



Aesthetics of Modernist Literature: A Stylistic Analysis of Three Texts from T. S. Eliot, S. Beckett and V. Woolf's Writings as Sample

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Abstract

This paper explores analytical and stylistic tools in the discourse of modernist literature as epitomized in three canonical works of three influential modernist literary figures: Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett. The paper shows how, upon meditation on the lived reality of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, modernist literature writers resort to fragmented language, mythical usages, and nonlinear structures to respond to the much ravaging and grotesque events witnessed by the world in general and Europe in particular in this epoch. Reflecting the compartmentalized and Balkanized reality of the world through its dazzling stylistic and figurative innovations, modernist literature sought to shock audiences, to lead bare the inconsistency of the human condition. This goes in parallel with an emerging philosophy that turned conventions upside down in different domains: ethics and morals, religion, history, economy, politics, aesthetics, arts, and language among others.

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophical ideas (of Marx, Heidegger, Freud, Darwin, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein) of the 19th and early 20th centuries play a great role in defining and shaping a literature that would be called later modern literature. Inquiries in language, psychoanalysis, perspectivism, and relativity theory reveal a state of chaos, disorder, and confusion that the human psyche experiences in its relation to the outside world. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis reveals the human being as comprised of three-part personality: the rational, realistic, defensive part or the ego; the preconscious part or the superego and the unconscious part or the id. The id occupies the base of this three-part structure. With this analysis, reason occupies a small part of the individual and reveals nothing about the human nature than the unconscious part does, which expresses itself through violence, sadism, masochism, dreams, and slips of the tongue, states in which the human being is reduced to an irrational entity. These ideas reveal much about the violence and wars the world undergoes in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure in "*Course in General Linguistics*" (1916) emphasizes the structural and synchronic dimension of language. He distinguishes between what he calls *langue* and *parole* with the former representing the mental processes of thought and the latter standing for the performance of those thoughts through fragmented stretches or patterns of languages as utterances. These utterances may convey or distort the true meaning or the mental meaning according to its perception and interpretation by others. In such situation,

the relationship between the linguistic sign and the external referent is arbitrary and meaning is created structurally within the linguistic system itself. Language then seems to do the job of creating and forming the outside reality rather than reflecting or mirroring it.

In phenomenology, Friedrich Wilhelm *Nietzsche's ideas concerning* the deconstruction of the subject, perspectivism, will to power, and linguistic constitution reveal much about truth as no more than an arsenal of metaphors. Our conception of the phenomena is not an objective one but a very subjective one conditioned by our experiences and states of mind in time and space. The phenomena are there but what we receive of it is our own creation and construction of it and there would be lot of different perceptions of the same thing as there are preceptors and therefore the impossibility of “reliably communicating ‘life sensations’ or ‘truth’ independent of its subjective construction by an individual observer.” (Herman, Manfred & Ryan, 2005, p. 317). With Einstein’s theory of relativity, everything seems to be relative and nothing is certain or meaningful in itself. These contemporary philosophical ideas affect in many ways an emerging modernist literature.

Modernist literature writers- J. Conrad, F. S. Fitzgerald, V. Woolf, D. H. Lawrence ... in the novel; E. Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens ... in poetry; and Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Eugene O’Neill ... in drama, to mention only a few- have assimilated these philosophical ideas and incorporated them into their writings to produce a literature that, in their views, has the internal capacity to a) reflect the interior psychic life of the bewildered, perplexed, fragmented modern individual that has gone astray amid the flow of the grotesque, b) to depict the uncertain, chaotic, conflict-and-war-characterized nature of the world and c) to question all forms and discourses of faith, truth, belief, rationality and perception. Thus, the reader of modernist literature; the novel, the poem and the play alike; will sense the dissolution of time and space, breakdown of communication, the melting together of binary oppositions (reality/fiction; man/women; colonizer/colonized; truth/illusion...) and the disappearance of the conventional literary forms and structures.

2. MODERNISM IN LITERATURE

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Virginia Woolf, as cited in Martin Travers, 2001, p. 185).

Broadly speaking, modern literature refers to the literature that emerges as a reaction to the Edwardian and Victorian traditional literature. From the late 19th century onward, there was a prevalent feeling among writers that the traditional novel, poetry, and drama, as literary, forms no longer serve the concerns of the alienated modern man in a period characterized by wars, violence, fragmentation, disability, and compartmentalization as opposed to the optimistic, certain and progressive ideas of realism of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Modernist writers lost faith in conventional forms of art, religion, and in the realism and

rationality of the Enlightenment. Faced with an era of irrationality, of new forms of economic and political particularities, and of a complete futility and anarchy of a new technological and industrial life, modernist writers feel the need for new forms of literature “arguing that traditional poetic forms and themes could no longer encapsulate the experience of the modern world” (Beasley, 2007, p. 1). Talking about the literature of the modern era T. S. Eliot entails that “truth is to be found not in the philosophical ideas or systems but by collapsing philosophical concerns into a close scrutiny of experience, and more particularly of language.” (Levenson, 1999, p. 28).

Modernism, at its beginning, draws much of its artistic and technical forms from symbolism and romanticism. For instance, with regard to modern drama, Robert Brustein in his book *The Theatre of Revolt* (1964) asserts that “the modern drama . . . rides in on the second wave of Romanticism – not the cheerful optimism of Rousseau . . . but rather the dark fury of Nietzsche, with his radical demands for a total transformation of man’s spiritual life” (p. 8). By the same token, upon his discussion of “the romantic heritage and modernist fiction” (p. 85) David Ellison states that the modern “early twentieth-century novel follows in the wake of a number of fundamental texts which provide the basis and critical accompaniment to Romanticism” (p. 119). Romantics revolt against the values of bourgeoisie and of the industrial revolution to put emphasize on individualism, nature and the sublime as subjects of art and expression. Symbolism expresses the idea that language is symbolic by its nature; hence, an effective use of language in literature would be an artistic use of symbols to portray reality. But with modernism, art appears to be the very record of the individual’s psychological process. Modernist writers draw from these ideas and turn away from the outside world to portray an inner, fragmented, reality of the modern man and a problematic nature of human identity. The following pages are a brief inquiry into modernism’s aesthetics and; particularly, the language, style and literary conventions of modern literature.

Aesthetics of Modernist Literature

Writers who analyze modern life often show how humans, as species, may be irremediably greedy, immoral, selfish, vain, stupid, perverse, corrupt, and sexually driven, despite the Enlightenment...the novel and drama particularly lend themselves to disclosing modern life, portraying characters meant to resemble those who readers and acquaintances imagine under certain circumstances they themselves might be. (Berman, 1994, p. 27)

The goal of modernist writers was not primarily to set their imagination free rather than to challenge a state of unfreedom and the persecution of journalisms, and to oppose mannerly audiences, passive readers, and religious, social and political orthodoxy (Levenson, 1999). The modernist novel, drama and poetry show a general use of fragmenting unities of lyric forms, mythic paradigms, radical linguistic innovations and experiments, and the disruption of linear progression of narrative for the purpose of startling and disturbing audiences as well as for the purpose of portraying an inconsistent, fragmented human mind. The competition for empire, the labor struggles, and the apocalypse of the First World War permeate artistic invention of the period. The life of industrial machinery and the broken bodies of war offer suitable forms and

characters to literature. They are figures of degeneration, nihilism, and despair; figures characterized by an absence of faith, an unconscious anxiety, alienation, moral bottomlessness, and the groundlessness of value. In an environment overheated by political and social friction or violence, writers in their artistic inventions long for obscurity, ambiguity, vagueness, allusion, ellipsis, non-paraphrasable and non-translatable structures and suggestion instead of coherent narrative and syntax, clarity, and fixed, paraphrasable content:

When formerly shared values must compete against newer ones, what was once absolute becomes merely relative; a temple of thought gives way to the marketplace of ideas. The emotional and intellectual complexity this competition calls forth in turn elicits verbal ambiguity and complexity. (Bloom, 2007, p. 201)

In modern literature, content is inseparable and completely dependent on form; style is not used as a decorative ornament upon subject matter, but the very means through which that subject matter is turned into art: “not only is the content of the work the content of the psyche, but the form of the work is also the form of the psyche” (Berman, 1994, p. 28). The subject matter, that is to say, what makes the content or the preoccupation of modernist literature, becomes the everyday, the brief love affair, the long conversation, the predicament and the passing or lasting insight along which the furniture, food, clothing, weather and transportation acquire symbolic values, and unadorned meanings never assigned to them in traditional literature. Generally, critics and readers of modernist literature feel a sense of uneasiness as they indulge in a literature that makes momentous use of verbal intensity, paradox, irony, ambiguity, metaphorical density, doubleness, plurisignation, and semantic disarrangement.

Modern Fiction

The modern novel...is clearly under magnetic attraction of symbolist aesthetics, and thus very largely amenable to modern poetics: it delights in irony and ambiguity, it is rich in figurative devices, it exploits the phonological level of language extensively..., it probes deep into the private subjective world of vision and dream, and its climaxes are ‘epiphanies’, moments of piercing insights analogous to the images and symbols of the modern poet.. (Lodge, 2001, pp. 31-32)

The modernist novel is associated with writers such as James, Joyce, Lawrence, Forster and Virginia Woolf who set to respond to a kind of crisis associated with imperialism, mass culture, state capitalism and monopoly, political challenges from the left and the right; all these forces put a great pressure on class, gender and national identities and brought about a sense of loss of agency and self-fragmentation. Unlike the traditional novel, the modernist one has no story to tell, no protagonist or antagonist, no plot, no conventional or stable characters and no sad or happy ending. It is a process of complete confusion or disorder, of a multiplicity of voices and of a strange use of language. There is no progressive or linear action in the novel; rather, it focuses on an inner state of the individual who finds himself tangled by a meaningless, chaotic reality with no alternatives. The narration is extended to represent a disturbed

consciousness with the employment of interior monologue “in a stream of consciousness style representing inner thought and with the supposedly chaotic, associative immediacy of their actual occurrence” (Herman & al, 2005, p. 317); there are no imposed limits on imagination. Modernist narratives are increasingly focalized within the individual narrative and greatly rely on what Virginia Woolf called in *Orlando* (1928) ‘time in the mind’ rather than ‘time on the clock’” (Herman & al, p. 318); and thus creating a kind of dream language. Modernists search not for presenting the universal in the particular, but the particular in a universal in which truth becomes impermanent and time-and-space-bound. What is conventionally perceived as an absolute truth is now demoralized and replaced by worldview, opinion and outlook.

Structure and Style in Modernist Fiction as Exemplified in Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall”

The Mark on the Wall is an articulation of an unstructured reverie provoked by the sight of a mark on the wall by the narrator as she explains “how readily our thoughts swarm upon anew object”. At first, the mark appears to the narrator to be made by a nail and, from this, she shifts to think of what pictures might be hung there by the previous occupants of the house. This thought leads her to ponder about the transience of life compared “to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour – landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one’s hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! ... Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard” Woolf considers life as an industrial mechanized process of utmost speed. Then, she turns to think about the afterlife in which it is almost impossible to distinguish human beings from other things. At this point, the narrator turns away from this alluring visual imaginary to rethink of the mark as a blemish and from this slide to another reverie. The narrator wonders how such flights of mind help in constructing a sense of the self. These actions of the mind are to be the very subject matter of future narratives when writers “will realize more and more the importance of these reflections ... those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps”. Returning from this interior exploration of the consciousness of the self, the narrator deliberates on the material, object world:

Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours.

At the end of the narrative, the narrator thinks about the marginal reality of newspapers and war and of the absurdity of life at the same time when the identity of the mark is revealed to be a snail. The reveries provoked upon the mark from a nail to a snail suggest a narrative self-consciousness mode that goes on to question how we should read any representational language_ be it the language of fiction or of journalisms.

Stream of Consciousness as a Reflection of the Interior Psychic.

For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. (Martin Travers, 2001, p. 186)

The mark on the wall leaves its mark on the observer. The latter gets absorbed in many things to escape reality; burying herself in oblivion and forgetfulness and adopting a very nihilistic view of the world. The mark in itself as an outside object has no meaning; Woolf alone makes it meaningful by the patterning of thought she creates through the flow of recorded experience with its paradoxes and irrelevancies. In an attempt to return to the inner reality of her mind, she deliberately creates these fancies for her own happiness. With this kind of dream language, and stream of consciousness, time is a continuous flow in which logic has no place. By doing this, the writer indulges in an escape from reality, from the confines of society, religion, and materialism. Her imagination, her flow of thought, keeps going back and forth questioning, questioning, analyzing and interpreting with no limits or boundaries. The writer becomes her own psychiatrist. The language of the narrative is a chaotic one describing a chaotic and haphazard self or inner represented by an informal colloquial style; interconnected, long-winding structures and stylistic deviance.

Modern Poetry

For my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.... Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. T.S. Eliot (as cited in Travers, 2001, p. 183_184)

The Stylistic Use in “The Waste Land”

The idea that the existence is unknowable or obscure engenders a quest for stylistic and literary devices that suggest conflict or doubleness through the use of irony, paradox, tension, juxtaposition, and ambiguity to convey an ambivalent sense of things. Thus ironically, while people perceive “April” to be the month of life generation, fertility, and green land, it connotes in the poem a cruel time that brings unpleasant memories and dire desires to an already wasted land “April is the cruellest month, breeding. /Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing./ Memory and desire, stirring./ Dull roots with spring rain”. While April is ironically the “cruellest”, “winter kept us warm, covering./ Earth in forgetful snow, feeding/ A little life with dried tubers”. Juxtaposition of the present and the past (from “the journey to Emmaus,” to “the present decay of Eastern Europe”), life and death (“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/“Has it begun to sprout? /Will it bloom this year?”), sterility and fertility ... are omnipresent throughout the poem. The paradox between death-in-life and life-in-death connotes the meaninglessness of a life which is lived only to witness destruction, war, and deplorable conditions and memories. When you remember, you will remember the “nothingness” of past

memories, where “nothing” as such in the poem can be remembered: “Do/“You know nothing?/ Do you see nothing? /Do you remember “Nothing?””. You cannot tell if you are dead or alive because everything becomes meaningless and what you know boils down to “nothing”: ““Are you alive, or not?/ Is there nothing in your head?”. The poem is highly ambiguous just as life is highly ambiguous. Ambiguity is conveyed through the use of different languages, various references to past experiences, ancient myth and past people, fragmented language, repetition, ruptures... as if one “know only / a heap of broken images”.

The Waste Land proliferates the referentiality of each paragraph, each sentence and each phrase by potentially making it significant to any other throughout the poem. *The Waste Land* assumes a moral center and previous order but maintains that the order persists only in memory and that the center is no longer shared in a waste culture and its Weltanschauung breaking apart. The poem’s generic staple, and the fragments, portray mimetically a chaotic, disconnected reality and criticize its confusion. Eliot’s frustration with the disorderly world is passed to us; as we, as readers, get frustrated by the poem’s discontinuous form. Preconceived ideas about order applied to the world are getting dispatched with upsetting expectations about poetic discourse; and verbal, semantic and formal disconnections throughout the poem. Eliot skillfully produces a world that withholds the moral and aesthetic order which is expected to be found in it; and he does so through multiplicity of voices and genres, fragments and narrative discontinuity.

Apparently, the poem establishes its meaning through what Eliot calls “*the objective correlative*”; the chain of events, of images, of objects, of interchangeable metaphors, of signs, of borrowings, of echoes, and of allusions through which the entity of the poem is composed. These things correlate throughout the poem and relate to each other. The meaning of the poem depends on its interpretation as whole, as an entity not as fragments. Therefore, each section from the poem would not make sense unless it is related to all other sections. This technique of the “objective correlative” is integral to modern poetry and it is a development of Ezra Pound’s “*imagism*”. Pound explains that since language is slippery and illusive and no longer depicts the outside world straightforwardly, or rather since it tends to falsify experience, the best way to compensate for this lack is to use concrete images and symbols directly from reality which might act as a catalyst or trigger for experiencing the poem’s subject directly. “Imagism”, also, draws much from the French symbolism and this leads the American critic Harold Bloom to coin the phrase “*the anxiety of influence*” to describe modern poetry’s engagement with its parentage. The most important point to focus on is that, according to modern poets:

Language cannot be understood as a transparent window through which one sees reality; it is a medium that is more likely to obscure reality. Their poetry will attempt to get behind language, as it were, by highlighting the mismatch between what we feel and what we can say. And, as we might expect, that decision will give rise to considerable difficulties not only for the poet, but for the reader too. (Beasley, 2007, p. 15)

Modern Drama: The Theatre of the Absurd

Originally, the term the theatre of the absurd is derived from Albert Camus and developed by Martin Esslin in his book “*The theatre of the Absurd*” (1961). The term

“*absurd*” is used to refer to the tension which human beings feel in their endeavor and determination to look for purpose and order in a world which cannot manifest either. This term is associated with dramatists such as Beckett, Ionesco, Boris Vian, and Adamov. All these figures take as their subject “the hollowness, decadence and fundamental absurdity of the Western World” (Birkett, 1987, p. 35). The works of these dramatists penetrate the tapestry of lies upon which the Western subject has fashioned his heroic self-image and; instead, they present in its place the end of the civilization and the end of the hero. Since language is the vehicle through which the Western culture has created and perpetuated its lies, the purpose of modern drama is to tear language apart until it discloses its deception. In modern drama, unlike what traditional dramatists teach, life is not a series of events with beginnings, middles, and ends. Neither is language an effective means of communication nor is logic a basic element of discerning meaning. Modern dramatists undertake to depict the unbridgeable gap between human’s aspirations and fulfillment, the futility of human relations and the impossibility of communication.

Samuel Beckett’s “*Waiting for Godot*”

Waiting for Godot is structured upon two acts, two days, two couples and two similar sets of incidents. The play has no linear progression, no plot and no hero. Characters are mere ordinary human beings, too fragmented, and too frustrated in their quest for order and purpose in life. The play depicts both the need for purpose and the psychological fragmentation that accompanies the struggle for purpose. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves in a world they cannot master despite their heroic accommodations. Actually, they are only capable of taking part in temporarily meaningful action and fragmented communication. Their uncertainty and lack of ability to act, when they keep repeating “let’s go” and they do not move, echo their profound awareness of the fact of their unsuccessful efforts to discern anything purposeful or right in life. For their past has not provided them with any codes or figures to follow, their future is similarly disheartening:

The very act of survival or waiting becomes Beckett’s exposition of the games and rituals people construct in order to pass the hours and years, the accommodations they make to those closest in their lives, the alternation of hope and despair they endure in these accommodations, and the illusions and rejections of illusion that accompany each of these acts. (Bloom, 2007, pp. 125-126)

The play’s underlying theme is the danger of “idle discourse” and emptiness of language. Language is metaphorical in its nature. Instead of depicting what is happening, language sometimes falsifies and misrepresents it. It has no grip on reality. Vladimir voices his need for swift action_ “let us do something, while we have the chance” _ he himself wastes time in idle words with no action. Their intentions and utterances are at cross purposes. So, the language that Estragon and Vladimir inherited is a means of illusion, a pack of techniques for inventing and deceiving but not for telling the truth. Vladimir has to continue in spinning words because his purpose will never be satisfied, his *Godot* will never come, and so Vladimir can never stop talking. Silence is an integral part in the structure and meaning of the play, it is another kind of

language. It is used to illustrate the breakdown of speech for example when Vladimir uses miming to ask about Lucky and his bags in page 31. This kind of language in the play reflects the absurdity of life, in which meaning either goes beyond understanding or proliferates into a range of meanings.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper provides an analysis of the style adopted by modernist literature writers. The paper begins with the presentation of the philosophical background that paved the way towards the emergence of modernist literature. It shows how literature writers within this tradition incorporated those ideas into their writings to convey the spirit of the era before and after the First World War. Then, the paper gives a definition of modernist literature and its general characteristics. The paper concludes with analysis of aesthetic and stylistic use in a) modernist fiction with the example of Woolf's short story "*The Mark on the Wall*", b) modernist poetry with the example of Eliot's famous poem "*The Waste Land*", and c) modernist drama with example of Beckett's wonderful play "*Waiting for Godot*". The style and structure of these three texts respond to Ezra Pound's call "to make it new" on the ground that the literary conventions inherited from Romanticism and before do not simply match the fragmentation, anxiety and uncertainty that characterize the interior world of individuals as well as the outside reality of the world.

The three texts discussed in this paper are highly innovative, abstract and autotelic in nature. They are characterized by the heavy use of paradox, irony and fragmented language to depict the meaninglessness of the lived experience, the breakdown of human communication and the shock upon the writ-large death and destruction that affect the world. The unstructured reverie in Woolf's "*The Mark on the Wall*" epitomizes the unstructured psychic of the modern man while the quick almost unnoticeable move between scenes in the short story reflects the speedy flow of the grotesque to the extent that one cannot tell the difference between human beings and objects or things. Similarly, the fragmented use of language, the continuous reference to ancient myth and dead people, the move from past to present and vice versa and the use of multiple languages in "*The Waste Land*" reflects the cyclical nature of history, as opposed to linearity, and the compartmentalization of the human condition. Finally, the repeated breakdown of communication between Vladimir and Estragon and their subsequent inability to act or move in "*Waiting for Godot*" cast back the impotence and powerlessness of the human beings to give meaning to their life or change anything.

This paper adds to the already existing literature on the discussion and analysis of the aesthetic and stylistic use in modernist literature. It is of important use to students who want to undertake an analysis of a modernist piece of literature as it discusses three texts from three genres, the novel, poetry and drama. In addition, the paper can be of paramount importance to anyone who wants to have a general idea of modernism in literature.

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