**MODERNISM & MODERNIST LITERATURE:**

**INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

**INTRODUCTION**

Broadly speaking, ‘modernism’ might be said to have been characterized by a deliberate and often radical shift away from tradition, and consequently by the use of new and innovative forms of expression Thus, many styles in art and literature from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are markedly different from those that preceded them. The term ‘modernism’ generally covers the creative output of artists and thinkers who saw ‘traditional’ approaches to the arts, architecture, literature, religion, social organization (and even life itself) had become outdated in light of the new economic, social and political circumstances of a by now fully industrialized society.

Amid rapid social change and significant developments in science (including the social sciences) , modernists found themselves alienated from what might be termed Victorian morality and convention. They duly set about searching for radical responses to the radical changes occurring around them, affirming mankind’s power to shape and influence his environment through experimentation, technology and scientific advancement, while identifying potential obstacles to ‘progress’ in all aspects of existence in order to replace them with updated new alternatives.

All the enduring certainties of Enlightenment thinking, and the heretofore unquestioned existence of an all-seeing, all-powerful ‘Creator’ figure, were high on the modernists’ list of dogmas that were now to be challenged, or subverted, perhaps rejected altogether, or, at the very least, reflected upon from a fresh new ‘modernist’ perspective.

Not that modernism categorically defied religion or eschewed all the beliefs and ideas associated with the Enlightenment; it would be more accurate to view modernism as a tendency to question, and strive for alternatives to, the convictions of the preceding age. The past was now to be seen and treated as different from the modern era, and its axioms and undisputed authorities held up for revision and enquiry.

The extent to which modernism is open to diverse interpretations, and even rife with apparent paradoxes and contradictions, is perhaps illustrated by the uneasy juxtaposition of the viewpoints declared by two of modernist poetry’s most celebrated and emblematic poets: while Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was making his famous call to “make it new”, his contemporary T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was stressing the indispensable nature of tradition in art, insisting upon the artist’s responsibility to engage with tradition. Indeed, the overtly complex, contradictory character of modernism is summed up by Peter Childs, who identifies “paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair”

**THE ‘EARLY MODERN’ PERIOD**

‘Early modern’ is a term used by historians to refer to the period approximately from AD 1500 to 1800, especially in Western Europe. It follows the Late Medieval period, and is marked by the first European colonies, the rise of strong centralized governments, and the beginnings of recognizable nation-states that are the direct antecedents of today’s states, in what is called modern times. This era spans the two centuries between the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution that provided the basis for modern European and American society, and in subsequent years the term ‘early modern has evolved to be less euro-centric, more generally useful for tracking related historical events across vast regions, as the cultural influences and dynamics from one region impacting on distant others has become more appreciated.

The early modern period is characterized by the rise of science, the shrinkage of relative distances through improvements in transportation and communications and increasingly rapid technological progress, secularized civic politics and the early authoritarian nation-states. Furthermore, capitalist economies and institutions began their rise and development, beginning in northern Italian republics such as Genoa, and the Venetian oligarchy. The early modern period also saw the rise of the economic theory of mercantilism. As such, the early modern period represents the decline and eventual disappearance, in much of the European sphere, of Christian theocracy, feudalism and serfdom. The period includes the Reformation, the disastrous Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), which is generally considered one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, in addition to the Commercial Revolution, the European colonization of the Americas, the Golden Age of Piracy and the peak of the European witch-hunt craze.

The expression ‘early modern’ is sometimes (and incorrectly) used as a substitute for the term ‘Renaissance’. However, ‘Renaissance’ is properly used in relation to a diverse series of cultural developments that occurred over several hundred years in many different parts of Europe – especially central and northern Italy – and spans the transition from late medieval civilization to the opening of the ‘early modern’ period.

Artistically, the Renaissance is clearly distinct from what came later, and only in the study of literature is the early modern period considered broadly as a standard: music, for instance, is generally divided between Renaissance and Baroque; similarly, philosophy is divided between Renaissance philosophy and the Enlightenment. In other fields, perhaps, there is more continuity through the period, as can be seen in the contexts of warfare and science.

**THE ‘MODERN’ PERIOD**

The modern period (known also as the ‘modern era’, or also ‘modern times’) is the period of history that succeeded the Middle Ages (which ended in approximately 1500 AD) As a historical term, it is applied primarily to European and Western history.

The modern era is further divided as follows:

\* The ‘early period’, outlined above, which concluded with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the mid 18th century.

\* The 18th century Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution in Britain, can be posited amid the dawning of an ‘Age of Revolutions’, beginning with those in America and France, and then pushed forward in other countries partly as a result of the upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars.

\* Our present or contemporary era begins with the end of these revolutions in the 19th century, and includes World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

The modern period has been a period of significant development in the fields of science, politics, warfare, and technology. It has also been an age of discovery and globalisation: it is during this time that the European powers and later their colonies, began their political, economic, and cultural colonisation of the rest of the world.

By the late 19th and early 20th century, modernist art, politics, science and culture had come to dominate not only Western Europe and North America, but almost every civilised area on the globe, including movements thought of as opposed to the West and globalisation. The modern era is closely associated with the development of individualism, capitalism, urbanisation and a belief in the positive possibilities of technological and political progress.

The brutal wars and other problems of this era, many of which come from the effects of rapid change and the connected loss of strength of traditional religious and ethical norms, have led to many reactions against modern development: optimism and belief in constant progress has been most recently criticised by ‘postmodernism’, while the dominance of Western Europe and North America over other continents has been criticised by postcolonial theory.

The concept of the modern world as distinct from an ancient or medieval one rests on a sense that ‘modernity’ is not just another era in history, but rather the result of a new type of change. This is usually conceived of as progress driven by deliberate human efforts to better their situation.

Advances in all areas of human activity – politics, industry, society, economics, commerce, transport, communication, mechanisation, automation, science, medicine, technology, and culture – appear to have transformed an ‘old world’ into the ‘modern’ or ‘new world’. In each case, the identification of the old Revolutionary change can be used to demarcate the old and old-fashioned from the modern.

Much of the modern world has replaced the Biblical-oriented value system, re-evaluated the monarchical government system, and abolished the feudal economic system, with new democratic and liberal ideas in the areas of politics, science, psychology, sociology, and economics.

**Modernism and Modernity**

Modernism is frequently characterised as a rejection of modernity and all its consequences – urban alienation, capitalism, changing social relations, modern inventions. But individual stances towards modernity vary from author to author and from piece to piece. It’s not unusual to encounter contradictory attitudes within one literary piece. This very struggle for meaning or an outright refusal of coherent meaning is very much a staple of modernism.

Attitudes towards modernity can be broadly divided into the following categories:

--Glorification

---Rejection

--Escapism

But mostly, modern attitudes towards modernity weren’t straightforward. Some aspects were celebrates; the camera, for instance, was considered an apt metaphor of human perception – always fragmentary and incomplete. Other aspects, such as rampant capitalism or instrumental reason, were condemned (however, writers were, willy-nilly, enmeshed in the emerging market relations).

Some moderns find solace in a glorified past. Others, refuse coherent meaning and representation in the face of unacceptable reality. Fiction is for many writers a bulwark against soulless utilitarianism.

**Formal Characteristics of Modernism in Literature:**

Modernism in literature is instantly recognizable. It is characterised by:

* Refusal of coherent meaning
* Rejection of realism
* Subjectivity
* Split temporalities
* Unstable identity
* Idiosyncratic language
* Metafiction
* Experimental forms
* Split identities
* Focus on interiority
* Unreliable narrator

Modern writers give primacy to form. This results in experimentalism, which breaks with 19th century realist conventions. Modernism celebrates unreliable or even split narrators. In Cortázar’s short story ‘Axolotl’ the narrator switches mid-sentence from the man who describes the axolotls to one of the axolotls:

**I saw a rosy little body, translucent (I thought of those Chinese figurines of milky glass), looking like a small lizard about six inches long, ending in a fish’s tail of extraordinary delicacy, the most sensitive part of our body.**

The modern narrator tends to be the main protagonist of the story. His or her personal involvement in the events usually precludes objectivity. Narrators habitually cheat readers, conceal certain events, or change from person to person. The modern narrator has none of the authority of his or her realist counterparts.

Modern fiction often explores the theme of identity, which is more fluid and unstable than in pre-modern literature.

Modern fiction privileges interiority over exteriority, a good example of which is the hallmark of modern literature – the stream of consciousness.

**Modern Conception of Time**

The linear conception of time is challenged by moderns. Here are some of the reasons:

* Darwin’s theory of evolution
* The creation of time zones
* Bergson’s psychological conception of time

Partly a result of Darwin’s theory of evolution, moderns didn’t see the self as a unitary being anymore. The human form was conceived as the accumulation of earlier evolutionary stages. Some modern writers played with the idea that all of the evolutionary past was contained in the present human form.

In 1884, time zones were proposed at the International Meridian Conference due to the fact that telegraph and trains connected previously separated corners of the world. Awareness of different time zones further eroded the linear sense of time.

Bergson understood time as an accumulation of all the previous moments in a body with intentions directed towards the future. This psychological concept of time influenced many modern writers, such as Virginia Woolf orJames Joyce, who used the stream of consciousness in an attempt to represent the wanderings of the mind, which jumps randomly between different events in the past, fragments of the present, and expectations towards the future. Subjective time and the relativity of memory are celebrated rather than the linear sense of time that was typical of 19th century realism.

**Stream of consciousness**

A literary device that purports to reflect the protagonist’s chain of thoughts without the mediation of the narrator.

**Modern Science**

Einstein’s theory of relativity demonstrated that measurements of time and space cannot be divorced from the observer and their relative position. Even scientific theories weren’t considered objective anymore. Modern scientific theories are seen as fragmented, subjective, and particular – there is no one absolute and correct way of describing the world.

These insights influenced modern fiction which is highly subjective. Modern writers don’t believe that the world can be divorced from the accounts of it.

Late modernity witnessed a rapid technological progress. Technology was either celebrated by moderns (futurists) or criticised as degrading to humans. The metaphor of machine was often used to describe the condition of workers under capitalism. To some authors, workers were nothing more than an appendix to machines. The human body was also depicted as a machine by Taylorism, whose aim was to subdue the body and to render it as efficient as possible.

Albert Einstein during a lecture in Vienna in 1921

External objects are only relevant insomuch as they are perceived and invested with meaning by the protagonist.

Another typical trait of modernism is metafiction.

**Metafiction**

**Narrative that draws attention to its fictional status.**

Metafiction may draw attention to style. It’s not unusual to encounter a modern narrator who wonders “out loud” what register or what person is the most appropriate to tell the story. This may result in an idiosyncratic language, which requires a great deal of interpretative effort on the part of the reader.

**Postmodernity**

The period after modernity. Some critics argue it started after WW2, whereas others situate its beginning in the 1980s or even 1990s.

The boundary between modernism and postmodernism in many cases is fuzzy. There was some programmatic disavowal of modernism on the part of postmodern writers, and yet postmodernism continued with and developed some modern ideas and techniques. Whether postmodernism should be seen as a definite break with modernism or its continuation is a matter of ongoing critical debate.

**Comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism**

| **Modernism** | **Postmodernism** |
| --- | --- |
| Adheres to Western hegemonic values | Contests Western hegemonic values |
| Focus on the writer | Focus on the reader |
| Focus on interiority | Focus on exteriority |
| Alienation | Collective voices |
| Unreliable narrator | Ironic narrator |
| Rejection of realism | Ambivalence towards realism |
| Literature is self-contained | Literature is open and intertextual |
| High-brow genres | Mixing of high- and low-brow genres |
| Rejection of literary conventions | Parody of literary conventions |
| Metafictional | Metafictional |
| Idiosyncratic language | Simple language |

**Postmodernity and Postmodernism**

Postmodernity refers to the historical period after the Second World War, although in many cases not immediately after. It was marked by an array of social and historical phenomena, which shaped our contemporary world, such us advanced capitalism, globalisation, and rapid technological progress.

In a British context, postmodernity has its own historical particularities. After the Second World War, Great Britain lost a significant number of its colonies, which entailed a loss of economic influence ( the UK couldn’t rely anymore on manpower and resources from nearly one quarter of the globe). After the war, labour shortages prompted Great Britain to invite workers from its former colonies, which resulted in the multicultural society we know today.

**Formal Characteristics of Postmodernism in Literature**

* Ambivalent stance towards realism
* Split temporalities
* Ironic narrator
* Metafiction
* Fragmentation
* Multiple points of view
* Focus on exteriority
* Pastiche
* Irony
* Black humour
* Intertextuality

Postmodern texts are usually written in clear, everyday language, even though their structure can be quite complex. A good example of this is Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, which contains ten separate beginnings of books, which are connected by the adventures of the Reader whose reading is constantly frustrated. Calvino used the metaphor of a diamond to reflect his writing practice – the language is crystal clear but the structure is multi-faceted and fragmented.

Postmodern texts tend not to engage in innocent, linear story-telling. Similarly to modern works, they draw attention to their status as fiction and the act of writing or reading. Unlike modernism though, postmodern texts refers both to themselves and the external world. Protagonists are often aware that they are in fiction.

Postmodernism works by multiplication – multiple narrators, perspectives, or takes on the same story. This represents postmodern skepticism towards single, unitary, and totalizing narratives (which cannot account for a variety of social experiences).

Whereas modernism focuses on interiority and psychological, postmodernism recovers the preoccupation with the external and the construction of worlds.

Postmodernism uses pastiche, black humour, and parody in order to contest traditional literary conventions. Postmodernism exists in a state of permanent paradox: parody draws strength from conventions and subverts them at the same time.

Postmodern texts are also frequently intertextual.

**Intertextuality**

The relationship between various texts.It can be achieved by mentioning, quoting, or parodying other texts. Intertextuality is by no means unique to postmodernism, but in this period this literary device is extensively used.

**Postmodernism – Challenging Hegemonic Values**

Postmodern writers tend to challenge hegemonic values, such as heteronormativity, imperialism, and traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Heteronormativity

Promoting heterosexuality as the norm to which all members of society should conform.

People that previously didn’t have a voice, now started to gain visibility. They were, among others:

* Ethnic minorities
* Women
* LGBT+ community

The questioning of heteronormative values in Britain was made possible by such socio-historical conditions as the trauma of the Second World War, decline of empire, and shifts in economic models.

With the dissolution of empire emerged a number of prominent writers who challenged imperialism and British hegemony. The dominance of the British publishing scene by white male authors was slowly contested by subaltern voices.

Women also gained more visibility. With the shift from product economy to service economy, women could find a job more easily than men, thus gaining economic independence. Postmodernity gave rise to different forms of feminism.

Sexual liberation is also a hallmark of this period both for heterosexual people and, to a certain extent, for the LGBT+ community. A range of prominent homosexual authors, such as Joe Orton, gained prominence.

Postmodernism is skeptical of grand theories and narratives. History, for instance, is deemed by many postmodern writers as a narrative constructed for certain purposes, which are not innocent (such as glorification of a nation). Every historical narrative involves a process of selection, editing, and interpretation on the part of the author, and thus cannot be objective. Postmodern writers frequently recover forgotten histories of marginalized people.

**Critique of 19th Century Realism**

Both modernism and postmodernism are disillusioned with 19thcentury realism.Realism attempts to sustain the illusion that the narrated world is a plausible version of the one we live in. You can think of realist narration as a transparent window through which the reader looks at the narrated world (in contrast, modern and postmodern windows either distort the narrated world or draw attention to the frames). Realism works as a tacit agreement between writer and reader; the former does everything to sustain the illusion of reality and the latter suspends disbelief.

Underpinning realism is the conviction that the world can be described in an objective manner. Modernism and postmodernism lose this faith in objectivity, and they focus instead on subjective modes of narration.

Modern writers disagree with realist ones the real world can be merely translated, transmitted or reflected – every act of writing is essentially creating a new world. Modernism rejects realist conventions, such as detailed descriptions or the third-person impartial narrator.

Both modernism and postmodernism recognize that the fictional world is mediated through frames (particular narrative choices which are always subjective). Whereas realism tries to conceal these frames by rendering the language as “transparent” and unobtrusive as possible, modern and postmodern writers draw attention to language and narration.

Postmodern writers argue that every reading of a work of fiction creates a different version of the text in the minds of readers, as every interpretation is unique. This multiplicity of texts goes against the impartiality and singularity of vision that realist writers believed in.

According to realism, the fictional world exists in its entirety and is analogous to the real world. Postmodern writers object to these views for the following reasons:

* The world is partly indeterminate
* Objects may have emotional coloration and a privileged space
* Some objects might be ambiguous if the sentences describing them are ambiguous

As a fictional world cannot exist outside of language, only things that are described by the narrator exist in a fictional world. Yet, it is simply impossible to depict the infinite number of objects that should exist in a world that is analogous to ours. The fictional world doesn’t exist in its entirety like the real one.

Postmodern writers also point out that narration isn’t such an innocent act as realism implies. Every act of telling involves selection, organization, and interpretation on the part of the narrator. This partiality of narration is suppressed by realism, which for postmodern writers is dishonest and potentially dangerous.

The referential function of fiction is also exposed as another promise that realism can’t keep. From a referential point of view, what happens in fiction is literally nothing.

Referential

Relating to the external world rather than to language.

Modernism gradually rejects the referential function. For instance, *Finnegan’s Wake*doesn’t refer to anything other than language. But this creates a problem, as coherence is lost. Modernism is a cul-de-sac – there is nowhere to go from this radical refusal of meaning. Literature was becoming a jumble of incoherent sentences that no-one could understand.

Postmodernism offers a solution. It preserves the realist referential function ironically by being both self-reflexive and referential. Postmodernism, at its heart, is characterised by paradox.