



## Modernism - Introduction

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

# Modernism

## INTRODUCTION

Modernism was the most influential literary movement in England and America during the first half of the twentieth century. It encompassed such works as *The Waste Land* (1922), by T. S. Eliot, *Ulysses* (1922), by James Joyce, and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Representing an unequivocal rejection of Victorian aesthetic standards, moral precepts, and literary techniques, Modernism was initiated during the opening decade of the century, a time of extensive experimentation in the arts. Writers of the movement embraced the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and the anthropological relativism espoused by Sir James Frazer, and in their works the Modernists emphasized the psychological state of a character through the use of such devices as the interior monologue, or stream-of-consciousness narrative.

In English literature, manifestations of the modernist aesthetic in fiction range from the sexual explicitness of D. H. Lawrence to the formal experimentation of Virginia Woolf and the myth-based narrative of James Joyce. The disorienting effects of the era of modern warfare that began with the First World War gave rise to such American expressions of modernist concerns as the novels of John Dos Passos, whose *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) utilized montage-like effects to depict the chaos of modern urban life, and Ernest Hemingway, whose *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) portrayed the aimlessness of the "lost generation" of American expatriates in Europe during the postwar era. Similarly, *The Great Gatsby* is seen to epitomize the demoralization of American society and the end of innocence in American thought.

While sharing the novelists' preoccupation with themes of alienation and ambivalence, Modernist poetry is chiefly known for its dependence on concrete imagery and its rejection of traditional prosody. Considered a transitional figure in the development of modern poetry, W. B. Yeats rejected the rhetorical poetry that had gained prominence at the height of the Victorian era, favoring a personal aesthetic, natural rhythms, and spare style. American expatriate Ezra Pound, who with Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle founded the Imagist movement in poetry in 1910, favored concise language and free rhythms, and became a champion of avant-garde experimentalists of the era. The thematic preoccupations and technical innovations of Modernist poetry are seen to culminate in *The Waste Land*, Eliot's complex, erudite expression of modern malaise and disillusionment.

### Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

## Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism: Modernism - Introduction

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:  
<http://www.enotes.com/twentieth-century-criticism>