



Uluslararası Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi
The Journal of International Social Research
Cilt: 10 Sayı: 53 Volume: 10 Issue: 53
www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581
http://dx.doi.org/10.17719/jisr.20175334111

MODERN ENGLISH NOVEL: THE LEADING TRAITS AND VOICES

Zafer ŞAFAK*

Abstract

Modernism can be defined through the shift of appreciation and perception of diverging spheres of life ranging from architecture to literature. Though characteristically associated with technology and with the pace or acceleration of life, modern art, particularly the modern fiction, ultimately produced artists challenging the taken-for-granted truths, attacking taboos and rejecting social norms and moral codes. Modern writers were hopeful in the foundation of a solid and thriving society through the utilization of values of the past yet the mass destruction and profound sense of grief caused by the war demolished their faith in humane values. Lacking a mainstay to base their arguments on an egalitarian society, literature of the age are rich in rebellious characters with the senses of alienation and insecurity. Within the mainstream of such themes as discontent and disintegration of society, writers came up with new technics as well for the depiction of reality. The objective of this study is to present a concise panorama of modern novel including its leading traits, prominent themes and styles, highlights of modern literature and representative works.

Keywords: Modernism, Modern Fiction, Disintegration of Society, Alienation, Insecurity.

1. Introduction: Modernism: Unfolding a Familiar Concept

Although Virginia Woolf exaggerated the far-reaching developments and great changes taking place in every sphere of life in pinpointing a specific time by suggesting that “On or about December 1910 human nature changed and [...] all human relations shifted” (Woolf, 1924:2-3), she was right in recognizing that there was a great shift in the appreciation or evaluation of literature, art, culture and ultimately the life itself. It is commonly accepted that the developments in question can be approximately brought back to the late years of the 19th century, which lasted right after the Second World War. All the changes, which cover the vast fields of architecture, culture, lifestyle, technology, music etc., denote what is then termed as Modernism.

Modernism, as a cultural and literary movement, flourished in the leading capital cities of the Western Europe such as Paris, London, Milan and Berlin as almost all the modernist works “centre on a great aspect of modernity: life in the city” (Butler, 2010:2) and the movement continued to exert influence over the rest of the World until it was both resisted and criticized and the features of which were also exploited by postmodernism. The movement was characterized by the advancement of industry and technology leading to acceleration of life in every respect and causing a restlessness and a profound sense of meaninglessness which were reflected both in the

* Res. Asst. Iğdır University, The Faculty of Science and Letters, The Department of Western Languages and Literatures, zafersafak61@hotmail.com



mainstream of modernism and in the sub/branches or extensions of modernism such as Cubism in painting, which was “invented by Picasso and Braque (Butler, 2010:15), and Surrealism in literature. What Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and many others observed in their rapidly changing environment and produced their works while making use of the harrowing rapidity of these changes and loss of humane values were indeed “heralded” in the works of late 19th (and early 20th) century intellectuals such as Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Darwin challenged the scriptural authority on the origins of human being though the Victorian attitude which clumsily tried to “maintain a humanist worldview” against “the deconstructive implications of [the] evolutionary theory” (Rohman, 2009:5). Nietzsche contradicted the ethical issues, which were held dear both by conventions and religious thought. Marx uncovered the fact that classes in a society have been indeed created and the situation is tried to be maintained by the dominant classes. Through his views, Freud destroyed the intrinsic qualities of man such as rational thought or common sense, affection and mercy, which all have been assigned to man, and he diminished them into the mere goal-oriented bestial urges or instincts. In short, Freud, who pays special attention to unconscious in his works, “aligns the unconscious with animality” (Rohman, 2009:23). Seeing that the mainstay on which they could rely had already been demolished and the impacts of which they inevitably had to face daily, artists of the modern period tend towards finding new ways or styles, integrated with dexterity, to convey their thoughts and feelings so that they can act a role for the creation of the coming/future society.

2. Reverberations to Literature and Fiction: Prominent Themes, Styles and the Variations of the Movement

The 20th century recorded an unprecedented advancement in terms of technology and in line with this technology, which was also backed up by the preceding centuries’ industrial development, transportation and communication facilitated man’s life to a great extent. Machines, which made it easier to communicate and travel, later proved that they also had the capacity for mass-destruction and murder. Modernist writers, particularly those who experienced the World War/s, mostly were afraid of technology and preferred excluding it from their works. When examined closely, Joyce, Pound and Eliot were seen to have either left the progress that technology made or dimly referred it no matter how much the urban life was deeply encircled by it. In relation to technology and literature, Greenberg and Schachterle argue that in Joyce fiction, “there is no attempt to focus on technology on its own sake” (Greenberg and Schachterle, 1992:57). As they tried to lay the foundations of a new civilization, they opt for looking back to classical era and/or to the period of Renaissance and eschew to rely on the outputs of a machine age for they believed this would aggravate their perception to comprehend the intrinsic qualities of man and a true civilization. Exception to this was Filippo Marinetti, who was the precursor and the leading proponent of the Futurist movement, was enamored by the technology and heavily employed factories, airplanes and machineguns as a subject matter for his writing. Futurist believed the “gleaning ever benefit of science and technology” and “technology would necessarily improve the human condition” (Rainey and Wittman, 2009:199,326). At last, Marinetti reached at such a point that he became a champion of the First World War, the phenomenon which nursed the fervor of modernist artists. The Second World War was seen to have not only extinguished their enthusiasm but also it almost marked the end of the movement.



Apart from technology, the theme of alienation, which means separation and the sense of not belonging to somewhere, holds a significant place in modern fiction. It is argued that “[...] in the twentieth century, the relationship between the individual and society [...] becomes equivocal [...] The protagonist we encounter in the fiction of Camus, Faulkner, Beckett is generally embittered, rebellious or withdrawn; the modern novelist faithfully reflects the spirit of his age by exploring the theme of alienation, impotence or anomie (Glicksberg, 1972:48). Alienation, in its primary form, characters are portrayed to have specific sensitivity to something and consequently alienated from the outside world, the portrayal of which is usually conveyed to reader through stream of conscious technique. In *Ulysses*, Dedalus is alienated from his family and the milieu as he is excessively devoted to art. In the case of Woolf’s female characters, they are alienated from their relatives because of their tightly squeezed gender roles dictated upon them mostly by traditions decreeing strict normative rules.

The third significant theme in modern writers’ fiction which either achieves to affect the course of events or looms over/behind them and lingers throughout the narration is the ever-presence of the past. Joyce is argued to have discovered the “basic strategy of the Modernist movement, the recovery of the presence of the past: as T. S. Eliot was to say in his famous essay on tradition, not the pastness of the past but its presentness, its presence in the present” (Schneidau, 1991:16). As the modern writers poignantly witnessed the loss of all the certainties even by the highly appreciated advances, they took refuge the certainties of the past. After the First World War, which demolished those hypothetically existing values of the past, they lost this “shelter” as well and they ended up with regarding themselves at the end of the history. Nevertheless, downfall of the past values does not stop modernist writers from constantly referring and making allusions to past.

As for the style, modernist writers did not try to depict the world as it was viewed rather they endeavored to portray it as it was experienced. That’s why modernist writers paid critical attention to narrative techniques; to comply accurately with the experienced subjective reality instead of the objective external reality; they made much use of interior monologue or stream of consciousness technique through which the writer recorded the flux of thoughts passing within the mind of a character without any regular pattern.

The other stylistic quality, which is heavily employed by modernist writers, is allusion. While allusions can be a reference to a person, event and a place and even to a specific object or an artifact, in Joyce and Eliot’s works, they appear to have been made in relation to past. While Joyce’s *Ulysses* reminds Homer’s *Odyssey*, which is constricted within a day in an unheroic way, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* proved to be a collection of historical references and specifically made allusions to people such as Dante and blind Greek oracle Tiresias.

In the beginning, Modernism was a medley of smaller groups or variations of the same movement. Among them the Dadaists, the Vorticist, the Futurists, the Surrealists and the members of the Lost Generation were the most notable ones. These groups, which were later called under the unified term of Modernists, led by significant literary figures of the age exemplified in the case of *Bloomsbury Group*, which included E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. The general tendency in these subgroups, as it is seen in the mainstream of modernism, is the pessimism about the present condition of the world, challenge against the taken-for-granted “truths” and



traditions and a widespread belief in to the artists who rebel. As opposed to the former Victorian literary perception and taste, which had esteem for edification in that literature must morally instruct and reform its audience, modernist literature stands out to be intricate and incomprehensible not only because of its irony, textual resistance and uncertainty embroidered with allusions but also due to the superior intellectual capacity and creativity of its practitioners. In doing so, modernist writers attacked on the social taboos in insulting religion and by rejecting social norms and “proper” conventional codes allotted respectively to each man and woman. As a consequence, modern artists were driven into the role of outcasts and rebels.

3. Highlights of Modern English Literature and Representative Works

Born in Missouri in 1888 and attended various prestigious universities such as Harvard, Sorbonne and Oxford, Thomas Stearns Eliot was naturalized as British citizen in 1927. (Cooper, 2006:2-9). In his college years, T.S. Eliot engaged with French symbolist poetry and he reserved a significant place to pessimism, emptiness and boredom in his poetry. Ezra Pound having read Eliot’s poems, he decided to include Eliot to their literary circle. Their friendship gave a chance to Eliot to refine his poetry which is claimed to have played a role in the edition of his long and famous poem *The Waste Land*. Having gained literary fame, he became a major literary critic, and editor of literary journals and publishing houses. Through his essays, he appreciated Metaphysical poetry, Elizabethan artists and Dante and he attacked on Neoclassical and Romantic poets. T.S. Eliot, who is noted for his works on literary criticism and poetical drama, dealt with such themes as time, eternity, disintegrating of civilization. His poetry, which is in line with the general tone of modern literary products, is rich in the sense of hopelessness and emptiness and it is characterized thematically with terror and stylistically with difficulty (Edward, 200:533-538).

James Joyce, who was not as prolific as the other modern novelist, he managed to produce works in the genres of drama, short story and novel. Joyce, who was born in Dublin, dealt with the most prevalent themes that modernist touched upon in their works such as significance of past in one’s life, exile from one’s milieu and culture and “loss, betrayal, and the interplay of psychological and social experience” (Attridge, 2004:173). The first noted contribution to modernism by Joyce appeared with the publication of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916 in which Joyce utilized stream of consciousness technique. In 1922, Joyce published *Ulysses*, which has been hailed as the most iconic modernist work of art, through which he retold the myth of *Odysseus*, in an anti-heroic fashion abounded with mundane concern in a modern world. For the two works, it is suggested that “there is a similar fluidity at the borderline between fiction and biography” (Attridge, 2004:24). Joyce’s *Ulysses* single-handedly achieved to convey the sense of trivialization of individuals in the intersection of daily concerns not matter how much their names connote the mythic and heroic characters of the past. The other masterpiece Joyce came up with is *Finnegans Wake* in 1939 with which he proved that he was not extinguished as a literary talent and surprised his readers with constant wordplays and meticulous search for the distant possibilities of language.

The other major modern novelist is Virginia Woolf who had the chance of meeting prominent Victorian intellectual men of letters in her childhood thanks to the statue of her family and its affairs with members of the upper class (Goldman, 2006:3) Her intellectual agility was sharpened when she married to journalist Leonard Woolf



with whom she found Hogarth Press. Woolf published Eliot's *Poems* and Freud's works (Ellman 2010:61) which she seemed to have internalized the thoughts of Freud and reflected them into her works, the traces of which can be followed in *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Like Joyce, Virginia Woolf utilized stream of consciousness technique and she related her feminist and bisexual concerns through such works as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Orlando* (1928), which were quite unusual for her time and countered with much distaste by some quarters.

Apart from British-oriented modern writers, there were also other voices, particularly from the other side of the Atlantic, who hoisted and waved the flag of modern literature. To exemplify, Gertrude Stein, who is commonly accepted to have come up with the coinage of the Lost Generation (Daniel, 2009:126) for the expatriate writers residing in Europe, dominated the avant-garde literary scene and provided a milieu for intellectuals to come together. Another U.S. subject was Nobel laureate novelist William Faulkner, who experiments with time particularly in *The Sound and the Fury*, opts for presenting various perspectives by means of series of narrator with a fragmented narration. This climaxes in *The Sound and the Fury* in which Faulkner forces his readers to find out the true version of the story out of a mentally retarded boy's recounting (Towner, 2008:16-17). Another significant modernist from U.S was Ezra Pound who laid the foundations of the short-lived modernist movement Imagism. Pound rejected Victorian verse and turned to fragmented and plotless versification. Aside from the stylistic features, Ezra Pound, who translated Anglo-Saxon work *The Seafarer* and came into prominence with his long poem *The Cantos*, integrated the most conspicuous thematic traits of modernism into his works such as the ills of the modern age and bewildered individuals without any way out or solution. One of the most distinctive features of these artists was "the degree of interaction among the main participants. Yeats, for example, put Pound in contact with Joyce; Pound put Eliot in contact with Harriet Monroe" (Nadel, 2007:25). With his journalistic technique, particularly he employed in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Ernest Hemingway contributed to the evolution of modernism and he almost omitted the use of adjectives and contractions both the technique (journalistic technique) and the preference (the omissions) could thus give the real traumatic experience of the casualties of a war and the sorrow of those who witnessed its fatal nature. He developed his technique by refining the language he was using which means in practice the "deletion of all words and phrases which were in any way false. One of the difficulties with language, as many good writers have felt and as Hemingway said, is that 'all our words from loose using have lost their edge' Recognizing this fact, Hemingway always wrote slowly and revised carefully, cutting, eliding, substituting, experimenting with syntax to see what a sentence could most economically carry, and then throwing out all words that could be spared" (Bloom, 2005.74).

4. Seeing Through the Gist of a Movement

Taken as a whole, Modernism was not a unified movement at its outset as it is suggested above and its practitioners, who were regarded outcasts in one way or another by the laymen, were characterized with pessimism and discontent the quality of which can be "read" in their art as well. They were mostly critical of the values piled up over centuries and their hostility to the codes of instructive work of art associated with Victorian attitude was first countered with discontent as it was outside the scope of "edification" through literature and art. That's why Modernism generated its own



critics such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who came up with their aesthetics conforming to the ethos of the new age. The resistance and discontented against the core values of Modernism yielded to widespread acknowledgement after the First World War, the phenomenon out of which the movement was truly ingrained to the extent that views of the artists were seen to be unmistakably true about the state of the world and humanity.

REFERENCES

- ALBERT, Edward (2000). *History of English Literature*, Revised by J. A. Stone, Oxford University Press.
- ATTRITGE, Derek (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, Cambridge University Press.
- BLOOM, Harold (2005). *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- BUTLER, Christopher (2010). *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press.
- COOPER, J. Cirox (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot*, Cambridge University Press.
- DANIEL, Lucy (2009). *Gertrude Stein*, London: Reaktion Books.
- ELLMAN, Maud (2010). *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud*, Cambridge University Press.
- GLICKSBERG, Charles (1972). *Literature and Society*, Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media.
- GOLDMAN, Jane (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge University Press.
- GREENBERG, Mark L. Schachterle, Lance (1992). *Literature and Technology*, London: Associated University Press.
- NADEL, Ira B. (2007). *The Cambridge Introduction to Ezra Pound*, Cambridge University Press.
- Rainey, L., Wittman L. (2009). *Futurism: An Anthology*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- ROHMAN, Carrie (2009). *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- SCHNEIDAU, Herbert N. (1991). *Waking Giants: The Presence of the Past in Modernism*, Oxford University Press.
- TOWNER, Theresa M. (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to William Faulkner*, Cambridge University Press.
- WOOLF, Virginia (1924). *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, London: Hogarth Press.