The term modernism refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post-World War One period. The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not, wrote T.S. Eliot, accord with "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Modernism thus marks a distinctive break with Victorian bourgeois morality; rejecting nineteenth-century optimism, they presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. This despair often results in an apparent apathy and moral relativism.

In literature, the movement is associated with the works of (among others) Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Franz Kafka and Knut Hamsun. In their attempt to throw off the aesthetic burden of the[realist novel](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0254.html), these writers introduced a variety of literary tactics and devices:

the radical disruption of linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause and effect development thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action; the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality; the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse; and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. (Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment" 68)

Modernism is often derided for abandoning the social world in favour of its narcissistic interest in language and its processes. Recognizing the failure of language to ever fully communicate meaning ("That's not it at all, that's not what I meant at all" laments Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock), the modernists generally downplayed content in favour of an investigation of form. The fragmented, non-chronological, poetic forms utilized by Eliot and Pound revolutionized poetic language.

Modernist formalism, however, was not without its political cost. Many of the chief Modernists either flirted with fascism or openly espoused it (Eliot, Yeats, Hamsun and Pound). This should not be surprising: modernism is markedly non-egalitarian; its disregard for the shared conventions of meaning make many of its supreme accomplishments (eg. Eliot's "The Wasteland," Pound's "Cantos," Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Woolf's *The Waves*) largely inaccessible to the common reader. For Eliot, such obscurantism was necessary to halt the erosion of art in the age of commodity circulation and a literature adjusted to the lowest common denominator.

It could be argued that the achievements of the Modernists have made little impact on the practices of reading and writing as those terms and activities are generally understood. The opening of *Finnegans Wake*, "riverrun, past Eve's and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs," seems scarcely less strange and new than when it was first published in 1939. Little wonder, then, that it is probably the least read of the acknowledged "masterpieces" of English literature. In looking to carry on many of the aesthetic goals of the Modernist project, [hypertext fiction](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0241.html) must confront again the politics of its achievements in order to position itself anew with regard to reader. With its reliance on expensive technology and its interest in re-thinking the linear nature of [The Book](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0246.html), hypertext fiction may find itself accused of the same elitism as its modernist predecessors