

# Important notes on modernism

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The signifier “modern” has been related to so many signifieds that it becomes impossible to define the term. Therefore, the notion of modern and modernity remains so varied and disturbing in the academic history. Sometimes the Elizabethan age is referred to as the first modern age; whereas some literary historians feel that true modernism starts with the eighteenth century when for the first time the spirit of Reason came in the history of European civilization. But for the present purpose, without going any further into the discussion of the project of modernity and notion of modernism, I will try to sketch the modern era which to some begins in 1890s, while others think it begins in 1901, with the death of Queen Victoria, while another view is that it starts during the First World War. The kind of confusion about when Modernism began is there because there are varied views about what Modernism is. Only the literary scholars are of the same view that the High Modernism began in the year 1922, with the publication of three major literary writings – T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*.

These three writers focus on three different aspects of Modernism – whereas Joyce dealt with the drabness of modern existence, Virginia Woolf dealt with the women’s questions and T. S. Eliot tries to point out that shabbiness of Modern existence, one thing is common between all three of them, that is, they all dealt not with the external reality but with the internal one. They didn’t deal with the clock time or the mechanical time, but with “duree” or the psychological time and how the duree dominates our consciousness. That’s the major change we can see between the Victorian writing and the Moderns. Whereas the Victorians were concerned with the reality outside, with the social problems, with the problems of loss of faith and the bad effects of Utilitarianism and industrialization, the moderns were concerned about the metaphysical existence, with psychological existence, with the effects of the World wars which traumatized the human psyche. Thus, we can perceive a vast amount of change between the Victorian literature and the Modern literature. There are many reasons why these changes have happened in the course of history of literature. Our next project would be to locate all those influences that paved the path for the changes.

When Virginia Woolf announced that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” what she was expressing is what seemed by 1924 to be an accumulated sense of exhilaration at a variety of new beginnings and rejections of the past. The most important influence is that of Sigmund Freud who changed the path of human thought by his awe-inspiring analysis of the human mind –

*(The id is) ... a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement. ... The laws of Logic – above all, the law of contradiction — do not hold for*

*processes in the id. Contradictory impulses exist side by side without neutralizing each other or drawing apart, ...in the id there is nothing corresponding to the idea of time, no recognition of the passage of time, and no alteration of mental processes by the passage of time. ... Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality. ... As regards a characterization of the ego, in so far as it is to be distinguished from the id and the super-ego, we shall get on better if we turn our attention to the relation between it and the most superficial portion of mental apparatus; which we call Pcpts (perceptual – conscious) system. This system is directed on to the external world, it mediates perception of it, and in it is generated, while it is functioning, the phenomena of consciousness ... The ego has to observe the external world and preserve a true picture of it in the memory traces left by its perceptions, and, by means of the reality – test, it has to eliminate any element in this picture of the external world which is a contribution from internal sources of excitation. On behalf of the id, the ego controls the path of access of motility, but it interpolates between desire and action the procrastinating factor of thought, during which it makes use of the residues of experience stored in memory. In this way it dethrones the pleasure-principle, which exerts undisputed sway over the processes in the id, and substitutes for it the reality-principle, which promises greater security and greater success. ... the ego stands for reason and circumspection, while the id stands for the untamed passion. ... on the other hand, Super-ego ... holds up certain norms of behavior, without regard to any difficulties coming from the id and the external world; and if these norms are not acted up to, it punishes the ego with the feelings of tension which manifest themselves as a sense of inferiority and guilt ...”*

Thus, Freud makes a three-part division of consciousness – id, ego and super-ego. Through these three constituents of the mind Freud tried to make a study of the different human behaviors. In modernist literature we see many influences of the Freudian psychoanalysis – D. H. Lawrence in the novel *Sons and Lovers* deals with the Oedipus complex, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce dealt with the stream of consciousness technique, T. S. Eliot dealt with the internal reality of mankind etc.

Novel as a genre found its birth in the eighteenth century and in about a century it became the favourite genre of the masses as in the nineteenth century (Romantic and Victorian Era) we have seen that Novel became very popular. In many ways it had surpassed poetry and drama and attracted a host of readers from all realms of life. Whereas the Victorian novel focused on social realism and try to portray the Victorian society from close quarters often to make a critique of the Victorian ethos (think about Charles Dickens, especially *Hard Times*); the

modernist novels instead of presenting the outside world focused more on the inner realms of man's existence as the mind and consciousness of man becomes the subject matter of study in the modernist novels.

Modern writers explored various themes in their writings as the preoccupations of the modern men are diverse. The diversity of the human existence and its various interests as well as manifestations found expressions in the modern novel.

Some of the significant themes of the modernist fiction are enumerated below–

(a) There are some writers who continued with the old order of the Victorian novel such as H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and Galsworthy where they focused on portraying the anxieties of the middle-class societies.

(b) People like H. G. Wells also anticipated the influence of science in the lives of modern man and therefore focused on writing about the various scientific developments as we see in his famous novel *The Invisible Man*.

(c) The influence of the World War can also be seen in the writings of the modern novelists. It is true that the novelists did not write about the War directly as the War poets did; but they represented the negative aspects of the war in their writings such as the portrayal of Septimus Warren Smith in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

(d) Writers like D. H. Lawrence emphasized on the impulses and instincts of man and wrote novels which dealt with the sexual instincts of man such as *Sons and Lovers*.

(e) James Joyce, Miss Richardson and Virginia Woolf found themselves dealing with the inner aspects of the mind's workings and developed the Stream of Consciousness technique and the evolution of the genre of the psychological novel happened in their writings

(f) Beside the Psychological novel many new genres of novel, such as biographical novel, regional novel, satirical novel, sea novel, war novel, novel of humour, novel of hunting, etc. were also written.