
UNIT 2 MODERNISM IN POETRY

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

At the end of your study of this unit, you would have learnt about:

- *the meaning of the term “modernist” with special reference to art and literature
- *the terms ‘paleo-modernism’ and ‘neo-modernism’ and the difference between the two
- *characteristics of modernism with emphasis on modernist poetry
- *relationship between tradition and modernism and
- *characteristics of modernist poetry

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘modernist’ associated with the 20th century, is misunderstood as a chronological development starting with the beginning of the 20th century, and spanning the full century.

It is not as though all those who wrote from 1900 are labelled ‘modernist’ writers. The term ‘modernist’ as it is applied to arts and literature, music and dance, sculpture and architecture, designates a distinctive kind of imagination which to begin with seems *obscure* and therefore *difficult* to apprehend at the elemental level. It also demands some degree of *acquaintance with ancient and classical texts* from different parts of the world. Thus *obscurity* is the first defining characteristic of modernist literature. Hence this Unit will introduce you to modernist poetry which is different from poetry written prior to this period and thereby make you appreciate why it is difficult to understand.

2.2 MODERNISM IN ART AND LITERATURE

Modernism started in the last years of the 19th century and has subsequently impacted the character of most 20th century art and literature. The movement reached its peak between 1910 and 1930, though it had begun in the last few years of the 19th century. These twenty years were a period of great turbulence and suffering as a result of World War I (1914-18)

and yet culturally they turned out to be a very creative period. Some of the outstanding British writers of this time were T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence, while Europe had Rainer Maria Rilke, Guillaume Apollinaire, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Boris Pasternak to name a few.

We also have the War poets belonging to the first World War period whose central theme was an 'anti-war' position. War poetry captured themes that carried across generations. It also sought to create a new language, which later generations used as a framework for understanding war history. Notable among them were W. H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, and Robert Graves to name a few. But the impact of Eliot and Yeats who started writing before the War, and continued to write well after the War ended, left a strong influence on English poetry. The War poets mentioned above had their own stature among English poets, but they did not influence many successors: *"In general, they had admirers more than imitators".¹*

Activity:

1. Take any Anthology of Modern English Poetry and read at least one poem of Eliot or Yeats and try to see where the obscurity and difficulty of understanding arises.
2. Read a few poems of the War poets mentioned above to get a feel of War poetry.

We are familiar with terms like 'realism' and 'naturalism' which represent a style in arts and literature that seeks to represent the familiar or typical in real life as opposed to the abstract or the ideal. Sometimes works of realism are known as works presenting what is known as "slice-of-life" representation. But in modernist literature and in particular in modernist art, realism is replaced by many other-isms such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism, Fauvism, Constructivism, Futurism etc (Refer Unit 1- Modernism).

Though most of the -isms relate to art, we have some of them reflecting the literary style of the Modern period. For example, literary impressionism reveals the authors' preoccupations and experiences at the moment of literary creation. Similarly expressionism in literature conveys emotion rather than meaning - a revolt against realism and naturalism, seeking to achieve a psychological or spiritual reality rather than record external events in logical sequence. Constructivism in literature enables the readers to better understand themselves, their culture and society. Constructivist theory postulates that personal experience cannot be separated from knowledge. In analyzing the literature of the day, the author found that constructivism can be viewed at the cognitive (individual) and social (community) levels.

In the novel, the term is closely allied to the writing of Franz Kafka and James Joyce and new styles of writing such as the stream of consciousness mode. These new -isms found expression not only in poems, novels and drama but it also brought in new literary theories and aesthetic manifestoes. The 20th century can be best described as the age of literary theory.

Thus what comes to mind when speaking of modernist literature is that it is something new and broadly imaginative that impacts intellectual and creative thought. This is its second characteristic. Before we discuss modern poetry with particular reference to early 20th century English poetry, let us once again define 'modernism'.

Check your progress 1

1. Why do we regard the years between 1910 and 1930 as a peak period in poetic creativity?
2. How have –isms in Modern Art impacted Modern Literature. Give examples
3. Why is the 20th century known as the age of literary theory?

2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNISM WITH REFERENCE TO MODERN POETRY

What makes for modernism in art and literature? Even in our daily parlance, when we say, someone is modern it means that s/he does not wholly subscribe to traditional beliefs and traditional culture. It also means the person is daring and desires to be different from the accepted practices and norms of the day. Modernism or the modern movement was built on the catchy slogan “Make it New”. It changed the character of all creative art and literature. The phrase “Make it New” was coined by Ezra Pound, the American poet and critic (1885-1972) though he did not advocate jettisoning the past, but argued in favour of gathering the odds and ends of the past tradition and repurpose them for modern times.

T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* is a good example where Eliot uses the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King and many literary and cultural allusions from the Western canon alongside quotations from Buddhism and the Hindu Upanishads which he says are the fragments he has shored against the ruins of time - suggesting it will be possible to continue despite the failed redemption.

Modernism did not stop with the 1930s, but continued through the 20th century. There has been a continuity of modernism in its original sense of being anti-tradition and anti-realism though it has in the post War II period, taken a distinct direction both in style and content. Frank Kermode speaks of the two phases of modernism- *paleo-modernism and neo-modernism, also known as postmodernism*. Those who wrote till the 1930s were the Paleo-modernists like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, the later Yeats and those who wrote after the 1940s were the Neo-Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf.

2.4 DISTINCTION BETWEEN PALAEO MODERNISM AND NEO MODERNISM

Paleo-modernism	Neo-modernism
Sought quality and perfection	Criticized quality and perfection as elitist and un-democratic. All values should be valued equally
Paleo-modernists wrote enormous poems and books sprinkled with Greek & Latin quotes, with footnotes or explanatory texts without which they could not be read.	Wrote short poems. They thought Greek and Latin quotes were bad by definition because they were elitist.
They were likely to be Christian (Eliot) or fascist, where the fascists valorized the	Philosophically committed to individual and cultural relativism (the theory that beliefs, customs, and morality exist in relation to the

Nation-state and rejected the autonomy and human dignity of the individual	particular culture from which they originate and are not absolute.
Words are to be understood in the contexts where they are used	Words are used in the realistic sense and presented in sentence fragments without the context by stripping off all unwieldy associations.
Closer to Structuralism (what things mean and how they mean)	Closer to deconstructionism(meaning cannot be decided) i.e. try to understand the relationship between text and meaning, to conduct readings of texts, looking for things that run counter to its intended meaning or structural unity.

Modernism is thus anti traditional, anti-naturalism and anti-representationalism. The best way to define modernism is to signify its constant attempt at experimentation in art and literature. Blank verse, atonalism in music, anti-representationalism in art, fragmentation, and stream of consciousness in novel were the outcome of modernism. Another characteristic of modernism is that *it establishes a new relationship between the reader and the writer*. For example, in the 19th century Victorian novel the writer writes about reality that he shares with his reader, where the experience of life is common to both the reader and the writer. Similarly in poetry as in novel, the focus was on morals or ethical values that could be easily understood by the reader.

But there came a reaction to the idea of a writer being a moral spokesman as it imposed restrictions on him/ her such as a taboo on writing about sexual relationships. With modernism, such moral earnestness was challenged as it spoke about beautiful but untrue things. The aesthetic revolution of the 1890s challenged Victorian orthodoxies. The end of the 19th century saw the breakdown of all assumptions - ethical, moral, social and artistic. One other distinctive feature of Modernism is the intertwining of literary criticism and poetic creation as is evident in the poetic works and critical works of Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell (of the early 20th century) and Philip Larkin in the postmodern period.

Complexity is yet another aspect of modernism. Accepting obedience, loyalty to authority, and even ideals like patriotism, doing one's duty, adherence to Christianity etc which were valorised by earlier centuries became questionable ideals. Hence modernism is characterized by various experiments of form. Chronological narrative was replaced by "spatial form" – where narrative is organized in order of space or location and not in order of chronological time. We see this in Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. What is provided is a pattern, not a story. *The Wasteland* is full of references and one has to discern the meaning by an understanding of the pattern of references that reflect the poet's experience. Eliot spoke about Joyce: "Instead of the narrative method, we can now use the mythical method. It is, I believe, a step towards making the modern world possible for art." This method, the use of myth (not in a rootless fantasy but in an intelligent way). is relevant to Eliot's poetry as well as to Joyce's novel. Eliot uses the myths of death and regeneration, the cycle of nature, the order of the seasons etc.

ACTIVITY

Read a few poems of the modernist poets and analyze the myths associated with them.

Check your progress

1. Distinguish between paleo-modernism and neo-modernism.

2. What are the myths associated with modernist poets like Eliot and Yeats?

2.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MODERNISM AND TRADITION

If we closely follow the characteristics of modernism it will be evident that there is a paradoxical relationship between modernism and tradition. On the one hand, modernism seeks to liberate itself from inherited tradition of values, ideals and cultural forms. There is a resistance to inherited culture, a complete break with the past. At the same time, as shown above there is a return to ancient myths from various cultures and religions with a deep sense of alienation, loss and despair. “These are the two phases, positive and negative, of the modern as anti- traditional; freedom and deprivation, a living present and a dead past.”² Modern imagination is both liberated and alienated. Thus modern writers in search of originality have gone back to ancient myths and traditions.

2.6 WHAT IS MODERNIST POETRY?

1. It is poetry that has broken away from the traditions of the past.
2. It is aggressively and consciously different from the poetry of the past.
3. All of modern poetry does not hang as one united movement, but it is characterized by a bewildering diversity.
4. A change of attitude towards poetic syntax (the ways in which we order specific words to create logical, meaningful sentences.) Syntax in modern poetry is wholly different from syntax as prescribed by grammarians. This is because modern poetry comes close to symbolist poetry.
5. What is symbolist poetry?

Symbolists believed that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. Thus, they wrote in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. Symbolism was hostile to "plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact description", and its goal instead was to "clothe the Ideal in a perceptible form" whose goal was not in itself, but whose sole purpose was to express the Ideal." For example an emotion is not described but a symbolic action or description of a place that stands as an equivalent is employed to express that emotion. Landscape often presents the experience through the choice use of words and syntax. Even though “The Solitary Reaper” was written in the early 19th century, it is a good example of using landscape to express the feelings of the solitary reaper. T.S. Eliot calls it ‘the Objective Correlative’: expressing emotion through a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that ‘particular’ emotion. Free verse, symbolic imagery and synaesthesia, (where poets sought to identify and confound the separate senses of scent, sound, and colour) were the techniques used.

Feeling is to be derived from the images and the poem itself rather than overtly describing the feeling.

2.7 AN EXAMPLE OF MODERNIST POETRY

Modernist poetry is difficult poetry. Since logical meaning has been replaced by images, there is a tendency on the part of the poets in the modern era to focus on intensity rather than on meaning to satisfy the reader. An example of modernist poetry is Eliot's *The Wasteland*. It is one of the most significant poems of the 20th century, and a central work of modernist poetry.

Eliot's poem has provoked two responses that contradict one another. It is seen to harbour defeatism, reflecting the state of personal depression in the guise of a full, impersonal picture of society. F.R. Leavis said that the poem's "rich disorganization" is an index of the modern plight, the state of society in modern times - "the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness that seems necessary to a robust culture. Life in the modern wasteland is sterile, breeding not life, but disgust, acedia and unanswerable questions."

But if one looks at the technique, it is seen how the poem moves from one experience to another. In Section II, "A Game of Chess" the shifting style throws light on different women protagonists. Starting with Cleopatra's ornate lifestyle, the poem moves to Belinda, the heroine of the *Rape of the Lock*, living in an idle, expensive world of make-up, dress and conspicuous consumption, then to the unpleasant reality of modern times.

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me

Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

Similarly in the mid section, "The Fire Sermon", one sees the change of class - from the wealthy class to the lowly class and the way the women of different classes talk show the transitions of time and transitions of the coarse talk by the pub women followed by the typist who reveals his own superiority. Eliot's use of older literature reveals his admiration for better quality of life, though he does not make it so explicit. If the reader like the critic, F.R. Leavis is pessimistic, he will not share that rich life of the past. So is the comparison between The Thames river today with empty bottles and sandwich papers as a contrast to the Thames of Spenser's time - of the Elizabethan times. The poem's meaning is clear: "modern civilization does nothing but spoil what was once gracious, lovely, ceremonial and natural"³(David Craig);

The poem contrasts Elizabethan magnificence with modern sordidness. But even in that past period, love for love's sake in an ideal fancy world of Spenser is shown as empty and sterile as in the modern world. Elizabeth and the typist are alike as well as different. Is Eliot warped in the past and full of revulsion for the present? If one is pessimistic, one sees the filth, poverty, low class life in contrast to the magnificence of the past. On the contrary Eliot seems to be manipulating history and reality to express his own prejudices and almost writing about his personal experience. Eliot's conscious use of literariness, his use of different styles for different people are meant to hold at arm's length his personal dislike of the unfeeling grossness of

experience between the typist and the young man endeavouring to engage her in caresses. His description of modern apartment:

On the divan are piled (at night her bed

Stocking, slippers, camisoles and stays (women's undergarments and corset

which shows the lack of sociableness is an attack on modern civilization. This is the irony/ smart sarcasm in the contrast between old grandeur and modern squalor by the use of literary allusions - not so facile to grasp but which is so intelligently manipulated. One notices Eliot's snobbery in the presentation of the young man- "a small house agent's clerk and what right has he to look assured? And the passage ends with Goldsmith's line "When lovely woman stoops to folly, she smooths her hair with automatic hand/and puts a record on the gramophone."

It is not a presentation of moral decline – it is not an attack as some critics say on the uprooting of life in the machine age. While *The Wasteland* has generated opinions that are negative about modern life, Eliot's last section "What the Thunder said" is inspired by Hindu faith. In a dramatic moment, thunder cracks over the scene, and its noise seems to say three words in Sanskrit: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, and *Damyata*, which command you to "Give," "Sympathize," and "Control." This is followed by a repetition of the word *Shanthi*, which means "the peace that passeth all understanding." After all the slogging, T. S. Eliot possibly gives us a little hope with this final word.

Let us just look at Line 431: *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*, which might actually be the most important line in the entire poem, because it basically sums up everything Eliot is trying to do by writing *The Waste Land*. What do we mean by that? Well, he has taken broken fragments from a culture that was once whole, and is just piecing them together in order to "shore up" his ruins. In other words, he sees himself standing in the middle of a waste land that's littered with pieces from a glorious, cultured past, and in writing this poem, he has collected these broken pieces and piled them together in a sort of testimony, which he feels is the most he can do now that Western culture is shattered. For such a depressing poem, *The Waste Land* actually ends on a slight note of hope, pointing us toward non-Western religions as a way to restore our faith and to start acting like decent, unselfish human beings again.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
ShantihShanithShantih

Well, at least that's something. Maybe we're not so doomed after all. Maybe. Maybe not.

2.8 SUMMING UP

- After a close study of this Unit on Modern Poetry, you would have learnt
- * the definition of modernism as a literary term with specific reference to art and literature
 - * the two distinct terms of paleo-modernism and Neo-modernism and the difference between them
 - * characteristics of modernism with specific reference to modernist poetry
 - * relationship between tradition and modernism
 - * what constitutes modernist poetry and
 - * why modernist poetry is difficult poetry.

2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. What are the Characteristics of Modernism with reference to Modern Poetry?
2. What is Modernist Poetry? Why is Modernist Poetry difficult poetry? Illustrate your answer with one example.
3. Discuss the relationship between tradition and Modernism.
4. What is Free Verse, Symbolist Poetry and Objective Correlative? Explain each citing an example.

2.10 GLOSSARY

1. Obscure: not clearly expressed or easily understood.
2. Apprehend: understand or perceive.
3. Slice-of-life: a realistic representation of everyday experience in a film, play, or book
4. Cognitive: concerned with the act or process of knowing, perceiving,
5. stream of consciousness: a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or convention.
6. parlance: a particular way of speaking or using words, especially a way common to those with a particular job or interest.
7. Jettison: discard
8. Redemption: the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil.
9. Representationalism: Representationalism (also known as indirect realism) is the view that representations are the main way we access external reality. According to this version of the theory, the mental representations were images (often called "ideas") of the objects or states of affairs represented.
10. Atonalism: music that lacks a tonal center, or key.
11. Aesthetic: concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.
12. Orthodoxies: authorized or generally accepted theory, doctrine, or practice.
13. Intertwining: connecting or linking closely
14. Paradoxical: Seemingly absurd or self contradictory
15. Metaphorical: involving, invoking, or intended to be taken as a metaphor, something used symbolically to represent something else, suggesting a comparison or resemblance.
16. Free Verse: poetry that does not rhyme or have a regular rhythm.
17. Symbolist Poetry: attempts to evoke, rather than primarily to describe; symbolic imagery was used to signify the state of the poet's soul.
18. Objective Correlative: the artistic and literary technique of representing or evoking a particular emotion by means of symbols which become indicative of that emotion and are associated with it; something (such as a situation or chain of events) that symbolizes or objectifies a particular emotion and that may be used in creative writing to evoke a desired emotional response in the reader.
19. Synaesthesia: a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated.
20. Overtly: without concealment or secrecy; openly.
21. Defeatism: demonstrating expectation or acceptance of failure.
22. Acedia : apathy and inactivity in the practice of virtue.

23. Neurotic: describes mental, emotional, or physical reactions that are drastic and irrational. At its root, a neurotic behavior is an automatic, unconscious effort to manage deep anxiety.
24. Sordidness: wretched, shabby, base.
25. Warped: abnormal or strange; distorted.
26. Literariness: to distort or cause to distort from the truth, fact, true meaning, etc.; bias; falsify- for example, prejudice warps the mind.
27. Grossness: outrageousness; the quality or state of being flagrant: atrociousness
28. Caresses: touch or stroke gently or lovingly
29. Camisoles: a woman's loose-fitting undergarment for the upper body, typically held up by shoulder straps.
30. Sociableness: the relative tendency or disposition to be sociable or associate with one's fellows. synonyms: sociability.

2.11 REFERENCES

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