**Literary Modernism**  
  
       Modernism generally thought to apply to the work of writers and artists who emerged about the time of WWI. This historical element is important, as the horror and devastation of this war caused thinkers to question any stable and meaningful, ordered existence. Add to that the disorienting effect of such nineteenth century thinkers as Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and these artists are prepared for upheaval.  
  
     Modernism becomes aware that a mirror held up to nature can only capture the surface. There is awareness that there is much that lies under the surface—especially with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), there are subconscious urges, dream states, whole psychic realms unavailable to normal consciousness, etc. And it is this that the artist attempts to portray.  
     Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and his theory of evolution, of natural selection, continues to challenge some people whose faith resists the long gradual process of the development of man. How much more radical he must have seemed when he first came into print. Challenge mostly to a long-held belief in man’s primacy in the universe, the means of creation of such a central being. The interconnectedness of all things.  
     Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) challenges the kinds of attributes of Christianity that he believes has the human denying the fullest parts of his potential—attributes of meekness and self denial that allow people to welcome suffering in expectation of greater rewards in another life. Rails against “the herd.” Sees much of this Christian ideology as in service to the powerful who exploit the weak, the meek.  
     Karl Marx (1818-1883) challenges the religion on capitalism along the same lines—as he sees the worker being exploited in service of the rich and the powerful. Sees this exploitation as built in to the very ideology of the capitalist system, and the system as a very un-democratic institution.  
  
     Here is what occurs—a breakdown of those vaunted institutions that once were the repository of meaning and which assigned one their place in the world. The nation breaks down with the depose of the king. The absolute authority of the church breaks down under scientific and philosophical scrutiny. The past and its hierarchical values (ancient Greece as the zenith of man’s artistic and political development). Add to that the horrors of a WWI.  
      The solution—recreate meaning—a structure of meaning, through the work of men. The greatest potential for this is seen in the possibilities of art. So, by making something absolutely new in art, civilization is offered a great gift, a new kind of potentiality. We’ll see what some of this new world looks like when we examine work by four European modernists and two Asian ones. We’ll carry these modernists with us through the semester—as the influence remains with writers to this day. Somewhere along the line, and perhaps not until our August 1 reading, we’ll have some time to discuss the response to modernism offered by post-modernism. Here is a quote from Virginia Woolf’s 1919 essay “Modern Fiction” that gives one idea of the rationale behind a different approach to writing, and that shows that the idea of realism is insufficient to express everything the writer wants to express:  
     "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions--trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, 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."

**Characteristics of poems:  
  
Formal characteristics:**  
Open Form   
Free verse   
Discontinuous narrative    
Juxtaposition   
Intertextuality   
Classical allusions   
Borrowings from other cultures and languages   
Unconventional use of metaphor   
Metanarrative   
Fragmentation /Digression  
Multiple narrative points of view (parallax)   
  
**Thematic characteristics**:  
Breakdown of social norms and cultural sureties   
Dislocation of meaning and sense from its normal context   
Valorization of the despairing individual in the face of an unmanageable future   
Disillusionment   
Rejection of history and the substitution of a mythical past, borrowed without chronology   
Product of the metropolis, of cities and urbanscapes   
Stream of consciousness   
Overwhelming technological changes of the 20th Century

More specifically:

1.  The poem is a detailed record of the random thoughts -**subjective consciousness**- represented just as they are going on in the mind of  the persona/speaker.

2. Modernist writers were influenced by Freud's ***psychoanalytical***method   by which a person was able to speak freely to release all his repressed emotions; they emphasized the power of dreams and the role of the unconscious/subconscious mind.

3. The poets used **avant-garde** methods like **the 'Stream ofConsciousness' technique** to faithfully portray the complex ways in which the human mind works-psychologically by association rather than logically.

4. This resulted in their characters having **multiple personalities** and we can find characters who could be both the speaker and the listener in the poem.

5. The modernist writers were influenced by contemporary artistic movements like **'Collage.'**Where we can find some poems that comprise mosaic of quotations from Dante, Shakespeare the Bible and other works.

6.  The modernist writers, deal with chronological (past, present and future), historical and most importantly **subjective time. They shape it in their own way; they do not stick to chronology.**

7. **Pessimism and loneliness** whereentire poems could be about a desperate attempt by the persona to relate to another human being.

8.   **The First World War left a lasting impact on the modern age and its literature; therefore, *we can find some poems that are dedicated to loved ones who died in this war*.**

[**Modernism Movement Variations**](http://www.enotes.com/topics/modernism/in-depth#in-depth-movement-variations)

**Imagism**  
Imagism is the best-known of the dozens of small movements in modernist poetry in the years leading up to World War I. Ezra Pound formulated the “rules” of Imagism, which were essentially a rejection of Victorian poetry. Imagist poets were encouraged to “simply present” an image; the poet “does not comment.” Excessive adjectives and the voice of the poet were anathema. Finally, Pound urged imagists to use the rhythm of the metronome.

From his base in London, Pound published the anthology *Des Imagistes* in 1914. Other poets in the movement included H. D., William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, and Amy Lowell; H. D.’s poem “Oread” embodies the imagist project. Pound soon moved on from Imagism but Lowell, from Boston, continued to publish imagist anthologies for years after the movement had become irrelevant.

**Vorticism**  
After Imagism, Pound moved on to Vorticism. This movement (which consisted primarily of Pound, the writer T. E. Hulme, and the painter/novelist Wyndham Lewis) was published in their magazine *Blast: A Review of the Great English Vortex*. It took the basic tenets of imagism, combined them with the painting style of Cubism, and injected an aggressive anger. At this time Pound had discovered the Chinese written character and had decided that its unique combination of sound, text, and image created a luminous “vortex” of energy. The movement fell apart as World War I began, for its anger and violence seemed very small and ineffective when compared to the real destruction of the war.

**Common notions/themes:**

**The “Unreal City”**  
In “The Waste Land” Eliot describes London as an “Unreal City,” a city through which shades of the dead troop over the bridges. Modernism was the first literary movement to take urban life as a given, as a form of experience that was categorically different from any other kind of life. The French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire was fascinated by the “flaneur,” the man who strolls the city aimlessly as a way of life. The anonymity of the city, its darkness, its mechanization, its vast power, all inspired the modernists; it attracted and repelled them in equal measure. Modernist writers (most of them, interestingly enough, from suburbs or small cities) gravitated to London and Paris, St. Petersburg and New York, where they found each other, formed movements, drank and fought together, and broke apart.

London was the first home of Anglo-American Modernism, but the city’s essentially commercial character eventually sent most of the writers elsewhere. By the 1920s, Paris was the home of one of the greatest concentration of artists in history. In the 1930s, with war looming in Europe, the artistic energy moved west to New York. But no matter what city, the city was almost always the subject of modernist literature. Although he could not stay there and moved between Paris, Trieste, and Zurich during his “exile,” everything James Joyce ever wrote was about the vibrant urban life of Dublin. The poet Hart Crane composed his epic poem “The Bridge” about the Brooklyn Bridge, the monument of engineering and architectural beauty that made New York City the center of American urban life. Eliot’s melancholy poems point out the loneliness and lack of meaning city-dwellers often feel. The city, where technology and masses of people and anonymity come together, became the master trope of Modernism itself.

**Alienation**  
Alienation is defined as the sensation of being alien, or of not belonging, to one’s own milieu. It can also mean separation from something. If the city is the master trope (or image) of Modernism, alienation is its master theme. Almost all modernist writing deals with alienation in some form.

The primary kind of alienation that Modernism depicts is the alienation of one sensitive person from the world. The stream-of-consciousness technique of narration is particularly well suited for this, because readers can see the inner feelings of a person and witness his or her essential self along with the actions of the world outside. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s protagonist and stand-in, is alienated from his family, his friends, his religion, and his country because of devotion to art and his certainty that nobody can understand and accept him. Woolf’s heroines are doubly alienated from the world because of their status as women; because of their sex, they are not allowed to participate in the world of politics, education, or economics. Eliot’s narrators (most notably Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”) are confronted by a world that is just broken shards of a discarded whole; everyone else seems to walk through the world calmly but they cannot. And for Ezra Pound, it is the world itself that has been alienated, by the forces of greed, from what should truly be historical heritage.

**The Presence of the Past**  
Surrounded by the debris of all of the smashed certainties of the past, modernist writers looked at the contemporary world as a directionless place, without center or certainty. These past certainties, although oppressive and constructed on specious values, were at least some kind of foundation for the world. The modernist age set out to break apart these certainties; World War I then finished the job and horrified the world by demonstrating what humanity was capable of. Writers in the modernist age often felt that they were at the end of history. Because of this, modernist poems and novels often incorporate and mix together huge swaths of history. Allusion—brief references to people, places, things, or even languages and literatures—was the characteristic modernist technique for including history. Partly because of their profound uneasiness in the modern world, modernist writers alluded constantly to the past.

This is not to say that the modernists were uncritical admirers of the past. In his poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” Ezra Pound wrote that World War I’s vast slaughter was ultimately for the purpose of defending “an old [b——] gone in the teeth . . . a botched civilization . . . two gross of broken statues . . . [and] a few thousand battered books.” Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus says that “history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” and the Irishmen who live in past glories are portrayed as buffoons and fools. But both of these writers’ works are filled with allusions to the past. And almost all of the important modernist writers, as well, structure their work around the presence of the past. Pound, for instance, called his The Cantos “a poem including history” and the list of allusions in that poem has over ten thousand entries.

**TO SUM UP**:

Modernism evolved as an artistic reaction to dramatic changes in politics, culture, society, and technology. Research some of the technologies that were developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s that might have literally changed the world. Some of the inventions you might want to investigate might be the technologies that captured and recorded reality (photography, sound recording, film), the technologies of communication, the technologies of transportation, and the technologies of weaponry.

The two world wars of the twentieth century had an enormous effect on the modernist movement. Many critics feel that the movement hit its height just after World War I and was effectively killed by World War II. Research the wars’ effects on writers of the modernist movement. What did they do during the war years? How did the war change their lives? You might want to look at lesser-known writers such as Rupert Brooke or Wilfred Owen who actually served in the conflict.

Most of the important modernist writers were born between 1880 and 1900, and most of them died in the 1960s. The world changed dramatically in the intervening period. In 1890 what were the world’s great powers? Who were its important leaders? What were the important issues in international relations? What products did people use? How did people travel from place to place? Compare the answers to these questions to what the world looked like in 1965.

In addition to being a reaction to changes in technology and politics, Modernism was a reaction to important developments in Western thought. Dozens of philosophers and scholars of the late nineteenth century rejected the accepted explanations about the world and proposed their own. Of these, the thinkers who had the greatest effect on Modernism were the economist Karl Marx, the naturalist Charles Darwin, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud.