

An Introduction to Modernism (Part1)

- Modernism is a movement in literature, philosophy and art that began in the late 19th century and lasted until the 1940s.
- Literary Modernism came as reaction against old parameters of writing such as the ideologies of realism. Realism is the dominant feature in the 19th century fiction and it focuses on representing everyday experiences as they are depicted in real life. Peter Childs states that realism is “characterised by its attempt to offer up a mirror to the world” (Childs 3). This means that 19th century fiction is realistic in the way that it attempts to mirror the life of characters as it is (representation of characters is close to the truth).
- **Modernism**, unlike **realism** that preserved things as they are, challenged all that blocked human progress and encouraged deep thinking of the individual. So, literary Modernism encourages the deeper thought of individual writers. Modernism develops stream of consciousness narration to see experience through the psychology of the individual’s mind.
- **Stream of consciousness** is a narrative mode that attempts to capture the interior flow of thoughts of the character.
- **Modernism** is mostly associated with representing the interior of the individual’s mind. It involves themes that centre around the search for a lost self or the questioning of one’s identity. This means that in Modernist literature, the character’s consciousness is the main site of action. Through the interior monologue and the stream of consciousness, the reader is allowed to have a realistic vision of the character’s state of mind with all its complexities and this is relevant to literary works of famous modernists such as William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf etc that mostly revolve around themes of madness and the terror associated with it.
- In addition to stepping away from realism, Modernists used **a fragmented style of writing**. This means that they did not follow a certain order of events in their writings. They also used **allusions**, **juxtaposition** and **free verse**. All of these new characteristics oppose the traditional ways of writing. A brief overview of these narrative and poetic characteristics can be found in the table below:

- Allusion means a direct or an indirect reference to another writer's part of a text. This includes a reference to a character, an event or a place and so on.
- Juxtaposition in literature means comparison or contrast. So Modernist writers use juxtaposition by presenting two characters for example side by side to create a valid comparison.
- Free verse is a literary device that Modernist poets used and which opposes the traditional verse. This means that, in poetry, poets are free from the limitations of regular meter or rhythm and the verses do not rhyme with fixed forms.

- The Modernist period was characterised by a series of cultural shocks and the greatest of all was the First World War (1914-1918). As a result of the Great War, the Modernist period was characterised by disillusionment and themes about political, social, and psychological unrest dominate the Modernist literature.
- In Modernist literature, writers tried to capture the moral decay and alienation of the individual.
- Last but not least, the fragmented style (disorganised style) of writing in Modernist literature mirrors the fragmented psychology (the disturbed psychology) of the individual of the Modernist period.