Aspects of Literary Modernism

Or
How to Recognize a Modernist Novel or Poem When You See One
Contextualizing Modernism

• Social, economic, political and social aspects of early 20th-century metropolis (Williams)
  ▫ Diversity of metropolis brought about by colonial and rural to urban immigration (rural social expectations and social structures dissolve)
  ▫ Possibility of creating new social, cultural and economic formations/organizations/relationships
    • Class noted political movements (woman’s suffrage) and social conditions (prohibition) that brought people together across social and economic lines
Contextualizing Modernism

- City, cont’d
  - *Intensification* of feelings of alienation, isolation, strangeness of existence in city and of moral darkness of city and its physical layout
  - Possibility of the city—new types of identities in “open, complex and mobile society” (Williams 91)
  - City gave audience to and space for pool of new writers
    - Metropolitan dwellers having “exceptional liberties of expression” (Williams 91)
Contextualizing Modernism

- Masculine anxiety over women’s success in literary marketplace that *intensified* in early 20th century giving rise to “exclusive” modernist aesthetic (Gilbert and Gubar)
- Blues, jazz—rise of African American art forms—growing use of vernacular language and folk culture in African American literature (Baker)
Context Influences Form

- Williams identifying “breaks in form” as defining characteristic of modernism rising out of artists and intellectuals location “within the changing milieu of the metropolis” (90)
  - “Openness and complexity” of metropolis engendering openness of form. “Emphasis on medium, and on what can be done in the medium, became dominant” (92).
  - Immigrants confronted with new language (and natives with new uses) see it as arbitrary rather than natural and thus open to shaping and reshaping
Context Influences Form

- “Renaissancism”: “a spirit of nationalistic engagement . . . that prompts the black artist’s awareness that his or her only possible foundation for authentic and modern expressivity resides in a discursive field marked by formal mastery and sounding deformation” (Baker 108)—a mixture “of class and mass” (109).
- Gilbert and Gubar see modernism as “an integral part of a complex response to female precursors and contemporaries” (156)
  - “Exclusive” language and form of anti-establishment avant-garde (“use of puns, allusions, phrases in foreign languages, arcane and fractured forms”) (156).
"Although modernism can be clearly identified as a distinctive movement, in its deliberate distance from and challenge to more traditional forms of art and thought, it is also strongly characterised by its internal diversity of methods and emphases; a restless and often competitive sequence of experiments, always more immediately recognised by what they are breaking from than by what . . . they are breaking towards" (Williams 89).
Literary Modernism

- Emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity (individual consciousness experiencing a moment: stream of consciousness, form of interior monologue).
- Exploration of how seeing takes place, rather than on what is perceived.
- Movement away from the apparent objectivity provided by omniscient third-person narrators, fixed narrative points of view, and clear-cut moral positions.

Material from Dr. Mary Klages, “Modern Critical Thought” course handouts. Available at: http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
Literary Modernism, cont’d

- Blurring or melding of genre styles.
- Time and space become subjective, move inward. According to Lye, space is “structured symbolically or metaphorically” and “time becomes psychological time.”

Literary Modernism, cont’d

- Experimentation in **form** in order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life.
- Language is seen as a complex, nuanced site of our construction of the 'real'; its multiple meanings and varied connotative forces are essential to our elusive, multiple, complex sense of and cultural construction of reality.

Literary Modernism, cont’d

• a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness, about the production of the work of art, so that each piece calls attention to its own status as a production, as something constructed and consumed in particular ways.

Duchamp, Marcel. Fountain. 1917. Image courtesy of: SF MOMA

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Literary Modernism and Woolf

- Scott draws attention to Woolf’s use of repetition and metaphoric language.
- Woolf’s own discussion of modernism in “Modern Novels”

Freund, Gisele. *Photograph of Virginia Woolf*. 1939. Image courtesy: Guardian.co.uk
Mrs. Dalloway, Opening

- Language of newness, calmness and peace: children, “fresh,” beach, wave (extended metaphor of beach)
- However, these images interspersed with ominous overtones of death and anxiety
  - Multiple connotations of term “plunge” and “plunged at Bourton into the open air” (3).
  - Clarissa’s feeling at 18 “that something awful was about to happen” (3).
- Peter: motif of him being in her thoughts continually, marriage plot, comfort with her, intrusion into her physical and mental solitude
Image Sources