

American Literature

Master1 ELCS, Tlemcen

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Lecture I. MODERNISM in America

Modernism is defined by **T.S.Eliot** as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history... instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art” (from Review of Ulysses)

The period referred to by Modernism, specifically in literature, has to do with the late 19th century to the early 20th century.

There are three periods:

Modernity (refers to the Enlightenment, starting from the 17th century to the 19th century)

Modernism (late 19th century to early 20th century)

Postmodernism (from the second half of the 20th till today)

In the United States Modernism referred to a literature which reflects the disillusioned society of the early 20th century. The main influences of this era have to do with WWI (1914-1918) followed by the 1920s Economic crisis which changed social values of society; but also the consequences of industrialization and rapid technological development which changed rapidly life standards.

The Economic crisis obliged the wealthy families to have the same living style as the middle classes, which constituted a form of deceit for these families. Besides, the collapse of social ranks also led to the collapse of the “Frontier”, which obliged upper class Americans to share a common lifestyle with the Blacks. The dramatic shift of social norms as well as the new ethnic conceptions, namely of blacks as equal, led Americans to feel disillusioned and lonesome. (Vonnegut in *Literary Conversations*, Klinkowitz in *Kurt Vonnegut*)

Modernism came as a reaction to the period which preceded it (Modernity). It came specifically to see the world differently and “make it new” in the words of Ezra Pound. It sought to break with the principles of Modernity, which for some writers and scholars, are responsible on the negative turn of events in Europe. Modernism in fact criticizes “the ubiquity of Western culture, and acknowledges its “decay and fragmentation” as anarchy and war change the world at that time”

Modernism is said to be giving “order to an ever changing world at the start of the 20th century”. It disrupted the traditional form of the novel, and wrote particularly about nonsense, it is ...reworking traditional forms like sonnets... using disjointed structure to reflect the disfunction of Western society... addressing inner thoughts of regular people... celebrated simplicity as a critique of the materialism of Western Culture...”

In their search for difference Modernists “separated” from the idea that literature must reflect the wealthy, they started to break with the Western Canon in literature, thus finding new writing styles. They broke with the traditional novel, because they thought that Realism was

an “attempt to offer a mirror to the world, presents itself as representative of the author’s society” (Childs 03)

Modernism was thus a form of “challenge to find alternative ways other than realism, to represent reality” Modernist writers were thus “seeking to undermine the dominance of realism” (03)

Peter Childs further explains that Modernism in prose tried make “ human subjectivity in ways more real than realism” by representing “consciousness, emotion, meaning and the individual’s relation to society, the interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunneling, defamiliarization” (03)

Characteristics of Modernist literature:

Modernist literature is abstract and does not make sense

Non linear plot: puzzle

Irony and Satire

Stream of consciousness

Allusions (to other works)

Breaking with the tradition

Fragmentation and alienation

Multiplicity of narrators in one story as well as the unreliable narrator

Symbollism

Lecture II. *The Great Gatsby*

Themes related to Modernism: artificiality, sentimentality, self reflexivity, inner monologue, revolt against a corrupted world (immoral world, cheating, racism, rich/poor)

The novel *The Great Gatsby* sheds light on racism in the US and the impact of the collapsed frontier on members of the upper class in Tom Buchanan:

Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?" (15-16)

Why, no, I answered, rather surprised by his tone. Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is that if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff, it's been proved.

Well, these books are all scientific," insisted Tom, glancing at her [Daisy] impertinently. This fellow worked out the whole thing. It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things. (20)

It also reflects a society which claims happiness while living in agony in Daisy

... I turned my head away and wept. All right I said, I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." "You see I think everything's terrible anyhow, she went on in a convinced way. Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I know. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything. Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated! (30)

“Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief and I tried very hard to die but I seemed to bear an enchanted life”

The novel also discusses the American Dream, symbolized in a green light which Gatsby often wanted to achieve but never did. It discusses an American society unable to cope with the new lifestyle, as when a woman is killed by a car (something impossible 20 years earlier). This society (in the novel) is immoral and anxious, in constant search for love and for profit.

Vonnegut expressed this idea in *Cat's Cradle*: “Americans... are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be. It must have something to do with the vanished frontier” (109)

Lecture III. American Dream (J. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*)

In 1931, James Truslow Adams wrote, “we dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”

The stipulation with Adams' dream is that one's achievements and abilities are dependent upon various external factors—economic situation, social status, gender, sex, etc

Through *Gatsby*, the novel's protagonist, Fitzgerald dreamt of an American society where you “be all you can be.” For Fitzgerald and for the characters in his most famous novel, the American dream comes with an influx of wealth and exorbitance, rendering it devoid of true love and joy.

Phrases such as “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” “all men are created equal” and that these same men are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” are words that have formed the American dream into what we know it to be.

Self-reliance (their dream about the rabbits)

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.” Lennie was delighted. “That's it—that's it. Now tell how it is with us.” George went on. “With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit-in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us.” Lennie broke in. “But not us! An' why? Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.” [...] we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—” “An' live off the fatta the lan',” [...], “we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof—Nuts!” (Steinbeck 15-16)

When George goes into a full description of the farm, its Eden-like qualities become even more apparent. All the food they want will be right there, with minimal effort. As Lennie says

"We could live offa the fatta the lan'." Chapter 3, pg. 57.

When George talks about their farm, he twice describes it in terms of things he loved in childhood:

"I could build a smoke house like the one gran'pa had..." Chapter 3, pg. 57.

"An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid." Chapter 3, pg. 58.

George yearns for his future to reflect the beauty of his childhood.

Dreams 5: Curley's wife has a dream that although different in detail from the other's dreams, is still very similar in its general desires. She wants companionship so much that she will try to talk to people who don't want to talk to her, like all the men on the ranch. Unsatisfied by her surly husband, she constantly lurks around the barn, trying to engage the workers in conversation.

be self-reliant, and believe in the promise that through hard work and perseverance life can be different and better.

Vonnegut: "Of all the words of mice and men, the worst are it might have been" (*Cat's Cradle*)

Broken Plans

Of Mice and Men takes its title from a famous lyric by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759 - 1796). Burns's poem "To a Mouse" contains the lines, "The best laid plans of mice and men / Often go awry." Nearly all of the main characters *Of Mice and Men* harbor dreams and plans that never come true. Most notably, **George**, **Lennie**, and **Candy** share a doomed dream of buying their own farm and living off the land. George often laments the life he could have had as a freewheeling bachelor

while **Curley's wife** often regrets her missed chance to become a Hollywood actress. In the end, the novel's main theme is that people must learn to reconcile their dreams with reality, to accept that everyone's best laid plans often perish.

There were two things though that did influence Steinbeck which were sexism, realism and racism. Steinbeck makes it clear in the beginning of the book that a woman is not equal with a man, yet in the end shows the audience equality of man and women as Curley's wife opens up to Lennie and Lennie acknowledges her as an equal. This is an affect of modernism. Racism is prevalent in the book as the N-word is used on more than one occasion yet there is a time when the white and black race seem equal. The equality in races did not come into modernism until the very end; however that is when Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men*. The only other influence from modernism in *Of Mice and Men* was the simple, blunt sentence structure with underlying meanings

In other words, the mouse can't think about the past or the future. Does this remind you of anyone? Us, too. It seems like Steinbeck is thinking of Lennie as the mouse, and George as the man who turns up its nest: life messes them both up, but at least Lennie doesn't have to remember any of it. Whatever happens to Lennie is over. He doesn't regret anything and he doesn't anticipate anything—not even his death.

But not George. George will have to live with what he's done for the rest of his life.

LECTURE IV. *Cat's Cradle*

Science in *Cat's Cradle*:

The novel *Cat's Cradle* tells how a harmless man, only interested in science, brought on the end of the world through ice—nine. This substance was created as an amusement after a military man asked for it and Dr. Hoenikker insinuated the possibility of its creation but declined the proposition. The theme behind this story is to make people more conscious of the authority that science has taken in our world, until it became unquestionable, and to push them, especially scientists, and men of power, to react against such misuse.

When Jonah, the narrator, starts collecting data about the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, he IS given different profiles of the same man. Some people describe him as a saint, others as an evil person, and others as an absent-minded man with no human characteristics at all, a robot. Even his children ARE suspected of being someone else's. The only thing that interested this scientist was "truth". His daughter, Angela, thinks that the world IS ungrateful to her father: "he gave so much, and they gave him so little" (*Cat's Cradle* 239). Likewise, Dr. Asa Breed, his supervisor at G.E, also thought that Dr. Hoenikker was a saint, and "a force of nature no mortal could possibly control" (38). Dr. Breed was impressed by Dr. Hoenikker's brightness and had a high appreciation for him as well as a lot of gratitude, because he was a man who loved science more than anything else in the world. Dr. Breed explainS Hoenikker's strong faith in pure science and expresseS his own fascination as well. He identifieS science and scientific research in particular as pure research for the sake of increasing knowledge only. He says: "it isn't looking for a better cigarette filter or a softer face tissue or a longer lasting house paint... Everybody talks about research but nobody in this country is doing it... Here and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that" (65).

Dr. Breed and Dr. Hoenikker as well as other figures in the novel share the belief that science is "the most valuable commodity on earth," and equal scientific research which of course leads to knowledge with truth, saying "the more truth we have, the richer we become". Dr. Breed is the spokesman of science in the novel. He expresses his wish to see more people studying science because the trouble with the world IS that people are more superstitious than scientific (65).

Dr. Breed insistS on the importance of scientific research in the lives of common individuals. He expresseS his conviction to high school students that science is meant to discover "the basic secret of life" (42); which the students never forget, although they do not make careers in science. His claim is taken at face value and recalled when these same persons hear a talk on the radio which says the secret of life is *Protein*.

Dr. Breed is convinced that scientists work on what fascinates them only but never on what fascinates others and especially not politicians. This conviction is one of the main things Dr. Breed is wrong about, among many other claims he mentioned earlier, like "we're [General Forge and Foundry Company] one of the few companies that actually hires men to do pure research," because apparently, scientists were serving government's projects, as General Forge was the company where the Atom Bomb was created in the novel. Dr. Breed mentions that military men (admirals and generals) consider Dr. Hoenikker as "a sort of magician who could make America invincible with a wave of his hand" (66).

Reason is Irrational:

Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argued that Western civilization has instrumentalized science in the process of the “rationalization” and “disenchantment” of the world (Cahoone 157). He concluded that, in disenchanting the world from its primitive state, modern society once again enchanted it (Kim). He traced the history of capitalism in the world and deduced that only Western civilization built its economy on “calculable” principles. Since the key for progress in the modern world is rationality, modern life, according to Weber, is fully dependent on a specially trained organization of officials. Apparently, the most important functions of the everyday life of society have been controlled by “technically, commercially, and above all legally trained government officials (Weber 159). This means that economic action is planned on the premises of rationality and adjusted in terms of capital, that is profit. Weber explains that Western capitalism has been influenced by the development of technical possibilities and is *dependent* on modern science. The development of THE sciences receives stimulation from capitalistic interests. Weber raises the question: from which parts of Western society’S structures does this capitalism derive the encouragement of science (165). Since modern society is controlled by the officials who are trained in economics as well as in politics and technology, every field in daily life is designed by them. Weber adds that modern law administrations rule as well in accordance with the “systematic formal code, without regard to person” (Kim); which puts everything in the service of the economy and the state. The world WAS disenchanting when man managed to control everything with “calculation”; thus man is liberated from the “savage life”. This disenchanting of the world, or its intellectualization, indicates that man longer needs magical ways to master life; technology is the key (Weber qtd. In Cahoone 170).

The Superficiality of the Novel:

Jonah and Philip Castle—son of Julian Castle—speak of the importance of a writer and his role in life. Julian Castle tells them both to write endlessly because people needed their lies. Vonnegut made of the apocalypse an art of writing, since he writes the unbearable suffering of the self of the post-world war period (Castro 33). Julian Castle’s statement confirms Vonnegut’s technique, which implies that postmodern fiction allows the author to write the massacre. Castle thinks it is terrible if fiction is lost in such a world. He supposes that the cat’s cradle (the game) is the literary metaphor of the apocalypse, and thus makes an artistic game. Losing fiction is losing the artistic game of the cat’s cradle which writes the catastrophe to soothe the soul (33).

The novel’s artificiality is apparent in Bokonon’s and Jonah’s warnings at the beginning of Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle*, the epigraph which tells that the book is unreal and made of lies—“don’t be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but foma!” (*Cat’s Cradle* 272)—, *The Books of Bokonon* which are a book written by Bokonon—this is the second book—, and Jonah’s book about the end of the world, which was to be called *The Day the World Ended*, then took the name *Cat’s Cradle*. Jonah’s awareness that writers are merchants of drugs implies that fiction is good because it is unreal and its consumer is aware of its artificiality. The artificiality of the religion of Bokononism itself and Klinkowitz’ argument that the transformative power of the novel is sapped when it is taken seriously, prove that neither religion nor fiction should be taken seriously (Klinkowitz 53). Thus, Bokonon and McCabbe’s drama started as a play everybody was aware of. The game became real with sentiments of hatred when it was internalized by the two main actors and people started to die on the hook (HY-U-O-OOK-KUH).

Lecture V. Political Reading

I. Marxist Theory (from *Literary Theory: The Basics* by Hans Bertens) (76-116)

Marxist theory explains that the world is built in structures, and these structures are defined by the economic system of each society. For Marxists “the way we think and the way we experience the world around us are... conditioned by the way economy is organized” (82)

For Marxists, even thought is “subservient to, and follows, the material conditions under which it develops” i.e: ideas develop to serve a materialist purpose, not an idealist one. (82). In this light, Fredric Jameson says that we suffer from a “waning of affects ie: loss of genuine emotion”—because our world is entirely dominated by Capitalism (83).

Marxists speak of *ideology* because it is one of the means through which Capitalism exploits the masses implicitly. Marxist definition of *ideology* is “what makes us experience our life in a certain way and makes us believe that that way of seeing ourselves and the world is natural” (85). Thus, if we give up to *ideology*, we live in an “illusory world” or what is referred to as “a state of false consciousness” (*ibid*)

Louis Althusser 1960 explained that *ideology* is implicitly injected in society through what he referred to as the *Ideological State Apparatuses*, in his opinion *ideology* “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (85)

Ideological State Apparatuses include “organized religion, law, political systems, educational systems (institutions)”

What Althusser thinks is that “While we believe that we are acting out of free will, we are in reality acted by the ... system” (86)

Ideology thus convinces us that we are « whole and real », that we are the ‘concrete subjects’ we want to be. « No wonder, then, that we see whatever ideology makes us see as natural, as belonging to the natural, harmonious order of things. » (87)

In Marxist literary criticism, it is argued that novels like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), which claim their characters as free, even if not all of them make use of that freedom, ‘hail’ us just like ideology hails us. [...] The reader is drawn ... and becomes through [characters] the experiencing centre of the novel’s organic vision: unless we resist such positioning by reading against the grain, it is hard to avoid the process. (87)

« Friedrich Engels in 1888 – ... the meaning of a literary work must be seen as independent of the political (and ideologically coloured) views of its author. This by now familiar strategy of separating text and author does, however, not separate the text from social reality (as the Formalists and the literary structuralists did). On the contrary, the idea is that if we remove the author from the picture – or at least the author’s political views – we might get an even better picture of the real world of class conflicts and political tension. This idea has the great merit that it allows Marxist critics to read the work of even the most reactionary authors against the grain of their political views so that the ‘bourgeois’ writers that are part of the general literary canon can also be appreciated from a Marxist perspective. » (90)

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