The Hydra of Modern Literature

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The Modernist Period is generally attributed to the broad span of time between 1880 –
1945. This new age was greatly influenced by such earlier controversial thinkers as Darwin,
Marx and Nietzsche. This emerging of unique philosophies, along with psychoanalysis and all
things Freudian, helped perpetuate new cultural and academic world views. Additionally, two
World Wars and a rise in industrialized mass production led to the development of radical avant-
garde movements which began to question heretofore accepted social constructs. Romantic
notions and sentimentality for “bygone days” disappeared. Modernists resisted almost all things
past. The trauma and uncertainty created by the First World War, resulted in more self-
introspection. Chaos caused by a complex outer-world led to a turn inwards. With the
disappearance of an ‘old-world’ order, individuals began to feel abandoned by society and set out
to establish alternative perspectives. Artists, architects, philosophers and writers started
experimenting with new forms of expression. No longer were poems strictly lyrical; no longer
were novels linear and in chronological order; no longer were artistic works able to be easily
interpreted. For modern art, the meaning became less important than the mere existence of the
work itself. Modernist writings were interspersed with ambiguity, subtlety and oftentimes
indecipherable contexts. Literature evolved into something that was fundamentally different from
anything ever done before.

Therefore, is it even possible to offer a comprehensive composite of this richly diverse
period? Or do we need several intersecting approaches? It has been debated as to the actual date
Modernism began. Some scholars label Gustav Flaubert and Henry James as two of the very
earliest modernist writers. Even Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*, written in 1899, could
be called a premature-modern novel. There certainly was an emergence of new literary styles in the 1890’s. Hence, the modernist period can be framed between the parameters of the late 1800’s and the mid-twentieth century. However, the First World War truly galvanized an entirely new phase of radical writings and artistic experiments. In this essay, I propose that the art of Modernist writings had many diverse exemplifications. Akin to a literary Hydra, this phenomenon manifested itself in different ways in different places. While in Europe it began in the mid-to-late 19th century, in the United States and Brazil it only began to take firm hold in the early 20th century. So how are we to approach this wide-ranging field? Some scholars have purported that it is futile to “search for an ensemble of modernists’ ideas or attitudes… or to isolate a set of formal devices…” that whatever modernism is, “it was impatient with or overtly hostile to received conventions of fiction…an impulse to repudiate that Victorian literature, that had sold itself to a mass reading public-” (Lawrence Rainey, *Modernism An Anthology*, p.25). While others chose to succinctly categorize its traits as: “Experimental; Transgressive; Multiple Points of view: Fragmented; Featuring alienation; Not sentimental; Anti-romantic; Brings back-ground into foreground; Insists on reader participation; Not eminently salable” (Peter Hays, “Wharton and Hemingway Both Modernists”- Essay from *Wharton, Hemingway and the Advent of Modernism*, p.20). These varied aspects of Modernism have encouraged me to look at it with a broader range of vision. The multilayers of this literary discipline deserve more than a unilateral scrutiny.

In hopes of presenting an illuminating approach, I prefer not to offer only one viewpoint, but to combine multiple perspectives by outlining three different cross-sections of Modernism. The fabled Hydra of ancient Greece bore many heads on one body and was said to be an immortal creature adept at regenerating itself. Like this legendary figure, newly emerging
artists were also capable of creating curious offshoots. The Modernists attacked conventional standards and presented revolutionary new approaches to painting, music and literature. Their works were often fragmented and abstract, forcing observers to contemplate this radically original art form from various angles. By compartmentalizing these distinct areas of Modernist works: The Lost Generation and the Modernist Period; Modernism’s New Woman and Absurd Modernism, I hope to clarify how important it is to understand the historical context of the time in which literary works are written. Knowing the political and social changes that were taking place when these stories were first told will hopefully provide a more enlightened view of modernist literature itself. We often project our present ideology onto the past. What made the Modernists unique was the fact that they did not omit history completely, but presented it in a brand new light. These writers found much of what their forebears had taught them to be simplistically suspect. After the Great War, the world was changing in many ways, but its changes were in conflict with its past. Therefore, modern art began to reflect this time of alienation and fragmentation. To Modernist writers, good literature became as complex and abstract as the industrialized society engulfing them had become.

**The Lost Generation and the Modernist Period**

Immediately following World War I, the 1920’s was a decade of prosperity and good times in America. But it was also a time in which people, for all their gaiety, seemed to have no permanent values or firm direction. Underneath all these high spirits lay feelings of uncertainty and bewilderment. Gertrude Stein called the young people of this period “The Lost Generation”. The literature and poetry of the time reflected these feelings of alienation. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s short poem “Second Fig” summed up this overall sense of impermanence: “Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand/ Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!”
In reality, Stein’s label of the “The Lost Generation” was projected onto Americans in lieu of the great loss of European life during World War I. When in fact, the loss of American life wasn’t as drastic as the rest of the world’s. However, what was truly lost for America was its identity as a white-Anglican nation. After the war, the United States entered into a distinct form of modernity that was reflective of their nation. It was an era when the population resisted its past in a variety of ways. That is, many modern writers and artists didn’t view their present as being aligned with their past.

These changes came about because World War I was the first time in American history, where a system of meritocracy came into play. With an urgent need for as many fighting men as possible, the United States Army started enlisting soldiers from all walks of life. Standardized testing began in earnest and a second generation of ‘non-white’ immigrants was able to achieve military status. This threatened the old elitist view that only “Nordic” races were superior and capable of attaining success. The place of white, Anglo-Saxon males in society began to be reevaluated. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, both authors examined the upheaval of old, steadfast beliefs that suddenly became antiquated. The “War to End all Wars”, didn’t end warfare but it did end a system of values.

*Jay Gatsby* represents this social change in American life. Originally, a poor farmer of German descent, he’s a ‘self-made’ man in the truest sense. Gatsby fabricates much about his past in order to win back his great love, the wealthy young socialite, Daisy Buchanan. He moves to a mansion in West Egg, Long Island and there he befriends her cousin, Nick Carraway, in hopes of pursuing her and rekindling their youthful romance. However, unlike Daisy and her husband Tom, Gatsby is not from ‘old money’. Although illegally, he’s earned and not inherited the wealth he has. He represents everything Tom and his ilk fear and despise. The rich sons and
daughters of immigrants, usurping the order of the ‘Old Guard’. To Tom, Gatsby symbolizes the crass, ‘new money’ of a post-war generation. But to Fitzgerald his hero personified a protagonist for the modern age: “…there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life,…--it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again…” (Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby*, p.2)

Many of the other characters in Fitzgerald’s novel also reflect the changing mores of the 1920’s. During this period a women’s place in society changed enormously. From the onset of the war, young women in small towns began to be surrounded by soldiers and sailors preparing to go overseas. For the first time, American women were placed in a situation, where sleeping with a ‘man in uniform’, could almost be considered one’s patriotic duty. Having ‘charity’ sex with men who may never return home seemed romantically glamorous to many young girls of that time. After the men went off to battle, women were left to work in factories, shipyards and offices in order to maintain the war effort on the home front. This societal shift led to an increased sense of female equality. Then with the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, giving women the right to vote, their role in American society was forever altered.

In *The Great Gatsby* both Jordan Baker and Daisy Buchanan were modern-day women of this new age. They were not the demure, virtuous young girls portrayed in many pre-war novels. Jordan was a professional golfer, who travelled independently and was “…incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage and…had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young…” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 58). She was athletic and had a “hard jaunty body”, a description more apt to describe a male rather than a female character. Jordan was also a young protégé of Daisy’s. So, we assume she learned much about men from her
mentor. Daisy Buchanan whose voice was “full of money” had many gentlemen callers. But she was the first “nice” (i.e. rich and well-bred) girl Gatsby had known. He felt “married to her”. However, Daisy didn’t feel exactly the same. In fact, in Fitzgerald’s novel, there is almost a reversal of male and female roles. Gatsby is the one who remains true to Daisy. Whereas, her feelings are more fleetingly superficial. After Gatsby goes overseas, Daisy marries Tom Buchanan, who is more socially her equal.

In some ways, Fitzgerald’s life mirrored the life of Jay Gatsby. He grew up in Minnesota but spent many years in New York and Europe, trying to emulate the social glamour of the rich and famous. Fitzgerald wished he could have been a war hero like Gatsby, but was unable to make the rank of Captain. So, he lived, somewhat vicariously, through his protagonist and elevated Gatsby to a Major in his novel. World War I stirred up feelings of ‘machismo’ for many American young men, all who wanted desperately to prove their masculinity by fighting in great battles. They longed to become officers, gentlemen and war heroes. However, the changing social strata made this goal somewhat difficult to achieve. The newly emerging immigrant classes created tougher competition for the Anglo-American male. Overall, heightening that generation’s feeling of being ‘lost’ or displaced.

In Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, Jake Barnes, the narrator of the story introduces us to the vibrant lives of expatriates living in Europe after the first World War. Hemingway, like other American writers of that time (Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Faulkner) came from a rather provincial background. Europe exposed these authors to a wealth of new cultures and ideas. Although he was rejected by the Army, because of his poor eyesight, the Red Cross enlisted Hemingway as an ambulance driver in Italy. It was there he was wounded and spent many months recovering in an Italian hospital. Like other young men of this era, his dreams of
becoming a celebrated war hero were soon dashed. This war did not provide the imagined 
glories of previous battles. Virile man-to-man combat was not part of this conflict. This was a 
horrific war fought by men huddled in filthy trenches, being bombarded with poisonous mustard 
gas. It didn’t provide many opportunities for displays of ‘guts and glory’.

The heroes of this “Lost Generation” were often maimed, fictionalized warriors. 
Fitzgerald’s Gatsby was a decorated soldier, yet an emotionally-wounded civilian. And although 
Hemingway’s Jake Barnes was an alpha-male fighter pilot, his physical wounds emasculated 
him. Hemingway uses his novel to express the feelings of powerlessness brought on by the war. 
In his story, the characters move aimlessly from place to place. Disillusioned, they drink, eat and 
have indiscriminate sex simply to feel alive. Like Fitzgerald’s tale, Hemingway establishes role 
reversals within his plot. Jake is in love with Lady Brett Ashley. Brett’s first husband died of 
dysentery during the war and her second husband physically abused her. Jake wants to marry 
her, but because he’s impotent, she refuses. Brett is a sexually liberated woman and although she 
loves Jake, she knows any commitment to him wouldn’t last. At times, the two seem to reverse 
roles. Jake assumes a feminine persona, wanting Brett to live with him without any real sexual 
fulfillment. While Brett’s promiscuity and fierce desire to remain unattached, give her more 
male-like tendencies. Hemingway even assigned her an androgynous name, Brett, which could 
apply to either of the sexes. This character underscores the destruction of pre-war values, 
displaying how far the blurring of traditional female roles were after World War I. And if not 
outwardly like Jake, men were inwardly neutered by the war.

In addition to Jake and Brett, other characters within the story seem disenchanted with 
their lives after the war. Mike Campbell is a penniless veteran engaged to Brett. He tolerates her 
endless affairs with other men by drinking himself into alcoholic rages- most being primarily
directed towards Robert Cohn. Cohn was a former boxing champion at Princeton before
becoming a writer. He’s also the only Jewish member of the group and is often derided in anti-
-Semitic overtones. Cohn is in love with Brett and wants desperately to be part of the group.
However, because of his ethnic background, he’s considered an ‘outsider’ by the others. Cohn
is interesting; because, he’s actually the inverse of Jake’s character. He’s romantic and idealistic
in his love for Lady Ashley, but he lacks irony and wit; while, Jake is ironic and hard-boiled.
He’s often emotionally masculine, even though he’s not physically so. Cohn’s character
exposes the prejudices of this second generation of Americans. Although not the social elite
found in Gatsby’s world, Jake and his circle of friends aren’t that different in their biases.

The characters in both novels represent a new class order for Americans after the war.
The Great Gatsby is a testament to that era’s obsession with wealth and social status. The greed
and selfishness of rich, young Americans is shown to outweigh all moral responsibility. To many,
this novel represented the story of 1920s America. To others, Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises,
more accurately portrayed the feelings of displacement and longing felt by those at that time.
Yet essentially, both stories captured the collective moods of that period. Each character within
each story is, in essence, an expatriate searching for a home or a value that no longer existed.
Although there was no name for it at the time, World War I had actually afflicted Americans and
the rest of the world with symptoms of “Post-Traumatic Stress”. The war had unhinged any fixed
set of ideals that had been in place before its inception. These new Modernist writers and artists
found much of what the previous generation had taught them about truth to be untrue. Their art
began to reflect their feelings of disconnection. Without the old moral compass used by those
before to guide them, this young generation was ‘lost’ and in need of new directions. Both
authors presented a modernist view of alienation, disillusionment and shattered values.

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Modernism’s New Woman

Gender and sexuality became important topics at the dawn of the Modernist age. A rise in consumer culture created female personas such as the flapper, the vamp and the new woman. Author and Professor Marianne Dekoven wrote:

Shifts in gender relations at the turn of the century were a key factor in the emergence of Modernism. The period from 1880-1920…was also the heyday of the first wave of feminism, consolidated in the women suffrage movement. The protagonist of this movement was known as the “New Woman”: independent, educated (relatively) sexually liberated, oriented toward more productive life in the public sphere than toward reproductive life in the home. (“Modernism and Gender” in The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, p.174)

Throughout history, white males had traditionally dominated most aspects of western culture. Women and minorities had typically been marginalized. But gradually, the modern age provided an avenue of expression for these soundless voices. Although it’s taken much more time for minorities to cross the vast divide, early feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein were in the forefront of Modernist writers. Woolf stressed the importance of financial security for a woman to make it in a ‘man’s world’: “All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point- a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved.” (Virginia Woolf, 1929 Essay- “A Room of One’s Own”). Woolf argues that in order to write a woman must have material support, time and space, and she must inherit a set of literary ‘tools”. Unfortunately, before the Modernist period, women writers only had the masculine tools of grammar, syntax and sentence structure at their disposal. But Woolf insisted that: “On or about December 1910, human character changed…The change was not sudden or definite…But a change there was, nevertheless; and since one must be arbitrary, let us date it

The author’s choice of December 1910 as a watershed moment resulted as a dispute she had had with writer Arnold Bennett. Woolf argued that because human character had changed the novel must change too, if it were to be a true representation of human life. In “Cassell’s Weekly” of 3/28/23, Arnold published an article entitled “Is the Novel Decaying?”. In it he stated that: “The foundation of good fiction is character creating, and nothing else.” Woolf concurred that the novel distinguishes itself by its characters, but felt during England’s Edwardian period, writers of Bennett’s era often created generalized characters too concerned with societal changes to care deeply about character or the art of fiction. She felt her generation of writers (Georgian) wanted to depict and... "particularize" character, to "deepen its compass, and so make possible those conflicts between human beings which alone arouse our strongest emotions....” (ibid). Yet, Woolf may have had a strong, underlining motive for disparaging Arnold Bennett. In 1920 he had published a collection of essays entitled “Our Women”, arguing that men were cognitively and creatively superior to women. On October 9, 1920, Woolf wrote to the Editor of “The New Statesman” (which praised his work) railing against Bennett’s sexist views. Her strong feminine voice helped personify this New Women of Modernism.

But basically, for Virginia Woolf a critical break with traditional norms came after the death of King Edward VII in 1910. He was the last genuine link with the Victorian Age. She approved the efforts of the Edwardian novelists, but now wanted to assert that era was over. The year 1910 brought about significant world change. There were the threats of civil war in Ireland and the fight over Irish Home Rule; the beginning of a strong Suffragist
movement; the mass movement of workers into unions and strikes in mines and on waterfronts; and the looming fear of war with Germany. So, Woolf’s declaration that “On or about December 1910, human character changed...” was valid. Not only were literary conventions changing, the ‘old world order’ was as well. But the frightening approach of unknown societal, economic and political upheavals caused feelings of anxiety and trepidation. Woolf like many other Modernists struggled with “the urgent demand, not just the opportunity, for some kind of self-definition to replace social definitions that were breaking down.” (Edwin J. Kenney, Jr. “The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness” - Colby Quarterly, March 1977).

Along with Woolf, two other early female Modernists, were fortunate enough to have had a “room of their own”: Katherine Mansfield and Rebecca West. After learning of the famous Rebecca West quote: “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat, or a prostitute.” (Rebecca West, Young Rebecca: Writings, 1911-1917), I knew she was a formidable woman. But after reading West’s short story, “Indissoluble Matrimony”, I realized she was an admirable writer as well. First published in Wyndham Lewis’ avant-garde magazine Blast, which became a short-lived platform for the “Vorticism” movement founded by Lewis and Ezra Pound in 1914. Pound coined this term to describe a new type of art, influenced by cubism and futurism. It was heavily political and abstract. West was one of its first female authors. Although the magazine survived only two publications, it did have some powerful influence in promoting modern writers. Rejecting Romanticism, these writers produced work that was often allusive and annotative. Although West’s technique was Modernist, I found her
style to be much less impenetrable than some of her Blast contemporaries.

“Indissoluble Matrimony” introduces us to a married couple, George Silverton and his wife Evadne, who’ve been married for ten years. During this course of time, they’ve grown drastically apart. Most of the narrative is expressed from George’s point-of-view and Evadne is chiefly seen through his myopic eyes. Like a true modernist, West presents us with an “unreliable” narrator in place of the omniscient and trustworthy narrator of past literary genres. At times, Silverton reminded me of Nobokov’s Humbert Humbert, giving us his perspective on Lolita. The story opens with George entering his darkened house after a day’s work as a law-clerk. Immediately we sense his unease and irritation with his wife. He internally describes her as “one of those women who create an illusion alternately of extreme beauty and extreme ugliness.” (Blast, 6/20/14 p.98). Evadne is depicted as an exotic beauty (racially other), whose feline sensuality unnerves George: “Perpetually she raised her hand to the mass of black hair that was coiled on her thick golden neck, and stroked it with secretive enjoyment, as a cat licks its fur.” (ibid. p.98)

From the start, we learn that George is extremely insecure and resentful of his wife’s accomplishments. A crisis ensues when Evadne receives an invitation to speak at a public rally in support of Stephen Langton, a Socialist Party candidate. He’s intimidated by her popularity and forbids her to speak at the meeting. Evadne, being a strong and assertive woman, refuses to follow her husband’s command and insists on attending. This enrages George and he calls her a “slut” and threatens to throw her out of the house if she disobeys him. Suddenly, all of George’s sexual insecurities are exposed. He tells his wife: “You’ve always been keen on kissing and making love…I didn’t know women were like that…I don’t believe good women are!” (ibid. p103).
West’s “Indissoluble Matrimony” represents the new experimentation with gender roles and sexuality beginning to emerge in modern literature. Before the early 20th century, men were typically stereotyped as strong, independent household heads, while women were often portrayed as submissive and dependent creatures. But Rebecca West’s story does a role reversal. George displays traits that had previously been ascribed to female characters in literature. He expresses annoyance, jealousy and resentment towards Evadne and feels trapped within their marriage. Sentiments that were usually considered feminine traits in the past. This switching of gender roles is a very modernist technique. As previously stated, both Hemingway and Fitzgerald used this same trope in their novels. Hemingway’s protagonist Jake, in *The Sun Also Rises*, displays characteristics more often aligned with a feminine persona. While his love interest, Lady Brett Ashley, displays more lustful qualities that had formally only been ascribed to masculine characters. Similarly, Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby is the more romantic and sentimental in the relationship between him and Daisy Buchanan. Yet written years earlier, West’s story was truly groundbreaking in this gender-reversal theme.

The juxtaposition of Evadne’s strength and George’s weakness allowed modernists to question and criticize the institution of marriage, especially the traditional roles patently assigned to males and females. Although Evadne is an intelligent and sensual woman, with a number of achievements outside the home, George views her as trivial and base. His envious fear of her powerful resilience weakens him and makes him inadequate. Not only does he feel oppressed at home, he feels insignificant at work too: “He revolved in his mind the incidents of his day’s routine and remembered *a snub from a superior.*” (ibid p.104). George was living in a changing world, where all illusions previously held regarding male superiority were being re-evaluated. “Indissoluble Marriage” addresses the issues that were beginning to arise during that
period in time. Men and women were no longer conforming to roles society had previously assigned them. Marriages no longer consisted of a dominant husband and a submissive wife. The “New Woman” had arrived and Rebecca West was one of the first writers to introduce her.

Another early pioneer in modernist fiction was Katherine Mansfield. Famously, Virginia Woolf viewed Mansfield’s work as “the only writing I have ever been jealous of” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 11*, p.227). Mansfield kept her distance from the example of James Joyce and other male modernists, whom she sometimes referred to as “loathsome” and “unspeakable” (Peter Brooker- “Early Modernism” Essay from *The Modernist Novel*- p.42). Her short story, “The Garden Party” is a Bildungsroman tale of young girl named Laura. The story unfolds at the Sheridan estate in New Zealand (Mansfield’s native homeland). This well-to-do family is throwing a garden party and young Laura is eager to help with the festivities. Mansfield employs the use of third-person narration, which allows the reader access to Laura’s inner thoughts and point-of-view. The author often applied this literary device, coupled with the then rare view into the female perspective. Mansfield, like most modernists, centered her story on a single incident to demonstrate how the most everyday events can leave lasting impressions on one’s worldview. Laura Sheridan is a privileged young teenager, who is also sensitive to those less fortunate. She’s trusting and well-meaning but out of her element, when dealing with the workmen setting up the marquee for the garden party. She innocently tries to take charge, but the workers dismiss her idea and proceed to place the tent where they deem best. However, her brief interactions with these laborers provide Laura with some limited access to a world divided by class and wealth. Impressed by their friendly camaraderie, Laura naively wishes: “Why couldn’t she have workmen for her friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who come to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with men like these.”
Later in the day, Laura learns that their neighbor, Mr. Scott, who lived at the bottom of the hill leading to their estate, had died in an accident. She’s shocked and immediately feels the family should call off their party. However, most of the Sheridans are unsympathetic, and none feel that the unfortunate event should interfere with their plans. Her mother exclaims: “- I can’t understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes—…People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us…” (ibid p.8). Mansfield deliberately places the poor Scott family at the foot of the Sheridan home, to emphasize the huge class distinctions that were prominent after World War I. The wide road extending from Laura’s house to the poor settlement below, suggests the huge class barriers between rich and poor. Young Laura is confused by her family’s insensitive reactions to Mr. Scott’s death. To appease her daughter, Mrs. Sheridan gives her a large picture-hat. Disheartened, Laura goes to her room, but is immediately distracted when she looks in the mirror and sees how lovely she looks in her new hat. Although Laura has good intentions, she’s young and easily swayed by her mother’s influence. The world of wealth and privilege that she inhabits powerfully impacts her developing social consciousness, despite her inherent kindliness.

After the party ends, Mrs. Sheridan allows Laura to take a basket of leftovers down to the grieving family. Laura’s walk to the Scott’s home and her crossover into their impoverished surroundings, is the beginning of her transition from childhood to adulthood. She’s ashamed at being overly dressed and wants to flee back to the safety and familiarity of her own environment. But Laura forges on and enters the bedroom where Mr. Scott’s dead body was lying. Upon seeing him resting so peacefully, Laura has a revelation: “What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful…
Happy…happy…All is well, said that sleeping face.” (ibid p.12). When Laura returns home crying, she meets her similarly named brother, Laurie (Mansfield’s nod to Modernist male/female duality). She tries to express what she’s experienced but can’t yet verbalize her emotions. Laurie assumes he knows what she wants to convey and the story closes with him finishing the incomplete question his sister begins to pose. In true Modernist style, Mansfield ends her tale ambiguously. The author intentionally leaves the reader alone to reach his or her own conclusions. We’re forced to interpret this work more abstractly. We’re no longer being spoon-fed pat endings. Since the world had become more complex and unsettled, so too did literature and art. Authors like Katherine Mansfield and Rebecca West, along with Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and all the other “New Women” of this Modernist age wanted us to finally realize that things had radically changed for all future generations. We could no longer adhere to the past romantic notion that- “God’s in his heaven/All’s right with the world!” Surely, a catastrophic world war, industrialization, mindless mass production and centuries of racial and gender inequality proved otherwise and these women intended to tell us so. A female voice was being sounded and Modernism suddenly had its mothers as well as its fathers. Woolf helped express this feminine side of the equation:

"We have to admit that we are exacting, and, further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh—Is it worthwhile? What is the point of it all?" – (Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 1919, Essay)

Absurd Modernism

When I first approached writings of Absurd Modernism, I was confused and a little disappointed by some of the strange works produced by many of the initial modernists. But as I began reading more of this genre, I gradually became enthralled by a few of these early pioneers
of Modern Literature. I learned that *Modernism* entered the world with a *BLAST!*- not a bleat. Trailblazers such as Pound, Lewis, Loy, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf and Stein began writing manifestos, poems, essays and short stories with a freshly askew perspective. These authors arrived at a time in history, when the world itself was radically off-kilter. The turn of the twentieth century saw the end of the first World War and the beginning of advancing technology. Great thinkers, scientists and philosophers opened up doubt regarding man’s existence and fundamental belief systems. This new age called for new voices and the Modernists were prepared to articulate a ‘new world order’.

Of the works studied, I found myself drawn to the very off-beat and experimental writings of Mario de Andrade and Samuel Beckett. I thought this strange, because I originally felt a feminist point of view would appeal to me more. Yet, I was a little underwhelmed by the writers I thought would attract me most: Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, and was captivated by the stories of two of the oddest wordsmiths ever encountered. I found Andrade’s *Macunaima* and Beckett’s *Endgame* fascinating. Although both are vastly different, their attempt to find some meaning and purpose in an upside-down world, along with their use of humor to help make sense of the nonsensical intrigued me.

Mario de Andrade was a Brazilian essayist, poet, musician and novelist born in Sao Paulo in 1893. He published *Macunaima*, which has been called his “verbal rhapsody”, in 1928. The first printing was actually done at Andrade’s own expense. However, the book didn’t have immediate success. Most readers were, and still are, baffled by it. Initially, it was considered too outrageously flamboyant and sexually obscene. Nothing like it had ever been seen before, either inside or outside of Latin America. Andrade was a student of anthropology and folklore and his story is an amalgamation of Brazil’s various languages (indigenous Brazilian, Spanish and
Portuguese) and cultures (jungle and urban). Once panned by critics, the novel is now considered a modernist masterpiece and is celebrated as a nationalistic treasure in Brazil. Noted Professor of Latin American culture, Severino Joao Albuquerque, cites *Macunaima* as the “cornerstone text of Brazilian Modernism”.

I read the story as an avant-garde hero’s tale. Although, Macunaima is not your typical demigod of distinction. In fact, “The hero without a character” is actually the subtitle of this novel. He’s a self-absorbed, lazy hedonist, who’s concerned only with satisfying his basic instincts and needs. Born in an indigenous tribal jungle in northern Brazil, this fictional character is the antithesis of a noble champion. But his magical shapeshifting abilities endow him with an undeserved prowess. Instead of using his gifts for the better good, Macunaima morphs into an insatiable trickster and sensualist. When he accidentally kills his mother, he and his brothers are forced to leave their tribe in disgrace. Then, after an endless series of sexual romps, Macunaima meets his one-true love, Ci- Amazon “Mother of the Forest”. Together they have a son. But in keeping with mythological tragedy, their young boy dies suddenly. The heartbroken Ci no longer wants to live and leaves earth to become a heavenly star. Before departing, she gives Macunaima a magical amulet, as a reminder of their love. The hero loses the talisman and thus, begins his quest to retrieve his lost “juju”.

Macunaima travels to Sao Paulo to face and conquer Piaima, the giant who has taken his charm. Once in the city, he learns its dual languages of Portuguese and Brazilian. Here Andrade uses Sao Paulo’s co-mingled linguistics to symbolize the damage caused by colonial rule on Brazil’s native identity. The rural hero intermixes with an urban environment that’s been “cannibalized” by one culture having been eaten up by other cultures. Macunaima is often considered to be a personification of Brazil itself. As a child he’s blacker than most, then
is magically transformed into a light skinned man with blond hair and blue eyes. He has an adult's body and a child's head and is a wanderer, never belonging to any one place. Along with his brothers, the three represent the country’s kaleidoscope of color- one fair, one red-skinned and one black. The novel becomes a fusion of primitive and urban aesthetics. With his unique and whimsical style Andrade was one of the first modernists to introduce us to “magical realism”. I found this story captivating because it blends reality with absurdity so well. The author incorporates fantastical elements into everyday settings and adds new life to the old genres of fables and folklore.

Concurrently, as comical and wacky as the novel is, its finale is fatalistic. Macunaima’s brothers become shadow-like monsters and he obstinately destroys his village. According to Albuquerque: “the novel presents ‘construction and destruction’ as inseparable. It is a novel of both power and alienation.” (Hispania: “Construction and Destruction” in Macunaima, p.70). A common factor of myths is that the hero is often questioned and nearly destroyed by a mysterious temptress. Because he had rejected her daughters, Vei- the Sun, tricks him into making love to the monstrous Lara, who steals his amulet and tears him apart. Although he survives, he feels he has no more reason to live:

“To go on living as he had been living was out of the question; it was because of this life that he no longer found any zest in living on earth. His life, with so many adventures, so much love-making, such deceit, such suffering, such heroism, was in the end not worth living; … He lacked the spirit to straighten himself out. He made up his mind: …This world has nothing for me anymore; I shall go up to heaven!” (Mario de Andrade Macunaima, p.162)

In legends, a true hero is committed to others, but Macunaima is too self-centered to be deemed a heroic figure. Ultimately, he wasn’t successful in proving himself worthy of greatness. Because he failed the hero’s test, he needed to suffer in order to follow the mythological
sequence. Andrade’s research in music, language and folklore created a novel that represents the multi-layered cultural complexity of Brazil itself. By retelling and solidifying its native fables in one grand epic, the author helped honor his country’s unique heterogeneity. *Macunaima* has come to be recognized as a truly remarkable work of Absurd Modernism.

Although not steeped in folklore, Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* is just as unconventional and off-beat a work as Andrade’s *Macunaima*. Born in 1906, Beckett was a second-generation modernist. He studied Romance languages at Trinity College in Dublin and was greatly influenced by the Italian poet Dante and the French philosopher, Rene Descartes. Arriving on the Paris scene in the late 1920s, he met and befriended James Joyce and joined his unconventional inner-circle. The young Beckett appeared after Proust, Eliot, Kafka and Joyce had written their major works. He was a late bloomer and didn’t fully come into his own until after the second World War. While he greatly admired Joyce, he ultimately developed his own uniquely minimalist style stating: “James Joyce was a synthesizer, trying to bring in as much as he could. I am an analyzer, trying to leave out as much as I can.”

Where Andrade’s writing is vibrant and verbose, Beckett’s is stark and austere. Yet, I found the “gallows humor” of the *Endgame* just as appealing as *Macunaima*’s zaniness. Beckett was a master craftsman. His play presents the futility of most human endeavors and compels us to see the insane pointlessness of our endless desires in a new and bizarrely comical way. True to its oddity, the very first line of the play is the end: “…Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.” The story’s just begun and already Beckett tells us it’s over, or nearly over. The scenery (or lack thereof), represents the author’s minimalism. Bare, lofty walls encased with two small windows, recede to the background of the stage. To the left center of the stage, he situates two covered ashbins and to the right near a door, a picture
is turned backwards. I thought this was Beckett’s signal to us that he’s about to turn art, as we had known it, inside out!

There are only four characters in *Endgame*. Hamm, the central character is a wheelchair-bound tyrant. Clove is his reluctant and cynical servant. Within two ashbins are Hamm’s parents, Nell and Nagg, who are legless due to a motorbike accident. These fantastic four make up the weirdest theatrical ensemble ever gathered on one stage. Although Beckett resented that his play was labeled as being within the “Theatre of the Absurd” model, he would be hard-pressed to dispute it. This genre first appeared in the late 1950s, around the same time *Endgame* was produced. It refers to works primarily written by European playwrights describing when human existence no longer has meaning or purpose. Specific characteristics certainly apply to Beckett’s *Endgame*: broad comedy mixed with horrific or tragic images (amputees-Nell and Nagg’s comical bantering); characters caught in hopeless situations doing repetitive actions (Hamm’s insistence on his chair being moved exactly within a certain spot); dialogue full of wordplay and nonsense (“The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.”); cynical storyline (characters physically and emotionally imprisoned- “You’re on earth. There’s no cure for that.”)

Another aspect of Beckett’s play is that he seems to have broken through the “fourth wall” of the theater. That is, the imaginary wall which separates the players from the audience. There’s a sense that we too are trapped within the same space as Hamm and Clov. In the course of their interactions, both characters reference asides. And in his soliloquy, Hamm seems to be addressing the auditorium directly. At one point, while Clov is peering out the window, he turns and points his telescope to the audience, including us in his sights. Beckett wants us to know that we’re all part of his dystopian drama. We’re not just spectators; we’re participants in it. The play’s title comes from a term used in chess. *Endgame* refers to an ending in chess when
the outcome is already known to the players. Beckett, an avid chess fan, saw a correlation between chess’s endgame and our final stages of life. Death is always the final outcome, regardless of how each of us plays the game of life, the end result will always be the same—we will all die eventually.

The main subject of the play is the symbiotic relationship between Hamm and Clov. Their dynamics alternate between roles of slave/master or son/father. Clov provides legs and eyesight for Hamm and Hamm provides food and shelter for Clov. Each mutually benefits from this bizarre alliance. Beckett also repeatedly refers to “finishing” throughout the story. In the opening scene Clov says: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be finished.” This theme connects to the daily routines undertaken by each character. As long as Hamm demands that Clov continually look out the window, Clov knows he’s not dead. Nagg regularly asks Nell to kiss him as a way of determining that he and she are still alive. So, when both Clov and Nell ask: “Why this farce, day after day?”, we realize they’re performing certain rituals in order to affirm their own existence. These countless regiments symbolize an on-going of life, finishing them represents death. To paraphrase an anonymous theater critic- _Waiting for Godot_ is Beckett’s despairing play about hope and _Endgame_ is his despairing play about despair.

Although this play is extremely bleak, it is counterbalanced by enough wit and humor to make us see that farce and misfortune are really the yin and yang of life itself. New York Times reporter, Morris Dickstein stated: “This was the positive side of Beckett’s detachment, the residue of Irish humor that enabled him to see himself as a character, uncompromising, unworlly, a modern Cassandra wary of all consolation.” (“An Outsider in His Own Life” by Dickstein-NYT 8/3/97). He goes on to describe how just as J. Alfred Prufrock represented T.S. Eliot, so too did many of Beckett’s characters become a surrogate for the author himself- the
“Beckett man”. One of the most heart-wrenching statements in the *Endgame* is “You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness.” But just when you think things can’t get worse, Nell says: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world.” Ultimately, Beckett is a bone-fide fatalist with a great sense of humor. Even the title of his play refers to the final stage of a dramatic event, where we know that the finish will be death; yet, we’re all still waiting for the game of life to play itself out. Magnificent irony! One of my favorite Beckett quotations was his response to someone who quipped that a beautiful day was one that makes you feel glad to be alive. The morose master’s response: “Oh, I don’t think I would go quite so far as to say that.”

As limiting as it is to characterize Samuel Beckett or any other of these great authors as early, late, post or even absurd modernist writers, so too is it as restrictive to view all Modernist Literature through one lens only. Approaching this genre should be akin to looking through a magnifying glass, while wearing bifocals. Because Modernism was often contradictory and projected in various ways in various places, we cannot understand its full richness from only one point of view. However, if we look at it in an historical context, every period seems to have gotten the modernism it desired or deserved. As splintered as that may seem, all modernism still maintained some form of cohesive interconnection. Scholar, Morag Shiach cites these shared commonalities: “…continuing themes; some consistent issues of style and form; innovations in the representation of time; complex explorations of the nature of consciousness; formal experiments in narrative structure; and an intense use of the imaginative power of the image have always been understood as central.” (Morag Shiach, *The Modernist Novel*, p.5). In addition to shaping writers within this field, Modernist Literature also made certain demands of its readers. Students of modernism are charged with being both analytical and open to experimental
innovation, where storylines and characters appear more multi-layered and complex. Modernism was born during periods of huge historical transitions. The Industrial Revolution, World Wars, technological innovations, urbanization, political and cultural upheavals, and an unraveling of social norms all contributed to its inception. This plethora of variants must allow us to examine its many characteristics through diverse perspectives.

**Conclusion:**

The Modernist Movement arose out of cultural art works from different national traditions, one and all, with their own requirements and constraints. The modern novel didn’t do away with past history, it just represented it with a new face suitable to each country affected by upheavals within their world at that time. European and American writers were strongly influenced by industrialization and World War I; whereas, Brazil and South America were strongly influenced by Colonialization. Emerging along with various literary movements embroiled in “isms”- Vorticism, Surrealism, Imagism, Futurism- this modern artistic era was bound to transform itself into a wide-ranging composite. Like Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, Modernist writers understood the importance of psychological ‘wandering’ within a story. Looking at this period with a linear lens cannot encapsulate its varied elements. Similar to the many-headed mythological Hydra, modernism often projected multiple aspects of itself. To appreciate this field in its entirety, it helps to explore modern literature’s unique factions. Modernism’s Lost Generation, New Woman and Absurd writers are three components of one iconic literary discipline. Trying to place these distinctive threads under one academic blanket loses the singular impact each contributed.
The many facets of Modernism only enriched its inherent uniqueness. Studying these works require a certain degree of imagination. Just as the mythological Hydra was capable of projecting various components of itself, so too were Modernists able to project multiple concepts from one centralized theory.
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