

The Birth of American Modernism (1915-1945)



Important Information
has been **bolded** for you



“World War I . . . destroyed faith in progress, but it did more than that—it made clear to perceptive thinkers . . . that violence prowled underneath man’s apparent harmony and rationality.”

--William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*

Definition

- ❑ Robert Wohl – “Modernism is a response by clusters of intellectuals and artists to the converging processes of industrialization”
- ❑ In Other Words...
 - **Modernism is the reaction of artists and writers to the new society formed because of industrialization.**

Literary Modernism: 1915-1945

Aspects

- 📖 high degree of experimentation.
- 📖 characters most often alienated people searching unsuccessfully for meaning and love in their lives
- 📖 themes pulled from real life.



AFTER THE GREAT WAR

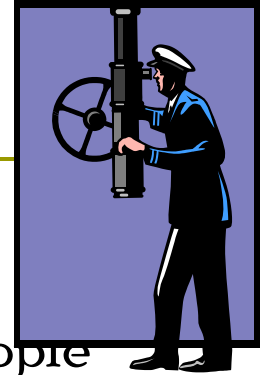
- ❑ **The devastation of World War I brought about an end to the sense of optimism** that characterized the years leading up to the war.
- ❑ **This more negative, or realistic, view of the world, and the technological advances, gave birth to Modernism**

Value Differences in the Modern World

Pre-Modern World	Modern World (Early 20 th Century)
Ordered	Chaotic
Meaningful	Futile
Optimistic	Pessimistic
Stable	Fluctuating
Faith	Loss of faith
Morality/Values	Collapse of Morality/Values
Clear Sense of Identity	Confused Sense of Identity and Place in the World

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE INTELLECTUAL CURRENTS WHICH INFLUENCED MODERNISM

Major Influences



□ WWI

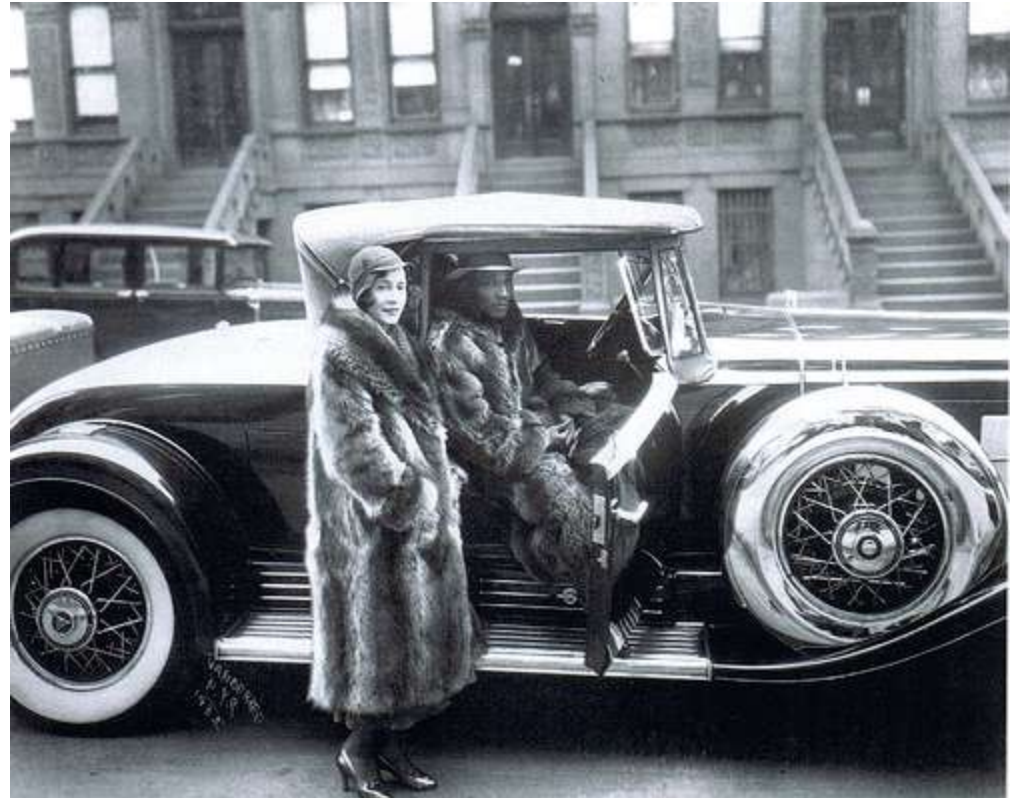
- 32 countries and claimed the lives of over 20 million people
- new weapons b/c of technology
- Signals an end to idealism and ushered in an era marked by hedonism*, political corruption, and ruthless business practices

□ The Jazz Age / Roaring Twenties

- “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history” (FSF)
- Young people rebelling against past + tradition
- Experimentation with fashion







Major Influences

❑ Prohibition (1920-1933)

- Alcohol was made illegal
- Bootleggers= sold alcohol anyway
- Speakeasies= where alcohol was served despite prohibition



❑ New Era for Women

- The right to vote (19th am.)
- Flapper= “an emancipated young woman who embraced new fashions and urban attitudes of the day”
- More women working

HELP ME to keep Him PURE



PLEASE VOTE
"AGAINST THE SALE
OF LIQUORS"



FORGOTTEN IMAGES



Major Influences

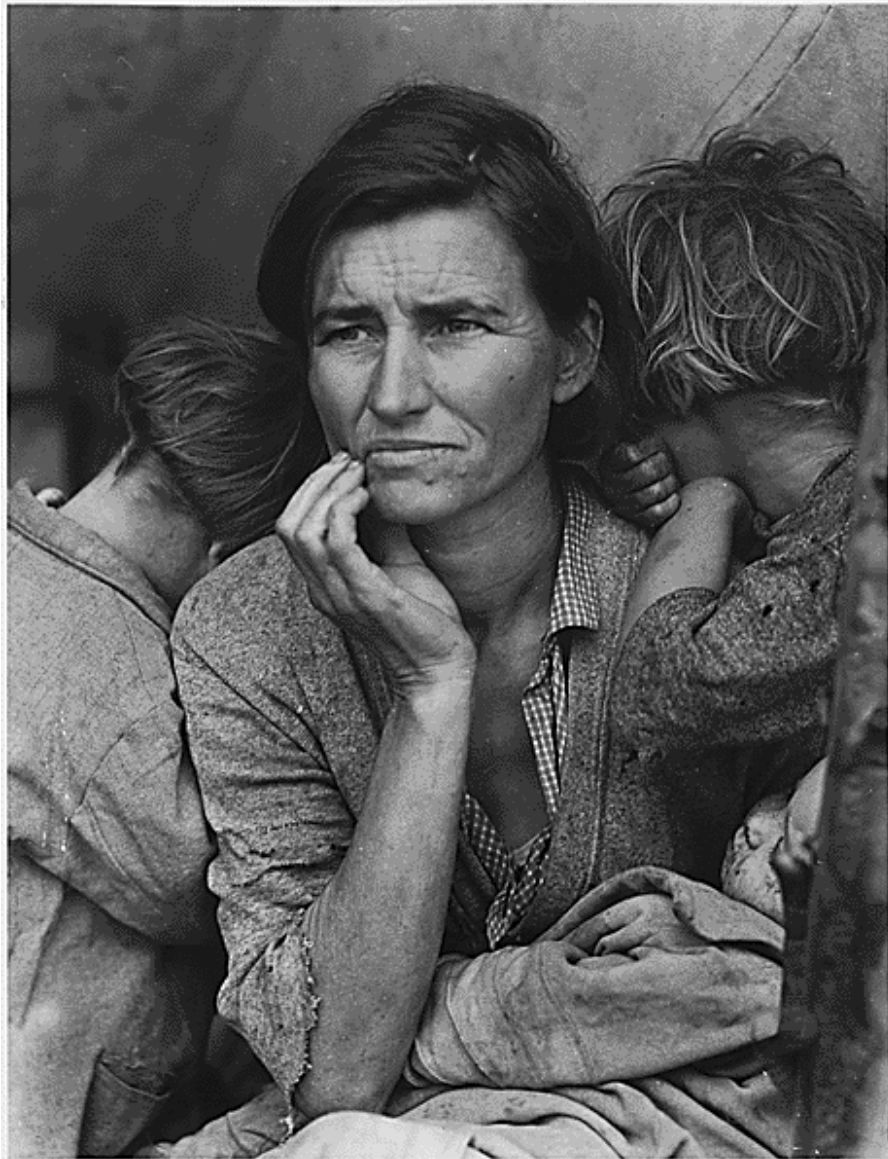


❑ The Great Depression

- Stock Market crashed in 1929
- Banks failed, businesses floundered, workers lost job; 25% unemployed
- Farmers ruined and went West to find work. Tough times. Not many jobs and too many people.

❑ The New Deal (FDR)

- New Deal programs: relief for the hungry and homeless, recovery for agriculture and business, and various economic reforms to prevent such a severe depression from occurring again.



Themes of Modern Literature

- ❑ **Collectivism versus individualism**
- ❑ **Disillusionment**
- ❑ **Violence and alienation**
- ❑ **Decadence and decay**
- ❑ **Loss and despair**
- ❑ **Breakdown of social norms and cultural sureties**
- ❑ **Race and gender relations**
- ❑ **The American Dream**

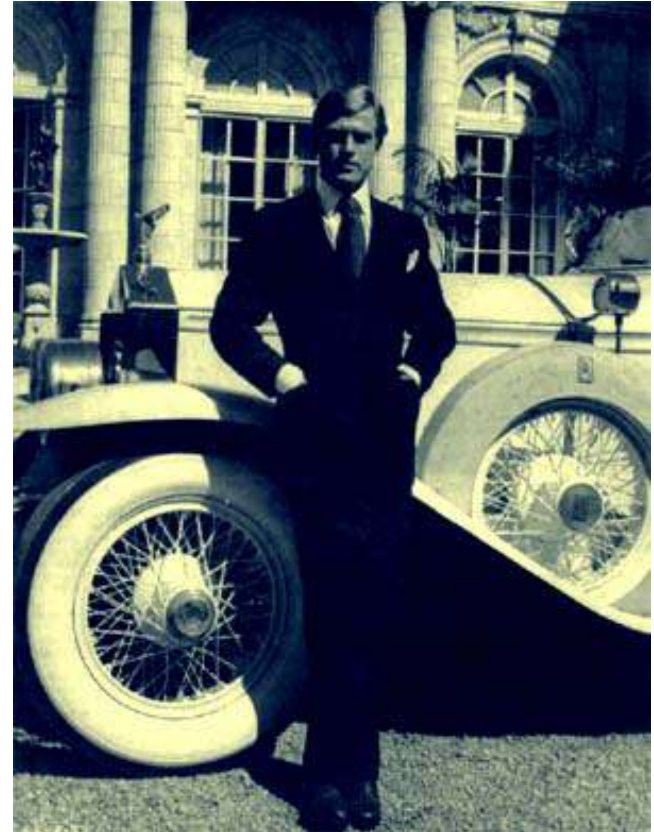
Theme of Alienation

- ❑ Sense of alienation in literature:
 - The character belongs to a “lost generation” (Gertrude Stein)
 - **The character suffers from a “dissociation of sensibility” —separation of thought from feeling** (T. S. Eliot)
 - The character has “a Dream deferred” (Langston Hughes).



Valorization of the Individual

- ❑ Characters are heroic in the face of a future they can't control.
- ❑ Demonstrates the uncertainty felt by individuals living in this era.
- ❑ Examples include Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, Lt. Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*



Urbanscapes

- ❑ Life in the city differs from life on the farm; writers began to explore city life.
- ❑ Conflicts begin to center on society.



Literary Styles of Modernism

- **Stream of consciousness narration: a narrative mode which seeks to portray an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either through loose interior monologue or in connection to action.**

Juxtaposition

- ❑ **Two images that are otherwise not commonly brought together appear side by side or structurally close together**, thereby forcing the reader to stop and reconsider the meaning of the text through the contrasting images, ideas, motifs, etc.
- ❑ For example, “He was slouched alertly” is a juxtaposition.

MAJOR AUTHORS



T.S. Eliot



William Faulkner



Ernest Hemingway



Gertrude Stein



F. Scott Fitzgerald

Ideal American Dream

- ❑ **Endless Opportunities— “New Eden”**
- ❑ **Progress—Life should keep getting better and better**
- ❑ **The independent, self-reliant individual will triumph**

Characteristics of Modernism in American Literature

- Emphasis on **bold experimentation** in style and form, reflecting the fragmentation of society.
 - Example—There is no resolution in “A Worn Path
- **Rejection of traditional themes** and subjects. **Loss of faith in religion and society.**
- Sense of disillusionment and **loss of faith in the American Dream**
 - Example—Nick and Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby*

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- ❑ **Rejection of the ideal hero as infallible in favor of a hero who is flawed and disillusioned** but shows “grace under pressure.”
 - ❑ **Interest in the inner workings of the human mind, (stream of consciousness)** sometimes expressed through new narrative techniques.
 - Examples—Hurstons, Hemingway

What is Today's American Dream?

“American modernist writers both echoed and challenged the American Dream. They constituted a broader, more resonant voice than ever before, resulting in a second American renaissance. With all the changes, however, writers continued to ask fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence.”

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F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896 - 1940

"Show me a hero, and I will write you a tragedy."

Summary

- ❑ **Wrote five novels and numerous short stories during the 1920s and 1930s.**
- ❑ **Portrayed extravagance and carelessness of the Jazz Age.**
- ❑ **Authored *The Great Gatsby*, often called the greatest American novel of the 20th century.**



Zelda



- ❑ Pretty Southern belle whom Fitzgerald met while stationed in Alabama
- ❑ Energetic and imaginative
- ❑ Turned Fitzgerald's first proposal down
- ❑ Later married and moved to New York

Scott and Zelda

Symbols of the Jazz Age

- ❑ Attractive and charming
- ❑ Legendary partiers
- ❑ Artistic ambition
- ❑ Drinking and recklessness
- ❑ Zelda's mental breakdown
- ❑ Romance and tragedy



Fitzgerald in the 1930s



- ❑ Debt, depression, poor health, drinking
- ❑ Hollywood
- ❑ Died of heart attack in 1940 at 44
- ❑ Zelda died in a hospital fire in 1947
- ❑ Work revived after his death

Themes

- ❑ What are the consequences of the carelessness that results from wealth and social power?
- ❑ To what extent can a person change his/her social status through the acquisition of money?
- ❑ What is the importance of striving to accomplish a lifelong dream?
- ❑ What are the consequences of failure to accomplish a lifelong dream?

The Great Gatsby

- ❑ Long Island, 1920s
- ❑ Jay Gatsby – young millionaire with mysterious past
- ❑ Gatsby throws glamorous parties for high society
- ❑ Gatsby wants to reunite with Daisy, his long lost love, who is married to millionaire Tom Buchanan
- ❑ Narrated by Nick Carraway, a young stock trader who lives in a small place next to Gatsby

Cubism



Dadaism

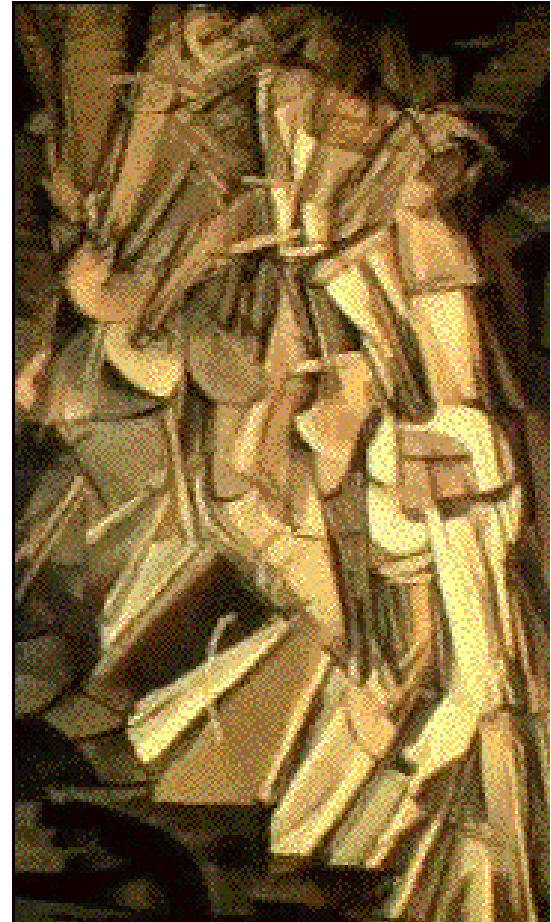
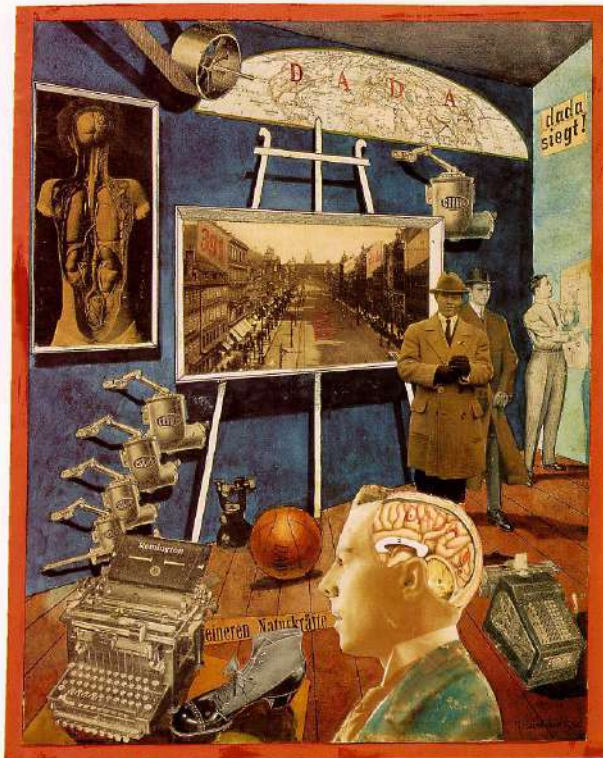
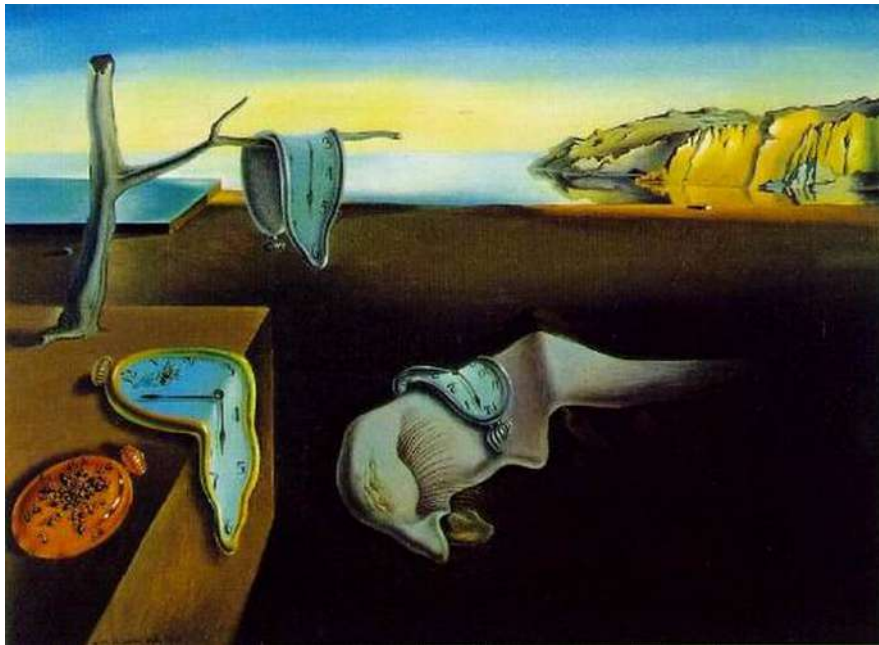


Fig. 1: *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*

Duchamp

Surrealism



Dali



Magritte



Jackson Pollock

Futurism



Kandinsky



Giacomo Balla