

Modernism

Socio-historical background

Modernism is a period of great changes in literature and Arts in Europe and America starting after 1910 and flourishing in the 1920s and 1930s.

It was born because the violence and destruction of World War I caused a sense of instability, and traditional values started to fade and people didn't have a clear reference point. The artists feel alone and misunderstood and express their inner self.

What happened during the World War I?

In July 1914 *World War I* broke out. France, Russia and Britain sided with Serbia against Austria and Germany. After the declaration of war, King George changed his German name of *Hannover* for the English name *Windsor*.

Before the World War I there was the culmination of the processes that characterized the Victorian Age, such as:

- Industrialization and new technical innovations;
- The growth of population and urban spaces;
- The extension of transport network.

The Irish Question

Moreover, in England there was the Irish Question: the population of Ireland was divided between the *Unionists*, who wanted to stay united with England, and *Republicans*, who wanted to have an independent Parliament. On *Easter Monday 1916* a group of Republicans organized a revolt in Dublin. This revolt was violently suppressed but was known as *Easter Rising*. In 1918 the **Sinn Fein** party proclaimed an **Irish Republic** and a Civil war started. The war ended in 1921 and in 1922 the **Irish Free State** was born, excluding Ulster, which remained part of the United Kingdom

Features of Modernism

Modernism was influenced by the theories of scholars like Freud, Bergson, Einstein and William James.

- 1) According to **Freud**, the development of our personality is influenced by the **unconscious**, the hidden part of ourselves that men can't dominate. To analyze the unconscious Freud gave great importance to the **interpretation of dreams** and to the **free association of thoughts**.
- 2) The philosopher **Bergson** distinguished between the mathematical time of science (**OBJECTIVE**) and the time of the mind, which is lived in a personal way and changes from one person to another (**SUBJECTIVE**), or from one situation to another, that he called «**duration**». Duration is the way we experience the world moment by moment.
- 3) **Albert Einstein** elaborated **the theory of relativity**. He demonstrated that time is relative, because it depends on the viewpoint and the circumstances. With Einstein's theory, the idea of an objective reality was put in doubt.
- 4) The psychologist **William James** coined the expression *Stream of consciousness* to indicate «*the continuous flow of thoughts and sensations that characterizes the human mind*».

The result is that there is a break with the literary tradition of the 19th century, in fact Modernism is characterized by these features:

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- The artists try *new experimental forms of expression*.
- The description of reality is **subjective**; the truth is fragmentary and relative.
- They represent **modern urban life**;
- Sometimes they use *primitive myths* (it's a way to create order out of the chaos of the modern world).

From a stylistic point of view, Modernist novels break with the tradition:

- The *omniscient narrator disappeared* and there was direct presentation of character's thoughts, feelings and memories;
- *The chronological order of events and the plot disappeared* because there was the inner reality of the characters, their perceptions.

Trying to represent the "stream of consciousness" introduced by Freud, Modernist writers developed new form of writing, **INTERIOR MONOLOGUE**.

ATTENTION ! 

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS	is the psychic phenomenon itself, the activity of the mind.
INTERIOR MONOLOGUE	is the writing technique used to express the <i>stream of consciousness</i> of the novels' characters. It is the VERBAL EXPRESSION of a PSYCHIC, MENTAL PHENOMENON. The character's thoughts flow freely, not interrupted by external events.

Interior monologue can be distinguished in 2 types:

- 1) **Direct interior monologue (or free direct speech)** is the **direct** presentation of a character's stream of consciousness without the guiding presence of an author or narrator. There is free association; thoughts don't follow a logical or linear pattern, like our natural mental process; there no punctuation; the narrator disappears; the characters' thoughts can go back and forwards in time: there is no chronological order, but a **subjective time**, there are **NO introductory expressions** like 'he thought, he remembered, he said'.
An example is Molly's monologue in the final chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* (chapter 28), where no external element interrupts Molly's flow of thoughts.
- 2) **Indirect interior monologue (or free indirect speech)** is the indirect presentation of character's thoughts because it is filtered through the voice of a narrator (for example with <he said>, <he thought>...). Sometimes there can be the presence of **two levels of narration**: one external to the character's mind, the other internal. There are jumps from past to present **but** they are put in order and in comprehensible English by the author/narrator. The author is present within the narration with **descriptions, comments and introductory phrases** to guide the reader through the narration; the **character stays fixed in space** while his/her consciousness moves freely in time; everything happens in **the present** in the character's mind.