

American Literary Modernism

Modernism, like most literary movements, includes a broad range of authors, themes, and styles.

American literary modernism is traditionally placed between 1915 and 1945 and is marked by the following characteristics and influences:

Experimentation: Modernists are daringly original and search for new forms of expression to respond to a new, more complex and more technological age and recent revelations in human psychology and sexuality. Ezra Pound's dictate—"Make it new!"—becomes the unofficial battle cry of the Modernists.

Imagery & Symbolism: The rise of Imagism, a school of poetry that favors precision of imagery and clear, sharp language, produces poems like this one, by Ezra Pound:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Both prose and poetry become more subtle and dense in their symbolism, more reliant upon allusions to earlier literary works so as to suggest mythological meaning, and more inclined to intellectual depth and brilliance.

Disillusionment & Self-imposed Exile: Modernists tend to reject the social, economic and spiritual values of Western culture and all related institutions, including government and church. Irving Howe, in the essay "The Idea of the Modern," states that "the modern writer can no longer accept the claims of the world... the usual morality seems counterfeit; taste, a genteel indulgence; tradition, a worrisome fetter." Many young writers become disillusioned by the Red Scares of the 1920s, race riots, political and corporate corruption, and prohibition. Many young American authors take up residence in the literary colonies of Paris, London, and Rome.

Existentialism: Modernists reject traditional philosophical and religious systems of belief in favor of existentialism, which perceives a meaningless, amoral, chaotic, Godless world, in which individuals may or may not give meaning to their lives on their own.

Alienation: American Modernists often feel like outsiders within their own culture. European residences and experimentation with non-Western models result from this alienation. Several major poets, including Ezra Pound, look east to Asian literary models for their experiments. Many Modernists search for their own forms rather than follow the

traditional literary forms of their culture. In addition, many believe that their psychological states cannot be adequately recorded in the traditional forms.

Control: One response to a chaotic world is carefully controlled art. Modernist poetry and prose is particularly marked by control. Poems, especially those written by the Imagists, are especially precise, carefully crafted and reworked, and are rarely the result of spontaneous outbursts of emotion or energy.

Influence of Freud and Jung: Advancements in psychological theory inspire the imaginations of authors who experiment in their fiction and drama with hidden motives and universal archetypes.

Influence of Darwin: Biologist Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) proposes a theory of evolution via natural selection and thereby undermines religious certainty and the idea of human uniqueness. Most importantly, the idea that human beings are driven by the same impulses as the lower animals seems to undo traditional ideas about a divine plan and innate human spirituality.

Influence of Marxism & Proletarian Art and Literature: For many Modernists in the period between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and World War II, communism and socialism promise a new, more equitable culture. In the 1930s, proletarian art and literature thrive in America for the only time. Many writers, including John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck, produce their best work as a result of this source of inspiration.

Classical Antiquity: Like the neoclassicists before them, many Modernists draw inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman culture. Their allusions are often erudite and frustrating for many students. T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and H.D. especially, seek to revive a classical spirit with allusions, reinterpretations, and contemporizing of Greek mythology. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot appropriates the voice of Homer's blind seer, Tiresias, and H.D. frequently references Greek gods and goddesses as she connects and blends her life to the ancient mythology in her poems.

Primitivism: Many Modernists draw inspiration from African art and American Indian art, both of which begin to receive critical attention and celebration. Authors often turn to more primitive settings in exploring Freudian and Jungian theories of human psychology and sexuality. In addition, the Harlem Renaissance is fueled, in part, by a sense of pride in African heritage.

Harlem Renaissance: A feeling of pride in African heritage and in African-American culture blossoms between the World Wars in a number of American cities, not just Harlem. While the artists of the Harlem Renaissance experiment with literary forms—often adapting musical structures derived from jazz and the blues to poetry, for example—their work tends to be more accessible than that of many other Modernists. However, like most Modernists, these African-American writers express disillusionment with America and its unfulfilled promises.