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The Influence of Modernism in English Literature

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Abstract:

In the last part of the nineteenth century, the British Empire began to decline as it suffered a series of political, military, and economic setbacks. There was growing instability and a loss of self-confidence. With the death of the queen, the prosperous Victorian era came to an end. England was then fully industrialized and urbanized. Thousands of people were migrating from rural to urban areas in search of jobs and a better life. Cities were overcrowded and housing problems were growing. There was also a rise in crime and vice. Morality was fast on the wane and sexual promiscuity was surging. There was a proliferation of all kinds of evils and vices. The eruption of World War I in 1914 that went on till 1919 further worsened the situation of human existence. The growing anxiety, pessimism, and skepticism in the minds of the people were powerfully reflected in the literature of the period. A new movement called modernism had emerged.

Keywords: Industrialization, urbanization, culture, modernism, literature.

The glory of Great Britain reached its zenith in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It was a period of unprecedented prosperity and success. There was great confidence and optimism about the future of the nation. The social, political, and economic conditions both within the nation and in the neighboring nations were at equilibrium. However, very soon, beginning in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, the British Empire began to suffer a series of shocks and surprises that posed a threat to its very foundation. An overwhelming feeling of instability and loss of self-confidence set in. Consequently, the need for spiritual revival and regeneration was strongly felt throughout the nation. The atmosphere of the dying century was saturated with a feeling of anguish and anxiety. The long and prosperous Victorian era came to an end with the death of the queen in 1901. Unexpected

reverses were suffered in the Boer War (1899-1902). Earlier, the British military might was thought to be invincible. However, this sense of security and complacency was fast on the wane. Thirty thousand strong British forces suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the native Afrikaners on January 24, 1900, at the Battle of Spion Kop in South Africa. Even though the Boers eventually surrendered, the lost image of the British Empire could never be regained. Dissensions also arose both within England and among the European nations concerning the Boer conflict. The conflict, however, seemed to have brought England to a realization that its imperialist ambitions would no longer be easy and secure like before. Administration of its vast empire had become increasingly difficult. Rivalry among the imperialist nations too had reached its boiling point. Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.S.A. were now intensifying their imperialist pursuits in Europe, Asia and Africa.

England began to face increasing competition and rivalry from the nations that had recently gained formidable economic, political, and military strength. Her global political and economic supremacy was showing signs of imminent disintegration. Her industries began to suffer setbacks as they depended heavily on raw materials and markets for finished goods in her overseas territories and foreign countries where nationalism was growing and anti-British spirits soaring. The economic depression in the last quarter of the nineteenth century badly affected not only England but all the other industrialized nations. The European nations were wary and adopting drastic measures to deal with the grim economic situation. This adversely affected the English trade and industry. The policy of fiscal protection was initiated in Germany, and other European nations followed suit. Subsequently, British goods were no longer given free entry into European markets. The European nations and the United States were intensifying their industrial activities which posed a very tough challenge to the British producers in the world markets. Besides this, in agricultural production, England was lagging far behind younger nations like the USA, Argentina and Canada. (Roy 5) Imported food grains were much cheaper compared to what was produced at home. By the end of the nineteenth century, England could no longer compete with its European rivals as well as the United States. The living conditions of her working-class people were deteriorating; unemployment and poverty were on the rise; strikes grew in number and frequency; socialism, which seemed to have vanished since 1850, was re-emerging as an active force. The unfolding events seemed to portend that the golden days were about to be over. (Legouis, Cazamian, and Vergnas 1219)

The prevailing political and economic circumstances seemed to be building up for cataclysmic events. There was a somber atmosphere of rivalry, distrust, and hostility among

the nations. The era of one-nation dominance was nearing its end as more and more nations began to assert their right to ascend in the global power hierarchy. The ambition of Germany to be a global power was ever-increasing. She was trying to expand her empire towards the east. France was enlarging her empire in Africa and Indo-China. Italy too was getting increasingly ambitious. Japan, which had recently defeated Russia, was getting over-confident and aiming for supremacy in Asia. The United States had won the Spanish War and had taken control of the Philippines thus paving the way for a serious conflict with Japan.

The tussle for domination among the rival imperialistic nations culminated in the First World War in which the lives of millions of soldiers as well as civilians were lost. Europe, the main theatre of war, was turned into a 'colossal graveyard'. The former beliefs in the goodness and nobility of humankind had been shattered. A new era of uncertainty, skepticism, and insecurity had just begun. People's attitudes to life and moral and spiritual values were changing swiftly; there was revolt against all established norms, conventions, and traditions. The complexity of life and reality in the new age was increasingly fostering an intense spirit of interrogation and investigation. All these political, social, and economic changes exerted tremendous impact on the culture, art, and literature of England. The English literary temperament was growing more flexible and opened to the influence of foreign literary and intellectual movements.

The advancement in science and technology—the discovery of the pre-existing laws of nature and their application in the invention of machines of all kinds—facilitated the birth of the Industrial Revolution in England in the early eighteenth century. The impact of industrialization and urbanization could be seen in the far-reaching cultural transformations that were taking place in England. The organic agrarian social structure was fast disintegrating, giving way to an urban industrial economy. (Roy 4) By the end of the nineteenth century, England was a fully industrialized and urbanized nation. Hordes of people from rural areas were rushing to the cities in search of jobs and better life leading to overcrowding and housing problems. Slums were growing in number and size, accompanied by the rise in crime and vice. The standards of sexual morality were at their lowest ebb. Sexual promiscuity was surging with increasing disregard for sex taboos. All the evils of industrialization were in full bloom. The tumultuous atmosphere of the transitional period did not fail to engender a tremendous amount of anxiety, pessimism, and skepticism in the minds of the people, and these were powerfully reflected in the literature of the period.

Louis Cazamian and Raymond Las Vergnas observed the literary ambiance that prevailed during this period:

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century make up a single literary period. This means that the relative unity of some predominant characteristics makes itself felt. But the unity of this age consists in the unifying background of disquietude. The numerous tendencies, with which it is stirred, after the breaking up of the Victorian equilibrium, lay at its core a deep-set restlessness through their divergence. (Cazamian and Vergnas 1292)

Modernism, a cultural movement that emerged in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, began to powerfully influence the art, music, architecture, and literature of England by around 1910 and it remained active for over two decades. The movement was based on the belief that traditional forms of art, literature, music, architecture, social organization, etc were outdated and needed to be replaced by new ones. It was thought necessary to re-examine and reinvent every aspect of life and get rid of all obstacles that lie on the path to progress and advancement of humankind.

Virginia Woolf seemed quite certain that a cultural movement had suddenly erupted when she made the following observation:

On or about December 1910 human nature changed . . . All human relations shifted- those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. (Bradbury and McFarlane 33)

Modernism may be viewed as the manifestation of the spirit of revolt and skepticism that arose in the wake of rapid modernization engendered by the advancement in science and technology. The sweeping political, social, and economic changes that were taking place led to a metaphysical crisis that virtually shattered the traditional systems of belief, values, philosophy, art, and literature. Science indeed played the dominant role in bringing about all these wide-ranging cultural changes. Professor Th. Ratankumar Singh in his book, *Ezra Pound and Imagist Poetry* gives a succinct description of Modernism:

To put it simply, Modernism should properly be seen as a culture, a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values, and modes of perception that came into existence during the mid to late nineteenth century, and that has had a powerful influence on art and thought since roughly 1900. (24)

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane also pointed out the fact that Modernism is a complex and comprehensive term that encompasses several sub-movements that were taking place in the period between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century:

The Term has been used to cover a wide variety of movements subversive of the realist or the romantic impulse and disposed towards abstraction (Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism); but even these are not, as we shall see, all movements of one kind, and some are radical reactions against others. (23)

Modernism may also be viewed as a complex and spontaneous cultural response to the flood of upheavals that wreaked havoc on the political, social, and spiritual landscape of the whole of Europe and the rest of the world by the turn of the twentieth century. The new century ushered in an era of chaos, anarchy, and desolation. In the fields of science, psychology, and social sciences, amazing discoveries were made that did not fail to introduce new philosophical and literary perspectives. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane brilliantly presented Modernism as an art that very successfully reflected the complexity of the twentieth century:

This leads us toward another kind of account as to why Modernism is our art; it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud, and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. (27)

There is yet another way of looking at the turbulent changes that were taking place during the period that is being discussed here. Changes, indeed, can be viewed as a sign of dynamism and progress. Stability and conservatism, on the other hand, may be regarded as denoting stagnancy and decadence. Science played a tremendous role in bringing about these radical changes had been tremendous. Science, indeed, wrought great wonders for humankind. It brought about great revolutions that rapidly transformed human civilization. The hurdles of distance had been considerably minimized with the invention of different kinds of engines—motorcycles, cars, trains, and airplanes. The cures for many dreaded diseases had been discovered. The production of both agriculture and industries had tremendously increased with the invention and employment of all kinds of machines. It is, indeed, difficult to try to enumerate the boons of scientific inventions and discoveries. Yet, if viewed from another angle, scientific advancement had brought along with it untold pain and suffering to humankind. Industrialization in its wake had introduced several problems, evils, crimes, and vices. Next, the invention of sophisticated weapons seemed to stir the excitement of warmongers and enormously multiplied the destructive capability of war. Consequently, strong reactions against the weaknesses of science began to develop, especially in the realms of literature and philosophy. In this regard, Louis Cazamian made the following somber observation:

The philosophy and the literature of the declining century were filled with an impassioned revolt against science. The rational study of things, as a method, had not justified the hopes which it had raised, or which had gathered round it, without its taking actual responsibility for them; it had not given man the material and moral happiness which had been naively expected of it. On the contrary, it had destroyed or dried up some of the fountain-heads of joy; it had struck the sources of bitterness yet unknown. (1219-1220)

As a befitting reaction to the self-conflicting process of modernization, the Modernist movement manifested some paradoxical and contradictory characteristics. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, in the following words, brilliantly presented an interesting feature of modernism:

In short, Modernism was in most countries an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over. (46)

In literature, the modernist influence was characterized by increasing emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity: how one perceives was given more importance over what one sees, which was manifested in the use of a new technique known as stream-of-consciousness. This was a trend away from the realist literature, which was over-obsessed with the presentation of real-life situations in art and literature. In novels, there was a deviation from objectivity provided by such features as omniscient narration, fixed narrative points, and clear-cut moral positions. There was increasing indiscriminate of literary genres. Novels were becoming more lyrical and poetic, whereas, poems were becoming more prosaic. There was increasing fondness for fragmented literary forms, broken narratives, and amalgamation of disparate elements. There was a propensity towards 'reflexivity', which means that poems, plays, and novels raise issues about their nature, status, and role. Innovation and experimentation were the hallmarks of the modernist literature. After the 1930s, the modernist movement was on the decline due to a tense social and political atmosphere. In the 1960s there seemed to have been a revival of the modernist movement, but it could never regain its former position of complete dominance. (Barry 82)

There was an attempt to emancipate modern literature from the bondage of 'realist literature' and an innovative concept like 'disjointed timelines' was introduced. Modernist literature was also characterized by its movement away from *Romanticism* in its style, semantics, and subject matter. In sharp contrast to the gay optimism of Victorian Literature, it was marked by somber pessimism and skepticism.

The stream-of-consciousness technique took modern fiction beyond the limitations of the Realist novel. Major exponents of this narrative method included the great modern novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. According to Bibhash Choudhury, "In novels like *Mrs.Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf readdressed the issue of the genre itself by suggesting that external structuring of events through the frame of the novel was not adequate to justify the complexities of modern experience." (264)

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