

MODERNISM

- I. Time Frame:
 - A) **Approximately 1910 to beginning of World War II**
 - B) **Late 19th century (1886) to 1965**
 - Innovative; marked a sense of cultural crisis and radical rupture with the past**
 - Ezra Pound said: “make it new” (imagism)**

- II. Key Characteristics of Modernist Writing:
 - 1. Movement away from realism into abstractions**
 - 2. Deliberate complexity – to point of elitism (forced readers to be well- educated to understand)**
 - 3. High degree of aesthetic self-consciousness**
 - 4. Questions of what constitutes the nature of being**
 - 5. Breaking with tradition and conventional modes of form, resulting in fragmentation and experimentation**
 - 6. Privileging of irony**

Result: poetry written in Modernist mode – often impersonal, cosmopolitan, highly learned, skeptical

Contained contradictory elements:
Proclaimed democracy but held to certain elitist ideals; both traditional and anti-traditional (searching for order through myth while at the same time using fragmentary, nontraditional forms)

- III. Numerous cultural forces worked to create the modernist movement in poetry:
Problems with ideals of movements that preceded modernism: Romanticism and Victorianism (R’s philosophy’s of pantheism and transcendence didn’t work for those coping with technologies of industrial modernization – didn’t express a sense of loss; V’s moral earnestness, complacency, overly squeamish stance on sexual matters)

- IV. Modernity “revolts against normalizing functions of tradition; Modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” (Jurgen Habermas, “Modernity,” 162).
WWI – questioned Western notions of superiority; questioned long-held precepts of Renaissance and Enlightenment beliefs that humans were essentially good and could perfect both themselves and their societies (collapsing), challenged value systems – those of God, country and capitalism; movement from rural areas to urban and technological change fostered cultural dislocation

- V. American poets associated with Modernist Movement:
American expatriates: T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Ernest Hemingway, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams

- VI. Modernism reflects awareness of new psychological theories:
 1. Proponents:
 - Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung
 - Historical-cultural theories: Karl Marx
 - Philosophical theories: Fredric Nietzsche
 - Evolutionary theories: Charles Darwin

Theories undermined long-held assumptions about language, culture, religion and reality

2. “Modernist self”: prevalent among literary artists of the movement – self-conscious, nihilistic, fragmented, cynical, alienated, detached, creator as opposed to preserver of culture, innovative

VII. Manifestations of modernists being highly conscious that they were being modern:

1. Radical use of a kind of formlessness
2. Utilized collapsed plots, fragmentary techniques, and stream of consciousness point of view
3. Used associative techniques – random impressions and allusions and readers are expected to make connections on their own
4. Concerned with inner being more than social being
5. Looked inside themselves for their answers rather instead of seeking truth through religion or scientific presuppositions that realism and naturalism rested upon

VIII. Summation:

1. Modernists sought to break with the past
2. Movement was resistive, a reply to a world considered to be a spiritual and moral wasteland
3. Rebellion did not extend to outright rejection of all belief systems
4. Meaning may or may not exist in the natural world, but modernists saw themselves as making meaning out of their art