



American Modernism

THE GREENHAVEN PRESS COMPANION TO
Literary Movements and Genres

American
Modernism

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American Modernism

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FOREWORD

The study of literature most often involves focusing on an individual work and uncovering its themes, stylistic conventions, and historical relevance. It is also enlightening to examine multiple works by a single author, identifying similarities and differences among texts and tracing the author's development as an artist.

While the study of individual works and authors is instructive, however, examining groups of authors who shared certain cultural or historical experiences adds a further richness to the study of literature. By focusing on literary movements and genres, readers gain a greater appreciation of influence of historical events and social circumstances on the development of particular literary forms and themes. For example, in the early twentieth century, rapid technological and industrial advances, mass urban migration, World War I, and other events contributed to the emergence of a movement known as American modernism. The dramatic social changes, and the uncertainty they created, were reflected in an increased use of free verse in poetry, the stream-of-consciousness technique in fiction, and a general sense of historical discontinuity and crisis of faith in most of the literature of the era. By focusing on these commonalities, readers attain a more comprehensive picture of the complex interplay of social, economic, political, aesthetic, and philosophical forces and ideas that create the tenor of any era. In the nineteenth-century American romanticism movement, for example, authors shared many ideas concerning the preeminence of the self-reliant individual, the infusion of nature with spiritual significance, and the potential of persons to achieve transcendence via communion with nature. However, despite their commonalities, American romantics often differed significantly in their thematic and stylistic approaches. Walt Whitman celebrated the communal nature of America's open democratic society, while Ralph Waldo

Emerson expressed the need for individuals to pursue their own fulfillment regardless of their fellow citizens. Herman Melville wrote novels in a largely naturalistic style whereas Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels were gothic and allegorical.

Another valuable reason to investigate literary movements and genres lies in their potential to clarify the process of literary evolution. By examining groups of authors, literary trends across time become evident. The reader learns, for instance, how English romanticism was transformed as it crossed the Atlantic to America. The poetry of Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats celebrated the restorative potential of rural scenes. The American romantics, writing later in the century, shared their English counterparts' faith in nature; but American authors were more likely to present an ambiguous view of nature as a source of liberation as well as the dwelling place of personal demons. The whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the forests in Hawthorne's novels and stories bear little resemblance to the benign pastoral scenes in Wordsworth's lyric poems.

Each volume in Greenhaven Press's *Companions to Literary Movements and Genres* series begins with an introductory essay that places the topic in a historical and literary context. The essays that follow are carefully chosen and edited for ease of comprehension. These essays are arranged into clearly defined chapters that are outlined in a concise annotated table of contents. Finally, a thorough chronology maps out crucial literary milestones of the movement or genre as well as significant social and historical events. Readers will benefit from the structure and coherence that these features lend to material that is often challenging. With Greenhaven's *Literary Movements and Genres* in hand, readers will be better able to comprehend and appreciate the major literary works and their impact on society.

INTRODUCTION

When attempting to pinpoint the genesis of the modernist movement in literature, critics often cite English novelist Virginia Woolf's remark that "on or about December, 1910, human character changed." This statement humorously and succinctly expresses the futility of attempting to identify the exact start date of a phenomenon that evolved as the result of various social, cultural, and literary forces. Perhaps more importantly, it hints at the enormity of change that the modernist movement represented.

Modernism, as its name implies, was a response to modernization. It was the literature that sprang up in the wake of the transition of Western nations, including the United States, from pre-industrial to modernized societies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1910, rapid industrial growth and technological advancement had transformed America from a primarily agricultural society to an overwhelmingly industrial one. Massive migration to the urban centers, combined with waves of immigration from Europe and Asia, had swelled the cities with burgeoning populations. The new industrial base of the nation had created an increasingly commercialized culture in which an abundance of new products were vigorously advertised for public consumption.

American authors of the early twentieth century were acutely sensitive to the cultural transformation occurring around them, and they responded in disparate ways. Some applauded the nation's technological progress while others criticized its materialistic culture. Some sought meaning in the imagination or in history while others searched for truth in the concrete world of the immediate present. Some developed allegiances to their particular regions while others fled the continent. An example of two differing responses to modernization is evident in the work of the poets Carl Sandburg and T.S. Eliot. In his *Chicago Poems*, Sandburg celebrated the new bustling metropolis. In *The Waste Land*, on

the other hand, Eliot depicted the modern city as a spiritually debased and dehumanizing environment. This is merely one example of the divergent paths taken by American authors during the modernist era.

The differences between individual modernist authors add to the difficulty of defining modernism. Modernism can be defined as an era, a time period from about 1905 to about 1929. It can also be defined in terms of its content—its struggle to make sense of a chaotic, modernizing world. However, the one element that all modernist authors shared was their dedication to using language in new ways. Modernist authors believed that the traditional literary forms and styles were inadequate to reflect the realities of the modern world, so they experimented with new structures and means of expression. Sandburg and Eliot, although they differed in their attitudes toward urbanization, are linked as American modernists because both poets relied on new modes of writing in an attempt to capture the spirit of the modern scene.

The transition from the pre-industrial period to the modern era in America thus produced not only new social institutions and economic structures; it brought forth a new literary aesthetic, a permanent change to the literary tradition of the nation. Although critics debate the quality of much of the literature of this era, few deny the lasting impact of the formal and stylistic developments wrought by modernist authors. No American poet (or any poet in English) writing after 1922 is free of the influence of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Similarly, no fiction writer escapes the effects of the "Hemingway style." Eliot, Hemingway, and their contemporaries altered the course of American literature. The nature and history of this change are described in the essays compiled in *American Modernism*, a volume in Greenhaven Press's Companions to Literary Movements and Genres series. It is the editors' hope that this anthology will aid the reader in understanding the new literature that emerged during the modernist era in American literature.

A HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN MODERNISM

American literary modernism was a movement in American literature that occurred roughly between 1910 and 1940. Although the exact start and end dates of the movement are debated, most critics of the era's literature focus primarily on two bodies of work: the poetry written between 1912 and 1917 (when the U.S. entered World War I) and the poetry and fiction of the 1920s (the postwar period). In some ways these two periods are distinct; however, they are both equally modernist.

More important than the exact dates of the movement are the characteristics of the literature bearing the label American modernism. Briefly put, American modernist literature is characterized by a reevaluation of traditional styles, forms, and subject matter and a new emphasis on experimentation. Some of the most salient features of American modernism are a direct presentation of experience, economical use of language, symbolism, and an informal, colloquial style. In poetry, American modernists eschewed traditional forms, rhyme schemes, and meter in favor of original, non-rhyming forms and musical or conversational rhythms.

In addition to formal and stylistic features, American modernism is distinguished by particular thematic elements. Especially in the postwar period, the works of American modernists express a sense of disillusionment with American society and culture. Some modernists were critical of America's increasingly mechanized, commercial, and capitalistic nature. In fact, many American modernists were extremely cynical and pessimistic about the state of American society and of Western culture generally. The works of these authors, including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway, portray individuals and a society in the midst of a spiritual crisis and a modern world (especially a modern city) in which human life has lost its meaning.

The works of American modernists reflect a sense that the world has undergone a transformation from a stable, ordered past to a chaotic, technological, mechanized modern era in which the basic underlying beliefs and assumptions have been brought into question. One element of the literature of the period is therefore a sense of discontinuity. This discontinuity is both a formal and thematic characteristic of the literature. For example, in much of the poetry and fiction of the period, chronological time has been broken up—that is, the sequence of events is jumbled. In addition, much of the poetry consists not of structured narrative but of juxtaposed and fragmented images and symbols. These formal characteristics of the literature reflect the authors' sense of a broken connection with the past and confusion, chaos, and a crisis of faith in the present.

AMERICAN LITERARY MODERNISM IN CONTEXT

In order to better understand American literary modernism, it is necessary to view the movement in the context of international developments. Modernism was an international movement. American modernism was not distinct from European modernism. In fact, some of the most prominent American modernists lived and wrote in Europe, and many were heavily influenced by European artists. For example, poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were influenced by the French symbolist poets of the nineteenth century. Therefore the term American modernism refers not to a separate movement, or even a submovement; it simply refers to the American authors who were part of the international modernist movement. In some ways these authors resembled their European counterparts; in other ways they did not.

The international literary modernism movement was itself simply the literary strain of a larger movement taking place in all the arts. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, authors of *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, characterize modernism as

(a revolutionary movement encompassing all of the creative arts that had its roots in the 1890s (the *fin de siècle* [end of the century]), a transitional period during which artists and writers sought to liberate themselves from the constraints and polite conventions we associate with Victorianism.)¹

As this definition makes clear, modernism was marked by a spirit of revolt—specifically, revolt against formal and the-

matic conventions characteristic of the Victorian era.

Many social and cultural factors contributed to this artistic revolution. Modernism can be seen as a reflection of, or reaction to, modernization and the Industrial Revolution. Dramatic social and cultural changes took place in the industrial western nations of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In America, one of the greatest changes was the nation's shift from a predominately rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one.¹ As Richard Gray, a literature professor at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom, notes, the populations of cities swelled during this period:

As early as 1880 . . . , over half the population of the Eastern United States lived in towns of more than 4,000 people; while places like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, which had once been provincial market-places, were turning into urban, metropolitan centres.²

This trend toward technological and industrial development, and the urban population explosion that accompanied it, accelerated in the early decades of the twentieth century.

This rapid societal change, combined with the increasing mechanization and commercialization of the culture, contributed to the sense of discontinuity, temporal and spatial fragmentation, and chaos found in the art and literature of the modernist era. In addition, whereas the Romanticism of the Victorian era had focused on nature and rural settings, modernist literature, as a result of the massive urbanization of society, more often focused on the city and its inhabitants.

Intellectual developments also helped to produce the modernist movement—especially the work of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein. Alan Shucard, Fred Moramarco, and William Sullivan, authors of the book *Modern American Poetry, 1865–1950*, describe the contribution that each of these thinkers made to unsettling people's underlying assumptions about human beings, their relationships with one another, and the universe in which they live:

From Darwin came the idea that the emergence of human forms was a natural, not supernatural, event that occurred over millions of years, the result of random forces and natural selection. Chance, not divine will, seemed the governing principle of what appeared to be an increasingly accidental universe. From Marx came a view of human society as perpetually engaged in class struggle. In Freud's work the inner world of humanity was depicted as dominated by uncon-

scious drives and motives, accessible only through dreams and deep exploratory analysis. And from Einstein came the revolutionary principle that time and space, the psychic and physical environment of humanity, were relative, not absolute, entities, subject to continuing alteration and redefinition as the mysteries of the cosmos unfolded.⁵

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche added to this atmosphere of intellectual upheaval by questioning the legitimacy of Christian morality. All of these thinkers contributed to the general sense that the old ideas and belief systems that had previously lent stability and order to the universe and human relations no longer applied and that, consequently, a new type of art was needed to accurately capture the new understanding of reality. 7

THE INFLUENCE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

The various social, cultural, and intellectual developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries first made themselves felt in the visual arts. European Impressionists such as Claude Monet had begun to revolutionize painting as early as the 1870s. In general, the Impressionists, as well as post-Impressionists like Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Wassily Kandinsky, abandoned the traditional artistic approach of creating realistic representations of their subjects. Instead, they relied on stylistic techniques, including the use of bold colors and expressive brush strokes, to convey the emotion evoked by the subjects of their paintings, whether rural landscapes, urban scenes, or nudes. In the paintings of the Impressionists, Alan Shucard and his colleagues explain, “the previously static and orthodox landscape is shattered into a fluid array of dots, colors, and vigorous brush strokes that create a sense of the transitory and shifting environment of the modern world.”⁴

Two exhibits of the visual arts are often cited as key moments in the history of modernism. The first was a 1905 exhibit at the Autumn Salon in Paris. This show featured the work of the Fauvists, a school of artists led by Henri Matisse and inspired by Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne. The Fauvists used vivid colors in an expressive, violent manner to create dynamic paintings. The name Fauvist was derived from the word “fauve,” which is French for “wild beast.” The group received this name after an art critic attending the 1905 show saw a traditional sculpture among