



E.A. Robinson and the Shift in Modernist Poetry Style

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

In the early 1900s, a new movement in poetry emerged. Find out about the Modernist movement in poetry and one of the first American Modernists, E.A. Robinson.

What Is Modern Poetry?

Imagine that you were raised on a farm without television or Internet. You've never been away from your small community. Life is simple. There's a lot of work to do, but things are generally good. And then one day, you leave the farm and go to a big city. You are suddenly exposed to things that you've never even dreamed: skyscrapers, airplanes, factories, and all sorts of amazing things. But it's not all great: you discover pollution and crime. You feel walled in by the tall buildings. You come to realize that life moves faster and is more stressful in the city.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a group of American poets found themselves in that same situation. The world was changing at a very fast pace thanks to technological advances and the Industrial Revolution. And World War I changed the way many people felt about humanity. Suddenly, the world seemed like a different, more modern, and darker place.



Tech advancements during WWI caused widespread death and destruction.

When faced with the changing times, poets decided to change the way poetry was written. They abandoned the old forms and themes and started a new movement in literature called **Modernism**. Modernism opened a whole new world of ideas.

Modernist poetry departs from the forms and ideas of traditional poetry and reflects the attitudes and culture of the 20th century. It reflected new and modern ideas of what poetry should be. Let's take a closer look at how Modernist poetry began, how it departed from traditional American poetry, and at one of the first Modernist poets, E.A. Robinson.

A Whole New World: The Industrial Revolution and Modern Poetry

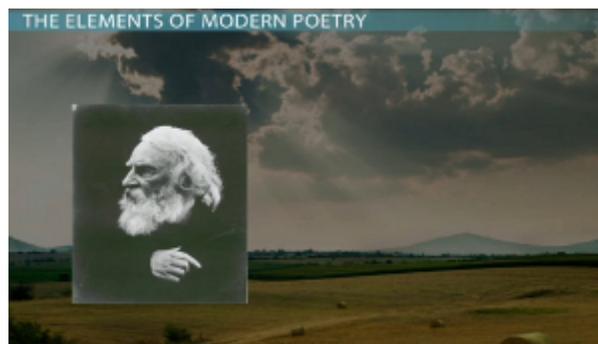
Until the late 1800s, America was mostly agricultural. That is, most of the money in the United States came from farms. People mostly lived in small towns or in the countryside, and many people never traveled outside of their county. Poetry was often about nature: daffodils and clouds and other things from the country. But in the late 1800s, America became industrial. Many people began working in factories to make a living, and technology changed the way people lived.

Not only that, but people wanted to live near the factories where they worked, so cities began to get bigger and bigger. Americans were more isolated from nature, and daffodils and clouds seemed to be a long way away. Poetry began talking less and less about nature. Instead, poetry shifted its focus to society. That makes sense. After all, poets like to write what they know.

World War I and Modern Themes

And then World War I happened. At the time, war was very different from the way it is today. Back then, two countries went to war with each other and fought with bayonets and horses. But World War I was different. First of all, it involved many different countries - so many, in fact, that people said that the entire world was fighting in one war. For another thing, all of the new technology from the Industrial Revolution was put to use in fighting World War I. Airplanes, bombs, and other advances in warfare became a major part of the war effort.

People were horrified at the result. Many people died all at once, and not all of them were soldiers. And those who were soldiers came back from the war with serious mental issues. The public couldn't believe the stories they heard about the war.



Longfellow wrote pre-Modernist poetry.

Before World War I, most poetry was pretty uplifting. Writers tended to take a generally optimistic view of the world. But after World War I, all that changed. Poets saw the horrors of the war as proof that the world was a cold and depressing place. Modern poetry is much more pessimistic than the poetry of the 1800s.

The Elements of Modern Poetry

As we've seen, Modernist poets responded to the world around them. They changed the subject of their poetry from mostly that of the natural world to that of society, and they changed their view of the world from optimistic to pessimistic. But that's not all they changed. As they began to break away from the old ideas, poets began to explore new ways of expressing themselves, too.

Ask a Question

Two important elements of traditional poetry are **meter** and **rhyme**. Think about your favorite song as a poem. The *meter* of the song is the *rhythm*: how long the lines are and which syllables in each line are stressed. The *rhyme* of a poem is the repetition of sounds within or between lines.

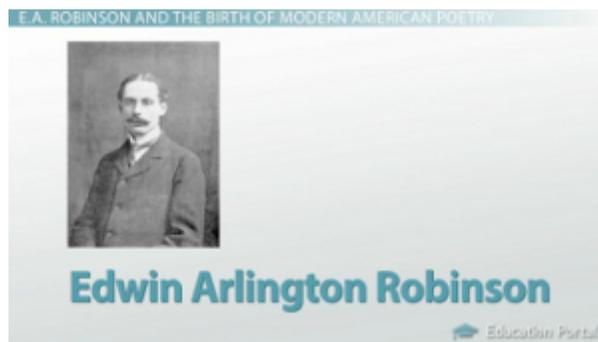
Before the Modernist poets, rhyme and meter were required for all poetry. For example, look at these two lines from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem 'The Broken Oar:'

*'A poet wandered with his book and pen,
Seeking some final word, some sweet Amen'
--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

Each of those lines has ten syllables, which is its meter. And the final words of the lines, 'pen' and 'Amen,' rhyme. This is a classic example of a pre-Modernist poem.

But the Modernist poets wanted to shake things up. They had new things to say, so they wanted to say them in new ways. So many of the Modernist poets started ignoring traditional meter and rhyme schemes. In fact, some of their poems didn't have any rhythm or rhyme at all! Poetry without rhyme and meter is known as **free verse**.

E.A. Robinson and the Birth of Modern American Poetry



Robinson avoided flowery language in his poems.

So Modern poets basically shook up the establishment. They changed what poetry said and how it said it. But the movement from traditional to modern poetry didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual change that began with an unlikely fellow, Edwin Arlington Robinson, who was born in Maine in 1869.

Robinson was an unlikely man to start a poetry movement in the United States because Robinson was an unlikely man to be a poet at all. He had two brothers; one became a doctor and one became a businessman. But Robinson loved words, and at a very early age he decided to be a poet.

At the time, poetry was filled with flowery language and long descriptions. Robinson pared down the language, bringing a less-embellished sensibility to poetry. In this way, he paved the way for future poets to do away with meter and rhyme altogether, though Robinson himself hated free verse.

In addition to changing the language of poetry, Robinson also dared to talk about things that most poets before him avoided. Robinson didn't have an easy life, and as a result he had a dark view of the world. The characters in his poems were depressed, often wishing that they were dead. Sometimes, they even committed suicide!

Even when his characters were not killing themselves, Robinson's poems were depressing. Look at the following lines from his poem 'The House on the Hill:'

They are all gone away,

The House is shut and still,

There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray

The winds blow bleak and shrill:

They are all gone away...

There is ruin and decay

In the House on the Hill:

They are all gone away,

There is nothing more to say.

That's quite a departure from the happy poetry that people were used to!

Lesson Summary

Modernist poets changed the content, themes, and style of poetry. Before the Industrial Revolution and World War I, poetry was mostly optimistic and used images of nature. It also had a set meter and rhyme scheme. Starting with E.A. Robinson, the Modernist poets reacted to the drastic