Eliot, and Pound that the allusion is particularly important. Indeed, it is essentially impossible to understand their work without tracking down their more important allusions, and scholars have compiled long volumes explaining each reference in *Ulysses* and *The Cantos*. Some of their

allusions are quite clear: for instance, in “Canto IV,” Pound includes the lines “Palace in smoky light, / Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones.” Most readers would be able to identify those lines as a reference to Homer’s *Iliad*, which tells the story of the end of the Trojan War. But not all of Pound’s allusions are so clear: “Canto VIII” begins “These fragments you have shelved (shored)”; the allusion is to Eliot’s famous line “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” at the end of “The Waste Land”. Eliot’s line is well-known, but only those who have studied poetry would know it. And many of Pound’s allusions, indeed most of them, are frankly inaccessible. Pound spends a number of cantos alluding to Sigismondo Malatesta, an obscure Italian warrior-prince from the Renaissance. Only because Pound made him famous does anyone recognize his name.

Joyce structured *Ulysses* to work on numerous levels. All of the mundane events in Bloom’s day correspond to episodes in Homer’s epic *Odyssey*, for instance, but the book also works as a retelling of Irish history, of the growth and development of the human fetus, and of the history of the Catholic Church. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” can be read simply as a collection of allusions or fragments as he calls them in the last section: appearing in the poem are the Greek seer Tiresias, a pair of working-class women in East London, a number of Hindu deities, Dante, and an American ragtime singer. These references are not explained; they just appear and the reader must make what sense of it he or she can. In the critical reevaluation of Modernism that took place during the 1990s, one of the central questions was whether one must understand all of the allusions in order genuinely to appreciate the work.

MOVEMENT VARIATIONS

FIN DE SIÈCLE

Fin de siècle is a French term meaning “end of the century.” The term is used to denote the interval between 1880 and 1914, a transition period when writers and other artists abandoned old conventions and looked for new techniques and objectives. Many despaired that western culture was morally degrading, but others anticipated the new century with great hope for what was to come. *Fin de siècle* has strong associations with French Symbolism but was also an immediate precursor to Modernism in Europe and the Americas. Writers commonly associated with the *fin de siècle* mindset are Stéphane Mallarmé, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw.

IMAGISM

Imagism is the best-known of the dozens of small movements in modernist poetry in the years leading up to World War I. Ezra Pound formulated the “rules” of Imagism, which were essentially a rejection of Victorian poetry. Imagist poets were encouraged to “simply present” an image; the poet “does not comment.” Excessive adjectives and the voice of the poet were anathema. Finally, Pound urged imagists to use the rhythm of the metronome.

From his base in London, Pound published the anthology *Des Imagistes* in 1914. Other poets in the movement included H. D., William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, and Amy Lowell; H. D.’s poem “Oread” embodies the imagist project. Pound soon moved on from Imagism but Lowell, from Boston, continued to publish imagist anthologies for years after the movement had become irrelevant.

THE LOST GENERATION

The “Lost Generation” was a name given by Gertrude Stein to the group of young Americans who migrated to Paris in the 1920s. Ernest Hemingway is the most famous of these Americans (in fact, it was to him that Stein said, “you are all a lost generation”), but there were dozens. Many of these Americans were artists and writers, but just as many were not and were attracted to Paris because of the strong dollar and the bohemian lifestyle. Hemingway’s first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, is the enduring portrait of this group as they wander from Paris to Spain and back, looking for thrills and occasionally working.

The Lost Generation's members constantly crossed paths with the European artists who were already living there. Pablo Picasso, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Stein, Constantin Brancusi, and many others had made Paris their home and had made it into one of the great centres of artistic activity. When the "Lost Generation" arrived, many of the established artists befriended these Americans, took advantage of them, or even worked with them. By the end of the 1920s, though, most of these Americans had returned home.