

Contextualizing Modernist English Fiction: A New Historicist Interpretation

د عصري انگليسي افسانې متناقض كول: يو نوي تاريخ پوه تفسير

Imdad Ullah Khan*, Muhammad Rafiq†, Aftab Ahmed‡

ABSTRACT

Modernists believed that conventional methods of creating art were outmoded and unfit for the demands of their contemporary times. They sought to redefine social norms, religion, the arts, and literature; to have a different perspective on life and what it means to be "human". In the current article, the modern novel is examined as a distinct historical stage in the development of the English novel. It offers a thorough understanding of the political, social, literary, and historical influences on modernist fiction. The novels written at this time tend to have a strong focus on individualism, the absurdity of life, fragmentation and pessimism, and the open discussion of sexuality. The experiments with form, style, and diction, the use of open symbols and stream-of-consciousness in narration, and the use of non-linear and multi-focal narratives by the modernists are explained from a new-historicist perspective in terms of how such elements reveal the feelings of disillusionment and anxiety that were widespread among in the west in response to modern industrialization, social fragmentation, rapid changes in gender roles, and the two World Wars. Through this examination of modernist literature, the article demonstrates how such works were not only aesthetic responses to these turbulent times but also acts of critical engagement with the struggles that many people were facing in their lives.

Keywords: modernism, fiction, new-historicism, thematic analysis, pessimism, innovation, literary techniques.

Introduction

The literary modernists held that conventional methods of creating art were outmoded and unfit for today's demands. They sought to redefine social norms, religion, the arts, and literature. To have a different perspective on life, they wanted to talk about what it means to be "human" and what makes us

* Assistant Professor in English, University of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Imdad.Khan@uswat.edu.pk
| ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7933-901X>

† MPhil Scholar, Hazara University, Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

‡ Qurtuba University, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

feel like conscious beings. Thus, during the modernist period, the accepted standards, ideologies, and moralities of the Enlightenment and the Victorian era were called into question. According to Childs (2000), the age of modernism is characterized by "paradoxical, if not antagonistic, tendencies towards revolutionary and reactionary viewpoints, fear of the new and joy at the passing of the old, nihilism and obsessive excitement, inventiveness, and despair" (p. 129).

Literary experts rarely concur on the exact time the modernist era started. But it's commonly accepted that it began as early as 1880 and continued until the middle of the 1940s and into the years that followed World War II. Among the important developments and upheavals that define the modernist period are industrialization, scientific progress, globalization, and the two world wars (WWI 1914–1918; WWII 1939–1955). These changes cannot be disregarded when researching modernist fiction or modernist literature in general. In contrast to how industrialization and war appeared to diminish and devalue the value of human life and sociocultural distinctiveness, globalization (increased communication and movement across regions of the world) appeared to shrink the world. People at the time produced social, cultural, and literary production at a faster rate to respond to these causes (James, 2009). The rapidity of societal change was reflected in rapid changes in the generation's creative output. The novel was not an exception, being a prominent form of cultural production. The sections that follow in the current article will show how the novel underwent significant experimentation in all of its elements. The objectives of creating fiction as well as the procedures and writing methods were rethought. These developments become fairly obvious when we compare any type of cultural production from the modernist era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to that which was produced previously in the fields of literature, the arts, or architecture.

Early modernist period

Although the modernist era is typically thought to have started around 1910, the antecedent works of the modernist approach had already started to appear earlier. *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a work of early modernism by Joseph Conrad, combines the modernist approach to fiction with realistic literature, which was common during the Victorian era. As a result, it is a piece of fiction that straddles the lines between Victorian and modernist prose fiction in terms of literary devices used. Similar to this, though tentatively and with some ambivalence, poetic and dramatic works that demonstrated a clear departure from traditional Victorian literature first appeared before 1910. The groundbreaking ideas of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Albert Einstein (1879–1955), and others had a significant impact on human understanding on the philosophical, psychological, and scientific horizons. These changes led to the development of novelistic techniques like stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, and the use of multiple perspectives (Rawlinson, 2000). The modernist literature of the era made an effort to blur the lines separating various literary genres. Both prose and poetry frequently contain elements of each other. Eliot's poetry, for instance,

avoids lyrical beauty and rhythmic phrasing to mimic the decomposition of wasteland. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, simulated the characters' fluctuating, flowing stream of consciousness in her novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931) by using lyrical prose.

Later modernist period

Modernism did not end abruptly in the 1930s; instead, it left a long-lasting legacy that continued even after World War II. The historical context of the two world wars, their effects on global geopolitics, and the post-World War II decline in the United Kingdom's economy and global influence are all important factors to consider when trying to understand late modernism. According to Mackay (2004), "late modernism provides the critical and emotive meaning to the story of England's cultural remaking." (p. 4). The rise of British nationalism played a significant role in influencing literature during the late modernist era. As a result of the nationalistic consciousness sparked by WWII, the relationship between the state and its citizens evolved. This shifting public realm also had an impact on the issues addressed in novels from the late modernist period. A severe economic crisis gripped the 1930s after World War I and another significant global conflict were soon to follow. Early modernist writers were concerned with rejecting the conventional literary devices of Victorian novelists as well as their view of reality. In the late modern era, the bigger social and political issues became too significant (Williams, 2007). Meanwhile, novels' thematic concerns were moving away from purely individualist concerns and toward broader socio-political issues.

The outside world is given more attention than the psychological moods of specific characters in early modernist novels. The experimental narrative style of modernism is still evident, as is a fragmentary outlook on life. *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) by Christopher Isherwood (1904–1966) has a modernist narrative and technical elements. But what distinguishes him from other conventional modernists like Virginia Woolf is his emphasis on the outside world. Isherwood asserts in 1963 that "I am a camera with the shutter open, taking pictures without thinking and being fairly passive. observing the man shaving at the window across from where the woman in the kimono was washing her hair. Someday, all of this will need to be created, meticulously printed, and corrected" (p. 1). Other literary genres of the time, as well as the movie industry, also displayed signs of this general movement; Isherwood is not the only author to have made a turn toward the outside world. *Between the Acts* by Virginia Woolf exhibits a similar shift in viewpoint. It shows that she has changed her approach and is now more focused on the outside world.

Methodology

The current analysis of the modern English novel is guided by a new-historicist perspective which is based on the idea that meaning is never fixed and should be seen in relation to the social and political circumstances of its production. Politics, ideology, culture, and history cannot be separated, according

to new historicism, and they all work together to help us understand how literature has developed (Gallagher, 1989). The goal of new historicism is to uncover and examine the connection between literature and its sociopolitical context, allowing us to better understand the motivations, values, and beliefs of a culture at a particular time in history. This is done through the interconnected aspects of our understanding of the past. The study of how history, culture, ideology, and literature interact offers us useful insights into the social, political, and cultural history of the time when literature was created, as well as its ramifications for contemporary literary production.

New historicism began as a reaction to formalism, which holds that a work of literature should be judged as a self-contained entity uninfluenced by outside forces (Childs & Fowler, 2006). While formalism continues to be a valuable tool for literary criticism, new historicism enables us to understand literature more comprehensively by recognizing its integration into broader historical and political contexts. Influential academics like Michel Foucault (1980; 2003), Marjorie Levinson (1989), and Catherine Gallagher (1989) produced significant work in new historicism. But the person who played the most significant role in conceiving new historicism as a critical approach was Stephen Greenblatt (1980; 1995; 2001). He believed that literature and history are inextricably linked and that the best way to understand literature is to consider the cultural, political, social, and historical context in which it was produced. Through the books *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), he developed the idea that all literature is inextricably linked to the historical, political, and cultural context in which it was produced. Today, new historicism is widely regarded as a crucial critical approach in the study of literature. It helps us better understand both the literary works themselves and the historical context in which they were written.

The goal of the current study is to develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of modernist novels published between 1910 and 1950 by fusing a new-historicist perspective with thematic analysis. From the middle of the 20th century onward, thematic analysis has grown in use as a tool for literary analysis. The idea behind thematic analysis is that literary works often have underlying themes, and by examining these themes, we can learn more about the text's meaning and purpose (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Thematic analysis is appropriate for the current study's objectives because it aids in understanding modern novels as cultural artifacts that capture the attitudes and ideals of the time they were written. The steps in the thematic analysis include identifying the research questions, gathering and organizing data from the text, coding the data into thematic categories, identifying overarching themes from the coded data, and then interpreting and drawing conclusions from the analysis. The current study's research question is: how do modernist novels written between 1910 and 1950 reflect the values, beliefs, and perspectives of their times?

Analysis

Individualism

The authors of modernist fiction placed more emphasis on the individual and how they adjusted to their social environments in response to the rapidly transforming world around them. The social structure and dominant culture of the rural society were destroyed by industrialization. Science had made strides that undermine the idea of God and the Christian faith, such as Charles Darwin's groundbreaking theory of evolution. It became difficult to have a strong belief in any one culture, much like how globalization brings various parts of the world together. Due to the rapid growth of capitalism in terms of transactional and logical market behavior, every aspect of human life and culture was being reexamined. This led to the emergence of a relativist morality that was based on the acceptance of various moral perspectives. The individual was under pressure as they struggled to make sense of their lives in a world that was quickly altering as a result of these sociocultural changes.

In response to these changes, modernist writers began to focus more on the individual than the societal setting in their stories. For instance, writers like Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) are renowned for developing fictional characters who persevere in the face of adversity and overcome it. They embrace deeply held individualist principles that allow them to live with some semblance of morality and take their society's norms at face value. Similar to this, James Joyce's and Virginia Woolfe's novels focus on examining a person's consciousness as it changes over time (stream of consciousness), which might seem strange to a reader who is unfamiliar with these authors' works.

Absurdity of life

The occurrence of two major wars in quick succession during the first half of the 20th century destroyed ideals regarding human advancement and civilization. People had a hard time believing in human progress when nation-states committed mass murder. Important players in World Wars I and II originated from "civilized" countries that thought they had reached the zenith of human civilization. Together with the world wars, global capitalism destroyed agricultural values and traditions (Childs, 2000). For control of the means of production and distribution in society, capitalism created competition. The ideas of Carl Marx (1818–1883) proved to be a pivotal turning point for capitalism. He challenged the idea that capitalism is an economic system based on free markets. Marxist/Socialist critique exposed the overt and ongoing exploitation of the working class (proletariat) by the capitalist (bourgeois) classes.

In light of this, modernist fiction portrays life as noticeably absurd and devoid of coherence and meaning. In the worlds portrayed in these novels, individual attempts frequently fail as a result of devastating blows from outside forces (James, 2009). Finding meaning in one's life is a constant struggle for most people. The universe grows more absurd and incomprehensible the more the characters attempt to find meaning in their actions and lives. Characters created by absurdist writers like Franz Kafka (1883–1924) inhabit a strange universe that exists independently of our own. For example, in "The

Metamorphosis," a traveling salesman is changed into a huge insect-like creature. These and other absurdist-themed short stories highlight how absurd the authors of modernism found their surroundings to be.

Fragmentation and pessimism

English literature from the modernist era is characterized by a cynical and fragmented view of life and the existence of people in general. This pessimism is a result of the depressing outlook for the future, which is supported by rapid political and technological advancements as well as a decline in sociocultural stability. The reign of Queen Victoria (1819–1901) marked the end of a protracted period of governmental stability and prosperity as well as a period marked by social norms and conformity that were largely conservative. At the turn of the 20th century, the political influence of the United Kingdom started to decline, while the United States simultaneously emerged as the next major power. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the first global modern war started. The misery, senselessness, and widespread destruction of a war fought with modern weapons are vividly depicted in the poetry of the English poets, many of whom perished in battle. World War One caused upheaval in the UK by bringing about social, economic, and political problems. In addition, the UK's expanding urbanization, which came after industrialization, was tearing apart the pre-industrial social structure. Modernist writers' pessimism and fragmentation were significantly influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Ernst Mach (1838–1916), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). The fundamental conflict of the modernist movement resulted in a literary output that is fragmentary, unreliable, and experimental.

James Joyce's 1922 book *Ulysses*, which is a classic travel narrative, is comparable to Homer's *Odyssey*. But it only tells a portion of the protagonist's tale as he explores modern-day Dublin. The thoughts of the main characters and supporting cast are the main subjects. An important component of modernist fiction, it makes literary allusions to Roman and Greek mythology. Some authors continued to write fiction using both Victorian and Modernist methods, although the majority of books were written in this modernist manner. For instance, in *A Passage to India* (1924), E. M. Forster discusses the social class divide that existed in India at the start of the 20th century while it was governed by the British. by

Explicit treatment of sexuality

Along with breaking the rules established by the earlier Victorian novelists, modernist authors defy literary conventions regarding how sexual content is depicted in literary narratives. In contrast to earlier fiction, where previous sex was implied through innuendos and undertones, modernist authors felt no need for such caution when discussing sex, religion, or social class distinctions. They recognized sexuality as an essential aspect of the psychological makeup of both individuals and societies. There

were concerns raised about sex-related personal and societal standards and values due to the explicit depiction of sexual content. Such a representation of sex in serious fiction was unthinkable in a Victorian culture given the rigid sociopolitical norms.

Freud reduced each human being and their psychological underpinnings to repressed sexual drives that were consciously repressed due to social taboos, traditional values, and a desire to avoid social rejection (Boone, 1998). By emphasizing and illuminating the significance of sexual urges in both the personal and societal spheres, modernists believed it was their duty to eliminate such taboos and conservative practices. For instance, *Ulysses* is very clear about his opinions on sex and how it belittles traditional religion. It also mocks the notion that drives Irish nationalism. Due to these circumstances, it was banned after its initial release in Ireland and the US. Another writer who uses a modernist approach to writing about sex is D. H. Lawrence. Instead of submitting to Victorian propriety and shame, he opted to discuss sex honestly and openly. In *The Rainbow* (1915), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928; 1932), and *Sons and Lovers* (1913), he elevates sexual drive to a spiritual level as a bodily impulse with profound psychological implications for happiness.

Stream of consciousness

Even though psychologist Henry James first used the term "stream of consciousness" in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), it is more well-known as a literary term than a psychoanalytical one. In earlier Victorian novels, characters and social situations were depicted using logic. Due to their rational foundation, these pre-modernist authors tended to use very methodical and linear approaches to character development, plot, symbolism, and motif. But irrational and rational parts of the human mind's cognitive process were used simultaneously by modernist authors to reflect their characters in the complexity and richness of real human life. The "stream of consciousness" writing style captures the complex, conflicting, and slow-moving workings of the human mind as thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations surface (James, 2009). The author captures shards of dispersed ideas and fleeting emotions by using incomplete sentences, inconsistent grammatical constructions, brief images, and concepts that are freely related to one another.

To describe a character's pre-articulation internal thought processes, this technique uses the character's stream of consciousness. For instance, the inner thoughts of the main characters Leopold and *Molly Bloom* and Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses* are revealed through intricately intertwined tales that employ poor language, mystical imagery, and strange and illogical ideas. Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse*, 1927; *Waves*, 1931). and William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, 1929) are two other well-known authors who wrote "psychological novels", focusing more on expressing their characters' inner thoughts than what they said or did.

Negation of realism and naturalism

According to realism, literature benefits from using existing external reality and criticizing it to improve it because it helps with societal reformation. The fundamental tenet of the realist school of literary philosophy is that humans are progressing from a less civilized to a more civilized condition, albeit slowly and discontinuously (Foucault, 1980). Despite criticizing less-than-ideal aspects of their social environment, realist novelists Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870) believed in human progress. They sought to remedy these flaws in the period's culture through their fictional works. However, it was difficult to maintain faith in human advancement when two world wars broke out shortly after one another. Because human homicide was so common, it was difficult to think that people today were any different or more civilized than those in earlier times. Similar to how the development of technology was initially seen as a sign of human progress and the start of a new era of prosperity. While using the same technology to develop new methods of mass murder, also had disastrous effects on the environment. As a result, realism was insolvent and lacked a foundation for its themes in the developing outside world.

Instead of creating fiction that was fixed, the modernists acknowledged a fractured external social world through their literary production. The inner conscious workings of the human mind assumed a significant role for modernist writers. The plot of modernist novels centers on how characters perceive their surroundings rather than on the outside world. Modernism accepted and embraced the world's division, strife, and lack of coherence as its external context. The inner world of human consciousness was shown and explored through highly symbolic narratives that illustrated how human awareness struggled with and tried to make sense of a world that refused to yield any.

Nonlinear narrative

Modernist writers disapproved of other traditional Victorian novelist techniques, so they adopted an unconventional narrative strategy. The story's characters' perceptions of events, rather than their chronological order, were frequently followed in the narrative. The non-linear narrative does not neatly divide into a beginning, middle, and end, which is closely related to the use of "stream of consciousness." In contrast, the sequence of events is altered to reflect or replicate a theme that the novel's author wants to subtly convey or replicate. By using these techniques, authors can make their characters more relatable to readers. The non-linear story features a significant amount of time manipulation. Instead of moving linearly from the present to the future, time may move backward, forward, or in circles in a non-linear narrative (James, 2009).

Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka all used non-linear narrative techniques in their writing. Joyce created and perfected the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique. As he did with other literary devices like language, imagery, and myth throughout his fictional work, Joyce experimented with how time is portrayed in literature. His groundbreaking novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *A Portrait of*

the Artist as a Young Man (1916) are good examples. Instead of portraying a logical plot based on a linear projection of time, Joyce made great efforts to replicate the experience of time as it is experienced in real life in his plot structure. Contemporary author Virginia Woolf thought that the Victorian linear and rationalist narrative form was inappropriate for capturing the non-linear and fragmented experiences of life. Under the influence of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf combined nonlinear storytelling with symbolism and stream of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Conclusion

The analysis of modern fictional writing and its sociocultural, ideological, and historical settings, as shown in the current article, indicates that literary works are connected to the society in which they are created, and often challenge mainstream values and ideologies. Through the use of a new-historicist analysis, this study has sought to explore how the values, beliefs, and perspectives of the early 20th century were represented and explored in modernist novels written between 1910 and 1950. Through an examination of specific features of these works, this study has found that the modernist writers of this period were often intent on challenging traditional modes of thinking and exploring alternative perspectives. As such, the examination of modern fiction from the early 20th century can offer a unique insight into the culture, beliefs, and values of that period, as well as their potential implications for contemporary society. Furthermore, this study has revealed that the values, beliefs, and perspectives expressed in these works were not static; instead, they changed as modern society evolved and modernist literature changed from its early form to its later one. This suggests that literature from the early 20th century was not simply a reflection of the values and beliefs of that period; rather, it also served as a commentary on them, providing its unique interpretation of contemporary culture (Childs & Fowler, 2006). Literature can thus be used as a tool for exploring these ideas in greater depth and complexity. By examining specific works of early 20th-century modernist literature, this study has provided insight into the complex relationships between the culture, beliefs, and values of that period.

This article has demonstrated that studying any literary period concerning its cultural, ideological, and social contexts can be a valuable endeavor to explore the nuances and complexities of a specific culture, its beliefs and values, and the changing nature of these over time. This suggests that literature has the power to both express and influence the cultural, ideological, and social values of a period (Greenblatt, 2001). Furthermore, it can serve as a window into a period of history, allowing us to gain an understanding of the values and beliefs of that era in ways that other forms of historical research may not afford. This highlights the importance of looking beyond the traditional narrative of history and recognizing literature as a crucial source for understanding a particular period. This has implications for contemporary society as well since the examination of a literary period through its cultural, ideological, and social contexts can help us to better understand our values and beliefs.

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