



Modernism in American Literature

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

In this lesson, we will discuss the concept of literary modernism in the United States. We will explore its historical backdrop along with the very unique characteristics and authors that define American modernism which lasted from 1914-1945.

Modernism



Tech advances and industrialization influenced the literary realism movement

The beginning of the 20th century was a time of change across the globe. Whether it was rapid growth in city populations, industrialization or global conflict, it was clear that a new and modern world was taking shape. **Modernism** was an artistic movement that grew out of this changing landscape of life during this time. Modernism, for the most part, represented the struggle that many had with the way that new ideas and discoveries challenged their previous lives during a time when tradition didn't seem so important anymore.

This artistic movement grew strength first in Europe in the early 20th century, eventually growing in the United States. It was fueled by domestic shifts (increase in city life, technology and wealth, for example) as well as changes on an international scale (like World War I). As this stable structure of a strong, patriotic nation began to weaken, so did the writing of the time reflect the uncertainty of its citizens. Growth, prosperity, fear, war, death, money, materialism, psychology and disillusionment all contributed to the creation of a modern literary movement in the United States; one that was very much a reflection of the unease of a people who felt that the old rules and the old ways of living and thinking were no longer relevant.

Emergence of Modernism in Literature

So, in order to truly understand literary modernism, it's important to take a look at a little U.S. history. Around the turn of the century, this country saw a shift as a result of industrialization. Cities began to grow and technology suddenly had the power to change everything. This is when **realism** in literature began, which, in basic terms, was a literary movement that produced (for the first time) writing that reflected the very real lives of the working class. In that sense, literature was already beginning to change.

It was 1914, however, that marked a very important change - something began that ultimately set the world into a tailspin. It was World War I - the first war of mass destruction. A war in which many nations saw their best and brightest young men die. Although U.S. involvement in battle was limited to just over a year, the country mobilized itself for true worldwide conflict, raised money and whatever else would help, supported allied powers and prepared over four million personnel for battle.



The Lost Generation emerged following World War I

The problem with World War I? Technology led to a new kind of war. With advancements in weapon development (like widespread use of automatic weaponry), war became about mass casualties - a change that many felt was inhumane and just downright evil. Others saw the results of World War I (over 9 million deaths) and felt that it was further proof in the necessity of a strong national defense (armed forces, etc.). Divided and confused, the only fact that was decidedly clear was that the U.S. had just been catapulted into modern warfare in a very modern world.

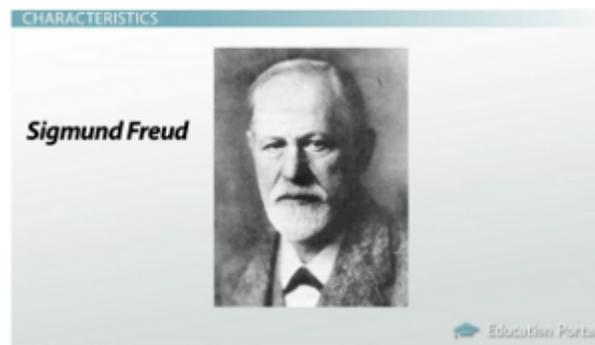
Dazed from the war, many of the younger generation no longer felt patriotic, content or safe. This generation became known as the 'Lost Generation'. A youth culture emerged - one in which free expression and a deliberate break from tradition became defining characteristics. While America continued to evolve and change (the 19th amendment gave women the right to vote, and the stock market crash of 1929 changed everything), modernism in American literature continued to reflect varying experiences with change from 1914-1945.

Characteristics

Now that you understand this complicated historical backdrop, the characteristics of literary modernism should make more sense. Clearly, breaking from tradition was a big part of the literary movement. This was evident in the choice to break from traditional forms. So now, literature could look like anything, even a sentence that went on for 157 words. There was quite a bit of fragmentation, as well as experimentation with point of view in writing - just another way to create a unique style.

Some stories were thoughtful and self-reflective, while others had an overwhelming sense of alienation, as a result of differing ways of processing the changing times. Readers can see an experimentation with gender roles, an introduction of racial issues and an inclusion of pop culture in many works. While some stories showed the wealth of the middle and upper classes (through materialism and lack of limits), others illustrated the bleakness of rural life.

Ask a Question



Freud and his theories made psychology a popular subject

There was something interesting that contributed to the tone of many works of the time - psychology. For the first time, psychology became a truly popular subject to debate, specifically Sigmund Freud and his new ideas. This included the implication that we were, in fact, godless. Any faith, religion or belief in a higher power was challenged by this. Many were left feeling even more lost. This sentiment pervades works of modern literature in the U.S.

Authors

When considering literary modernism in this country, it's important to take a look at a few authors and examples of their work. Unique in style and voice, each writer serves to illustrate how they were influenced by the time period. F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of those writers we know because of that book he wrote that every high schooler has to read - *The Great Gatsby*. Do you remember what that story was about? A group of young, wealthy 20-somethings with too much money and too much time on their hands. What's important to remember is that this was post-World War I, and the characters live in a world of excess without a lot of limits. No structure in place, no sense of purpose, no real patriotism, no family structure, no moral guide; this is the modern world that Fitzgerald creates.

Many readers know William Faulkner because of his novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. And while the content of Fitzgerald's stories makes them quintessentially modern, it is Faulkner's unique experimental style that makes him an icon of modern literature. He approached writing like music - an art in which sound and rhythm were just as important as words. Faulkner is also often associated with stream of consciousness writing and those long, long sentences that go on for paragraphs.



Ask a Question

Leading literary modernism writers included Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway

Finally, Hemingway is one of those writers whose style and content very much reflect the sentiment of this lost generation. Although it appears to be simple writing, Hemingway's work demonstrates a deliberate break from the flowery language and drawn out narratives of the 19th century. Unlike Faulkner, he wrote without complication. Again, just another choice that made him unique. And it's clear in novels like *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises* that he struggled with both the war and the post-war experience as an American.

Lesson Summary

Modernism is an artistic movement that began in Europe, eventually reaching the United States during a time of change, confusion, discovery, invention and war. From 1914-1945, modernism in American literature reflected the unease of those grappling with a changed post-war world. This world, characterized by a growing youth culture, became the backdrop in which many writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway portrayed this lost generation. Breaking with tradition and convention, some writers wrote of a life that was markedly different from the stable, moral, patriotic pre-war America they remembered; a world in which wealth and excess seemed to signal a larger lack of moral code; a world in which rural life no longer seemed as relevant.

Other writers, like William Faulkner, focused on experimentation in form and style, specifically employing point-of-view, fragmentation and stream of consciousness in new ways. A greater interest in psychology led many to question religion, contributing further to a changing worldview where there were more questions than answers, more uncertainty than stability. It is through modern literature that the reader can understand a feeling of alienation and loss that many young men and women had after having crossed through the first very modern war.

Learning Outcomes