**Modernist Literature**

Modernism is an international literary movement that appeared in the early twentieth century and flourished in the 1920s and 1930s mainly to question the old truths that were shaken by the changes that happened to the western world after the First World War. Generally, most critics agree that the WWI gave birth to modernism and WWII killed it. The atrocities of the war that most modernist writers witnessed made them to question the traditional values and truths and anything that was before an accepted idea. This questioning was also the result of being influenced by the ideas of thinkers especially the three “masters of suspicion,” as Ricoeur famously called them namely: the economist Karl Marx, the naturalist Charles Darwin, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. All these thinkers share the idea that everything that was inherently accepted is a mere construction. Therefore, in their writings, modernist writers focused on themes like the meaninglessness of life, the human despair, and the loss of belief in religion.

It is very challenging to define the ‘when’ and the ‘where’ of modernism because of its internationality. Modernism does not have geographical and temporal boundaries because it was created through the strong collaborations and influences between British and American writers who were gathered in the cultural centers of London, Paris, Rome, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. The main innovators of the modernist literature are: James Joyce, D.H.

Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and F.Scott Fitzgerald just to name few. Another reason behind the international aspect of the modernist literary is the growing interest in non-western cultures in Asia and Africa for example Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness that investigates the horrors of colonialism in Congo. Therefore, modernism brought new things to the light.

“Make it new” is considered as the logo of the modernist movement. This sentence was said by Ezra Pound who by saying it, he revolutionized the literary field at that time urging literary men and women to embrace it as a principle. That is, in order to make their literature new, modernist writers changed the traditional ways of writing by omitting standard beginnings, transitions and endings in order to tell stories that show the complex ways in which people think. However, ‘Make it new’ is paradoxical because most modernist writers attempted to create something new by returning to the very ancient sources like Homer’s Iliad and Odysseys as if Homer is more modern than the writers who came before the modernists.

**Thematic Features of Modernist Texts**

The modernist writers did not see themselves as a unified movement because they belonged to different modernist smaller movements like: the Lost Generation, the Dadaists, the Imagists, the Vorticists, the Objectivists, the Surrealists, and many others. However, all of them opposed the idea that the purpose of literature is to educate people and to represent the best that has been thought and said and instead they focused on the general pessimism about the state of the world, a rejection of the society’s certainties, to give voice to the voiceless (women, African Americans, Chicanos). In addition to the mentioned themes, there are two main themes that recur in the modernist literature namely: the urban life, alienation, and the presence of the past.

**The Unreal City** : Modernism focused on the urban life and saw it as categorically different from any other kind of life. For example, the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire was fascinated by the ‘‘flaneur,’’ the man who strolls the city aimlessly as a way of life. The anonymity of the city, its darkness, its mechanization, its vast power, all inspired the modernists; it attracted and repelled them in equal measure. Modernist writers (most of them, interestingly enough, from suburbs or small cities) moved to London and Paris, St. Petersburg and New York, where they found each other and formed movements. London was the first home of Anglo-American Modernism. In the 1930s, with war looming in Europe, the artistic energy moved west to New York. But no matter what city, the city was almost always the subject of modernist literature. Although he could not stay there and moved between Paris, Trieste, and Zurich during his ‘‘exile,’’ everything James Joyce ever wrote was about the vibrant urban life of Dublin. In addition, Eliot’s melancholy poems point out the loneliness and lack of meaning city-dwellers often feel. The city, where technology and masses of people and anonymity come together, became the master trope of Modernism itself.

**Alienation:** If the city is the master trope (or image) of Modernism, alienation is its master theme. Almost all modernist writing deals with alienation in some form. The primary kind of alienation that Modern-ism depicts is the alienation of one sensitive per-son from the world. The stream-of-consciousness technique of narration is particularly well suited for this because readers can see the inner feelings of a person and witness his or her essential self along with the actions of the world outside. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s protagonist and stand-in, is alienated from his family, his friends, his religion, and his country because of devotion to art and his certainty that nobody can understand and accept him. Woolf’s heroines are doubly alienated from the world because of their status as women; because of their sex, they are not allowed to participate in the world of politics, education, or economics. Eliot’s narrators (most notably Prufrock in ‘‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’’) are confronted by a world that is just broken shards of a discarded whole; everyone else seems to walk through the world calmly but they cannot. And for Ezra Pound, it is the world itself that has been alienated, by the forces of greed, from what should truly be historical heritage.

**The Presence of the Past**: Because of what happened in the WWI, Writers in the modernist age often felt that they were at the end of history. Because of this feeling, modernist writers incorporated fragments of history in their writings. Allusion—brief references to people, places, things, or even languages and literatures—was the characteristic modernist technique for including history. Partly because of their profound uneasiness in the modern world, modernist writers alluded constantly to the past. This is not to say that the modernists were uncritical admirers of the past but instead they were in a way disfiguring and questioning the legitimacy of History. In contrast to what familiar stories and records implied about its easy accessibility. The past therefore appears in modernist literature as something to be discovered only haphazardly, imperfectly, and through much effort. In his poem ‘‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,’’ Ezra Pound wrote that World War I’s vast slaughter was ultimately for the purpose of defending ‘‘an old [b——]gone in the teeth...a botched civilization...two gross of broken statues . . . [and] a few thousand battered books.’’ Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus says that ‘‘history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake’’ and the Irishmen who live in past glories are portrayed as buffoons and fools. But both of these writers’ works are filled with allusions to the past. And almost all of the important modernist writers, as well, incorporate in their work the belief that the past exists in the present. Pound, for instance, called his “The Cantos” ‘‘a poem including history’’ and the list of allusions in that poem has over ten thousand entries.

**Stylistic Features of Modernist Texts :**

Most critics agree on the fact that modernism is characterized by a high level of experimentation and innovation. This experimentation with the literary form and language created new forms of expression, such as the stream of consciousness, the use of different narrative perspectives, allusion, and imagism.

**Stream of Consciousness:**

Modernist fiction tends to rely on the stream of consciousness or ‘interior monologue’ techniques in order to emphasize the subjectivity as a main aspect of their writings. This kind of narration is about recording the thoughts as they pass through a narrator’s head. Stream of consciousness is the continuous uncontrolled flow of a seemingly random collection of a certain character’s thoughts, feelings, images, and memories forcing the reader to piece together the plot or the theme. It replaces the traditional chronological order. Stream of consciousness stories include the following elements: first-person narrator, a lack of conventional sentence structure or grammar, “free associations” that flow through a character’s mind and connect separate events, and interior monologues. This literary technique that gives the readers access to the character’s subconscious is taken from The psychology of William James who had had particular, foundational influence here – upon the development of the “stream of consciousness” style so famously innovated in the modern novel. James discovered that “Consciousness. . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits.. . . It is nothing jointed; it flows.” Since“A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described,”James suggested that it be called “the stream of thought, or of consciousness, or of subjective life” (qtd in Matz 220). Influenced by this idea and mainly by Sigmund Freud’s psychological theories, modernist novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf used it to emphasize the idea that human actions and thoughts are not always

consciously produced but they are also driven by the ‘unconscious’ that is formed by past experiences and social interactions. In her short story, “The Mark on the Wall,” Virginia Woolf captures a moment in time as a woman looks at a mark on the wall and tries to make mental connections with this mark with seemingly unrelated topics. The following passage is from “the Mark on the Wall” and it employs the stream of consciousness narration:

PERHAPS it was the middle of January in the present that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the

white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.... If that mark was made by a nail, it can’t have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room. That is the sort of people they were were—very interesting people, and I think of them so often, in such queer places, because one will never see them again, never know what happened next. They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.

\* **Different narrative perspectives:**

In modernist literary works the story is told by different narrative points of view. Generally the story is told from the first person narrative and the third person limited narrative perspectives. For example, in Eliot’s the Waste Land, the poem is told from different narrative perspectives and even the title of this poem was “He do the police in different voices” before changing it to “the Waste Land.” This makes it a polyvocal poem.

\***Allusion:**

Allusion is a central formal device in the modernist writings. It is an indirect reference to a character, a place, or a situation from history, art, music, or literature. For example, T.S. Eliot’s ‘‘The Waste Land’’ can be read simply as a collection of allusions or fragments as he calls them in the last section: appearing in the poem are the Greek seer Tiresias, a pair of working-class women in East London, a number of Hindu deities, Dante, and an American ragtime singer. These references are not explained; they just appear and the reader must make what sense of it he or she can.