

Modernism in American Literature

Literary Modernism – 1915-1945

1. Response to “sense of total breakdown”
 - a. Reaction to World War I
 - b. The Great Depression
2. Sees the world as “fragmented” pattern of construction out of fragments
 - a. Unrelated pieces juxtaposed
 - b. Life is fragmented
 - c. Unusual connective patterns missing: morals, laws, etc.
3. Point of view is remote and detached from subject
4. Subject: often questions the purpose of literature
 - a. What is the use of literature in a world which is falling apart?
5. Elite audience: intellectual, academic

Philosophical Backgrounds

1. Karl Marx
 - a. Economic Determinism
 - b. Human behavior controlled by forces *outside* of self
 - c. CLASS STRUGGLE, workers unite for a Utopian change
2. Sigmund Freud
 - a. Psychoanalysis
 - b. Psychological Determinism
 - c. Human behavior controlled by forces *inside* of self
 - i. Subconscious – hidden desires and meanings
 - ii. *Interpretation of Dreams*
 - d. Interior forces, man’s taboos and rules govern the world
 - e. Self-analysis
3. Friedrich Nietzsche
 - a. “God is Dead”
 - b. Economic and psychological determinism
 - c. No divine patterns, search for meaning
 - d. Trying to put world back into some kind of order, structure
 - e. Spiritual ruins after the war: what is the meaning of life?
4. Pablo Picasso
 - a. Objects are broken down, analyzed, and reassembled as an abstract form
 - i. Cubism
 - b. Allows for multiple differing perspectives
 - c. Lack of overall cohesion

Characteristics of Modernism

1. Alienation from society; loneliness
2. Procrastination; inability to act
3. Agonized recollection of the past
 - a. Flashbacks
4. Fear of death and appearance of death
5. Inability to feel or express love
6. World as a Wasteland
7. Man creating his own myths within his mind to fall back upon

Major themes emerging in Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald

1. Violence and alienation
2. Historical discontinuity
3. Decadence and decay
4. Loss and despair
5. Rejection of history
6. Race relations
7. Unavoidable change
8. Sense of place; local color