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Modernism in Literature

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## Modernism in Literature

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approaches to the arts, architecture, literature, religion, and social organization (and even life itself) had become outdated in light of the new economic, social and political circumstances of a by now fully industrialized society.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 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 inquiry.

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” (Modernism, 2000).

## 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, secularised 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 concerning 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 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, 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 globalization: it is during this time that the European powers and later their colonies, began their political, economic, and cultural colonization 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 civilized area on the globe, including movements thought of as opposed to the West and globalization. The modern era is closely associated with the development of individualism, capitalism, urbanization, 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 have been most recently criticized by 'postmodernism', while the dominance of Western Europe and North America over other continents has been criticized 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, mechanization, 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.