

AMERICAN MODERNISM
LIT. 215
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Chapter 7: Early Twentieth Century - American Modernism: A Brief Introduction

By

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"... the greatest single fact about our modern American writing is our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it." - Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 1942

"Defining modernism is a difficult task. ... A historical definition would say that modernism is the artistic movement in which the artist's self-consciousness about questions of form and structure became uppermost. ... In brief, modernism asks us to consider what we normally understand by the center and the margins." - *Heath Anthology*, Vol. 2, 4th ed., 887-888.

Modern Attitudes

1. The artist is generally less appreciated but more sensitive, even more heroic, than the average person.
2. The artist challenges tradition and reinvigorates it.
3. A breaking away from patterned responses and predictable forms.

Contradictory Elements

1. Democratic and elitist.
2. Traditional and anti-tradition.
3. National jingoism and provinciality versus the celebration of international culture.
4. Puritanical and repressive elements versus freer expression in sexual and political matters.

Modern Themes

1. Collectivism versus the authority of the individual.
2. The impact of the 1918 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.
3. The Jazz Age.
4. The passage of 19th Amendment in 1920 giving women the right to vote.
5. Prohibition of the production, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages, 1920-33.
6. The stock-market crash of 1929 and the Depression of the 1930s and their impact.

Modernism and the Self

1. In this period, the chief characteristic of the self is one of alienation. The character belongs to a "lost generation" (Gertrude Stein), suffers from a "dissociation of sensibility" (T. S. Eliot), and who has "a Dream deferred" (Langston Hughes).
2. Alienation led to an awareness about one's inner life.

Modernism and the New Negro Renaissance (i.e. 'The Harlem Renaissance')

1. The relationship between the two is complex.
2. They both share the important motif of alienation.
3. However, American modernism is inspired by the European avant-garde art; the Renaissance represents the unique and distinct experience of black Americans.
4. Modernism borrows from the Renaissance the themes of marginality and the use of folk or the so-called "primitive" material.
5. The use of the blues tradition - important for the Renaissance - is not shared by white modernists; considered too limiting (mere complaint about one's repressed and exploited condition), the blues tradition represents images and themes of liberation and revolt.
6. This relationship requires reevaluation; the Renaissance is important for black and white readers and writers.

(For a detailed discussion of the above-stated elements, read pages 887-914 in Paul Lauter, ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2, Fourth Ed., 2002.)

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