

Modernism

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Abstract:

Modernism has played an important role in ushering Literature into a new era. The works be it in the form of literature, arts or architecture produced during the period reflected the thoughts, ideals, doubts and anguish which are the results of scientific, political and economic influence brought about by the advancement in science and technology. This paper aims to highlight the shift in literary works produced during Modernism and the participation of prominent figures during the period.

Keywords: *modernism, ideals, prominent figures.*

Introduction:

The term 'modernism' is not as simple a question as getting a date or a time period and labelling everything that falls within the time frame as 'modern'. It does not specifically have an exact date as to its historical emergence with not much evidence of spirited scholarly discussion about when or how it actually began. However, its standard definition would be:

“a general term applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the literature(and other arts) of the early twentieth century”

According to M.H.Abrams;

“The term 'modernism' is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in subjects, forms, concepts and styles of literature and other art in early decades of the present century”

But what about the artists who already thought of their art as “modern”. Witcombe in his essay, *What is art? What is an artist?*(1997) points out to the 14th century artist who in his 1437 book “Il Librodell'Art” describes Giatto as having made painting 'modern'. This dilemma of what modernity or 'modernism' exactly means raises the question to the level that it becomes a necessity to have a broader perspective of its true nature.

Roots of Modernism:

Modernism was said to have begun during the Renaissance as a revolt against the conservative values of Realism. It was a traditional pattern to use God or nature as the centre of all the measures of life, but the spirit of Renaissance already evoked the modernist trend of thought that human beings ultimately held the power to “create, improve, and reshape their environment with the aid of Scientific Knowledge, technology and practical experimentation”. It evolved and expanded as the Age of Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution of the 18th century formalized this belief as credible. The open-mindedness of the 18th century allowed the people to think freely and apply reason to find truth. Arguably the most paradigmatic motive of modernism is the rejection of the traditional forms of art, the rejection of the certainty in Enlightenment thinking and the existence of the Omnipotent God.

Important intellectual precursors of Modernism in this sense are thinkers that questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organisation, religion and morality and the traditional ways of conceiving the human self. In biology, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection undermines the religious certainty creating an aura of doubt regarding human being’s superiority and the creation of man. Other thinkers and philosophers like Karl Marx in the field of economics, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer radically question the truth and of the individual’s place in the society. Nietzsche offered the notion in 1883 that ‘God is dead’, and questioned where this has left humanity and its morality. He concluded that we live in a meaningless universe and are therefore truly free to explore the capabilities of human endeavour. Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud provided society with the means or the blueprint to go about this re-examination of society and the self and Carl Jung further expanded on the exploration of the subconscious to find the connection and bond among all individuals.

Prominent Figures and their influence in Modernism:

Sigmund Freud:

Virginia Woolf said, “On or about Dec 1910, human character changed”. However, the whole of an individual character or of the society cannot be changed within a day or even a month. But the statement rings the truth. Character has been changed not because personality has altered, but literature had. By 1910, Modernism reached its peak with the emergence of new knowledge and technology and the culture of that era began to look at things in an entirely

different yet original way. Therefore, human character didn't really change but what really changes was the way it was perceived and the way that perception has been put into written form. This brings light to the theory brought forth by Sigmund Freud when he gave the ideas of the subconscious and the conscious state of mind. This single hypothesis about the human mind can have the power to change an entire literary era. The subconscious is the area of mind that is the deep feelings and desires that we are often unaware of. He goes on to mention the different developments within our psyche which he labelled as id, ego and superego.

Writers up to the point before the notion of modernism were mainly concerned with the plot and their descriptions, things that take place externally. Though they did not leave the internal human thought completely they did not give extended attention to the internal workings of the individual mind. T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a modernist poem which reflected the influence of Freud on Modernism by the use of 'Stream of consciousness' technique. In the poem, Prufrock fell in love with a girl, but his shyness prevented him from pouring out his feelings. He is often caught in an endless dilemma, to either confess his feelings or not. The reader is allowed to open a window into the thoughts and desires of the protagonist. Freud's concept of the role of the conscious and the subconscious within the mind of an individual is presented in this poem.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" wrote John Milton in his Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*. This presented the notion that the internal mind and thought itself is a powerful weapon.

Karl Marx:

Karl Marx's Philosophy is known as, "Dialectical Materialism" where no place is being given by him to the soul and spirit. Being the 'Father of Communism', his basic concept lies with the class conflict. He wanted to eliminate the hierarchical structure in the society and has concerns for the poor exploited masses. His teachings inspired many revolutions like the Russian and Chinese Revolution and deeply influenced the writings of D.H. Lawrence and George Orwell. *Animal Farm*, a novel written by George Orwell is a 1945 modernist novel that has the influence of Marxism. It's an allegory written in the form of a fable, where animals are used as a metaphor to represent a satire on the Bolshevik Revolution. There are class differences and inequality among the animals themselves. This shows the influence of Marxism in Modernist Novel.

Modernism, which had been a minority taste before the war, came to define the 1920s. It appeared in Europe in such critical movements as Dada and then in constructive movements such as surrealism, as well as in smaller movements such as the Bloomsbury Group. The 1920s were known as the "Jazz Age", or 'the roaring twenties' and the public showed considerable enthusiasm for cars, air travel, the telephone and other technological advances. The "Jazz Age" is most identified in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, especially in *The Great Gatsby*.

A prominent feature of Modernism is the phenomenon called the avant-garde that is a small, self-conscious group of artists who deliberately undertake Ezra Pound's, 'make it new'. These famous words reflect the modernist movement approach to the old ways which they saw as obsolete. These Avant-garde artists represented themselves as 'alienated' from the established order. Among these artists are writers that include James Joyce, Luigi Pirandello and Samuel Beckett.

The literary trends of Modernism change to a certain extent within the field of poetry, novel and drama. Major modernist poets include T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats and Robert Brook. Prominent novelists are Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, H.G. Wells and Franz Kafka. They wrote about human conditions at its worst and at its best while the woman counterparts began to champion the causes of women as an important influence to a truly modern age.

Poetry in Modernism has no set rules and patterns like sonnets or the poems of John Keats and P.B. Shelley which has rhyme schemes and definite metre. Free verse came into existence with the breaking away from this tradition followed by the 'stream of consciousness' technique which is found in the poem of T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*.

Conclusion:

Modernism has affected the individual and the society as a whole by its elevation into a new level of development and creation of a new mode of thought and a way of life. It has genuinely proved the dynamic nature of human life in this world and how we are not to be bound by a singular and absolute law. It has played an important role in ushering 'optimism' in the part of literature.

Works Cited

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