ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

Indira Gandhi National
Open University
School of Humanities

British Literature: Early Twentieth Century
BEGC-112

Block

1

Modernism

EXPERT COMMITTEE

Prof. Ameena K. Ansari
Department of English
Jamia Millia Islamia.

Dr. Anand Prakash
Associate Professor (Retd.)
Hans Raj College
University of Delhi

Dr. Hema Raghavan
Principal (Retd), Gargi College
University of Delhi

Dr. Vijay Sharma
Principal (Retd.), RLA College
University of Delhi

Prof. Malati Mathur
Director
School of Humanities, IGNOU

IGNOU FACULTY (ENGLISH)

Prof. Neera Singh
Prof. Nandini Sahu
Prof. Parmod Kumar
Dr. Pema Eden Samdup
Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo
Dr. Malathy A

COURSE COORDINATION & COURSE EDITING

Dr. Malathy A, Assistant Professor (Selection Grade), School of Humanities
IGNOU, New Delhi

COURSE PREPARATION

Units 1 & 2:   Dr. Hema Raghavan, Principal (Retd), Gargi College University of Delhi
Unit 3:   Dr. Anand Prakash, Associate Professor (Retd.) Hans Raj College University of Delhi
Unit 4:   Dr. Hema Raghavan , Principal (Retd), Gargi College University of Delhi
Units 5, 6, 7 & 8:   Dr. Malathy A., Assistant Professor, School of Humanities, IGNOU, New Delhi
Units 9, 10, 11 &12: Dr. Anand Prakash, Associate Professor (Retd.) Hans Raj College University of Delhi
Units 13,14,15 & 16: Dr. Hema Raghavan , Principal (Retd), Gargi College University of Delhi

SECRETARIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Monika Syal, AE (DP), SOH, IGNOU

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Welcome to the course **'British Literature: Early Twentieth Century'**!

This is a core course of the fifth semester of BA English (Honours), that focuses on studying early twentieth century British literary texts, placing them in their social, cultural and intellectual contexts. In earlier courses you have been introduced to British literature of the 14th to the 17th centuries. This course brings us to the early twentieth century, which as might be expected at the beginning of a new century, was a period of transition and change. In literature, the period saw the emergence of 'modernism' which represented an attempt to reject and break away from all that had been valued by the preceding Victorian age. It was a period marked by extraordinary artistic and literary creativity – some of the twentieth century's finest writers like W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were writing at this time. In this course, we introduce you to their writing, with the hope that you will be encouraged to read more of their work. The texts prescribed for study represent the transition from late Victorian to Modernist sensibilities, and convey a sense of the innovation and experimentation in form and technique that was typical of this age. The texts also reflect the major concerns of the period, such as its preoccupations with psychoanalytic approaches to human behaviour, the women's movement and the general sense of anxiety and despair created by the first World War.

We begin the course with an introduction to this fascinating phase of British literary history in **Block 1 'Modernism'** which provides an overview of Modernism. **Block 2 'Novel (1)'** is devoted to a detailed study of the novel *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence, one of the outstanding British novelists of the twentieth century. **Block 3 'Novel (2)'** discusses new methods of narration such as the 'stream of consciousness' and studies the writing of the modernist novelist Virginia Woolf, focusing on her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. **Block 4 'Poetry'** discusses representative poems by four of the greatest poets of the early twentieth century – W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, so that you, the learner will get an idea about the new directions that British poetry was taking during this period.

We hope that by studying this course, you will gain a strong understanding of the literary achievement of this particular period in British literary history.

The course contents are given below:

Block 1: **Modernism**

Unit 1: Introduction to Modernism

Unit 2: Modernism in Poetry

Unit 3: Modernism in the Novel

Unit 4: Modernism in Drama

Block 2: **Novel (1)**

Unit 1: The Early Twentieth Century British Novel: Social and Cultural Contexts

Unit 2: D. H. Lawrence and the British Novel

Unit 3: *Sons and Lovers*: Analysis and Interpretations

Unit 4: *Sons and Lovers*: Themes and Concerns

Block 3: **Novel (2)**

Unit 1: "Stream of Consciousness": an Introduction

Unit 2: Virginia Woolf as Novelist

Unit 3: *Mrs. Dalloway* – Analysis and Interpretations

Unit 4: *Mrs. Dalloway* - Themes and Concerns

Block 4: **Poetry**

Unit 1: W.B. Yeats: "The Second Coming"

Unit 2: T.S. Eliot: "Journey of the Magi"

Unit 3: W. H. Auden: "The Unknown Citizen"

Unit 4: Stephen Spender: "I think continually of those who were truly great."

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 1: Modernism provides an overview of Modernism as a major literary movement of the twentieth century. The block discusses the rise of Modernism in different art forms and in literature. The expressions of Modernism in Poetry, Novel and Drama are also discussed in detail.

Unit 1: Introduction to Modernism: Modernism is a complex movement, and in this block, the terms 'Modernism', 'Postmodernism' and 'Post-postmodernism' are explained in simple language.

Unit 2: Modernism in Poetry: This unit discusses aspects of modernism with reference to modern poetry, citing various passages from modernist poetry as examples.

Unit 3: Modernism in the Novel: This unit discusses the modernist novel and its ideological and aesthetic dimensions.

Unit 4: Modernism in Drama: The various phases in the development of modern British drama, such as the 'problem plays' of George Bernard Shaw, the 'verse drama' of T. S. Eliot and the 'theatre of the absurd' are discussed in detail in this unit.

Acknowledgement

The material and images we have used are used purely for educational purposes. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders of material used in this book. Should any infringement have occurred, the publishers and editors apologise, and will be pleased to make the necessary corrections in future editions of this book.

UNIT 1   MODERNISM

Structure

1.0   AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will learn about:

* Developments in twentieth century literature
* The genres of modernism
* What is modernism
* The rise of modernism
* The characteristics of the three forms - modernism, postmodernism and post-postmodernism

1.1   INTRODUCTION TO MODERNISM

During this programme of study, you have been introduced to writers belonging to different periods of English Literature. You have sampled their distinctive styles or genres of writing in keeping with the characteristics of the age they belonged to. You have read Homer who wrote in 800 BC, nearly thirty centuries back. You followed it up with a study of English literature from the Elizabethan period (16th - 17^{th}centuries) till the end of the Victorian period that came to a close at the turn of the 20th century. The different genres of writing associated with these different periods have been variously labelled as Classicism, Romanticism, Neo Classicism, and Victorian (which was predominantly Realism). Approximately, the writing of the first thirty years of the 20th century, has come under the rubric of 'Modernism'. The literature of the second half starting at the end of World War II and extending well into the nineties is generally covered by the term, 'Postmodernism' and the literature of the last thirty years leading to our present times is referred to as Post-postmodernism or Meta Modernism. The literary trends we associate with these different "isms" make the last one hundred and odd years distinctive from earlier literary ages.

1.2   WHAT IS MODERNISM?

'Modern' as a term relates to the present or recent times as opposed to the remote past. In literature, visual arts, architecture, dance, and music, the style that is known as Modernism represented a break with the traditional past and a simultaneous search for new forms of expression. Modernism in the 20th century, indicates a period of experimentation in all forms of artistic and aesthetic expression - in literature, arts, architecture and sculpture, as well as in the performing arts like music, dance, and drama. Modernism in literature is notably seen in the writings of the years following World War I (1914-18), though it should be stressed that the end of the Victorian age (1900) marked the beginning of a new style in all forms of art and literature.

Activity 1: From your study of Literature, give definitions for the terms Classicism, Romanticism, Neo Classicism, and Realism with one example for each style of writing.

The Victorian Age in England, especially the second half of the 19th century, saw rapid growth of industrialization and remarkable advances in the sciences and the social sciences. Industrial progress resulted in a huge exodus from the rural areas to the cities that brought about distinct social changes. In social sciences such as psychology, Freud's theories explained human behaviour and introduced psychoanalysis for treatment of mental illness. New philosophical inquiries and political theories needed alternative modes of expression.

Modernists felt a growing alienation from Victorian prudery rooted in Victorian morality and in a society based on hierarchical principles of gender and class, its optimism, and conventions. New ideas in psychology, philosophy and political theory, kindled a search for new modes of expression. All these caused a radical shift both in form and content in 20th century art and literature.

Modernism introduced new literature and new forms of art that were innovative and experimental. The first three decades of the 20th century (approximately 1900-1930) is called the modern period. The postmodern period started around the time World War II ended, approximately after 1945. It spanned the second half of the 20th Century almost for three decades and gained ascendancy over modernism from the 1960s. However, we have to remember that artistic and literary movements cannot be pinned down to an identifiable calendar year, and we cannot say that modernism started exactly in 1900 at the turn of the millennium, and postmodernism at the end of World War II in 1945.

Broadly speaking, the 20th century saw the rise of a new movement in creative arts, both visual and performing arts. It had a strong impact on literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, music, dance and architecture. It was also a philosophical movement as it effected a change in the Western society towards a new way of thinking, living, expressing and engaging in cultural and artistic pursuits. Modernism as a movement gave men and women the means to tackle a new world that was increasingly getting impatient with traditional mores and beliefs. The term Modernism has come to signify a new trend in the early decades of the 20th century, a divergence from the earlier tradition of arts and literature that brought in various innovative movements and styles as a replacement.

1.3 THE RISE OF MODERNISM AND POST MODERNISM

Among the many factors that gave rise to the new movements – modernism and post modernism - two are significant: (1) the rise of the new modern industrial societies that contributed to the rapid growth of cities and (2) the two horrific World Wars which resulted in great destruction and extensive loss of life, in particular, the racist genocide on a vast scale in the name of ethnic cleansing. The kind of inhumanity evidenced in the two World Wars was not a new phenomenon. Violence and cruelty between man and man, united by common ancestry, but divided by race, religion and society, have always been a part of our existence, from the days of *the Mahabharata* War.

But what was new in the 20th century was the severe jolt it gave to the traditional belief that 'God is in Heaven/All is right with the world' which led to scepticism about the presence and existence of God. The question – 'if God is in Heaven, why all is not right with the world'- led to the sceptical questioning of God's existence and of the comforting validity of faith in the justness of the divine. Man's relationship with God changed from faith to non-faith to agnosticism. The dependence on God and on His merciful intervention to set things right declined. But on a positive note, this gave rise to a utopian vision of human life and society, a belief in human progress and a moving forward without waiting for divine grace. It almost echoed the prophetic utterance of Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the last quarter of the 19th century, "Away with such a God! Better to have no God, better to set up destiny on one's own account, better to be a fool, better to be God oneself". This was Nietzche's exhortation to man to become a Superman as the natural next step in the progress of the evolutionary order.

Check your progress 1

1. Explain in your own words, your understanding of the terms 'modernism', 'postmodernism' and 'post-postmodernism'.

2. Briefly discuss the factors that gave rise to modernism in the early twentieth century.

1.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNISM

In the beginning, modernism began as an anti-tradition movement against existing forms of art, literature, philosophy, culture and society, and impacted other activities of daily life such as architecture, fashion, modes of transport, and connectivity. Modernism, true to its name represented a clash between the old and the new. It rejected all traditional forms as irrelevant and outdated to fit in with the new economic, social, and political environment of a modern competitive, industrialized world. The poet Ezra Pound's injunction to 'Make it new!' inspired artists and writers to re-examine established cultural, aesthetic, and religious traditions and bring a change in all aspects of life.

The 20th century saw the beginnings of an aesthetic modernism in literary and visual arts. In painting between 1890 and 1910, came different art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism, Constructivism, Minimalism, Vorticism, Futurism, and Fauvism distinct from the earlier forms of Classicism, Gothic art, Baroque, Naturalism, Realism, and Romanticism to name a few. In short, realistic painting or representation of reality in painting was abandoned. Similarly in music, melody and harmony were given up in favour of atonalism and

indeterminacy whereby a musical piece can be performed not in any one fixed way, but in substantially different ways. It marked the break-down of all traditional aesthetic conventions, and introduced complete freedom in all aesthetic dimensions, including melody, rhythm, harmony and tone. In architecture the new trend was for geometrical forms instead of the earlier ornamental styles. It included open spaces, use of new and innovative technologies of construction, particularly the use of glass, steel, and reinforced concrete; the emphasis was on functionalism and minimalism and a rejection of ornament. In literature, traditional realism, closed endings, chronological plots and consecutive narratives were set aside in favour of experimental forms that included open endings, symbolism, individualism, formalism and absurdity. Modernism thus ushered in changes in culture, society, literature and arts.

Even as modernism started on a rebellious note against tradition, it harboured nostalgia and deep regret for all those lost fragments from the earlier age. In the poem 'The Wasteland' (1922), by T. S. Eliot, the poet explicitly says 'These fragments I have shored against my ruin'. This single line sums up a despairing nostalgia for what has been lost. The loss of all certainties that had earlier sustained society in the past had caused a vacuum in the absence of a sustainable replacement. 'The Waste Land' appeared four years after World War I ended in 1918. Eliot was affected by the emotional and spiritual sterility that was both the cause and consequence of the war. Human beings had lost faith in God and religion, and in the absence of any strong anchor to hold on to, were rudderless and lost even the passion for life. They led a life-in-death existence, a life without hope of salvation, a life of disillusionment and despair with no possibility of moral and spiritual regeneration. All that remained were the broken cultural fragments from a vanished past that remained to be salvaged, holding out the vestige of hope as a distinct possibility.

Eliot's 'The Wasteland' mirrored the mental, emotional and spiritual aridity of the time. The triple repetition of 'Om Shanti' at the end of the poem sounds more like wishful thinking. Eliot's poem mirrored the paralysis of the mind and sterility of emotions, where the brain seemed paralyzed, emotions sterile and the spirit violated. As one of the holocaust survivors said, 'we have not died; we are dead. They've managed to kill in us not only our right to life in the present and for many of us, to be sure, the right to a future life . . . but what is most tragic is that they have succeeded, with their sadistic and depraved methods, in killing in us all sense of a human life in our past, all feeling of normal human beings endowed with a normal past, up to even the very consciousness of having existed at one time as human beings worthy of this name".

Modernist literature is innovative and experimental in form and content. These experimental writings were at their height during the first three decades and slowly declined over the next two decades. The intervening World War (1939-45) started the downslide of modernism and less than two decades thereafter, postmodernism became the dominant theory. Modernism peaked between 1910 and 1930 with some of the best works produced in England and Europe by great English poets, artists and novelists like T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein and French and German writers like Marcel Proust, Stephane Mallarme, Andre Gide, Franz Kafka and Rainer Maria Rilke. Their writings were characterized by:

1. Focus on impressionism and subjectivity (how we see rather than what we see as evident in the stream of consciousness technique).
2. Rejecting objectivity in novels, such as an omniscient external narration, well defined moral positions and fixed narrative points of view

3. Blurring of genres whereby novels are poetic and lyrical and poems more like prose documentaries.
4. Fragmented form, discontinuous narrative and mounting of collages of disparate materials and
5. A tendency towards reflexivity whereby the writings such as novels or poems raise issues about their status and their nature.

Postmodernism

Modernism began to decline in the 1930s; the 1960s saw the beginnings of Postmodernism. Postmodernism, like modernism is also characterized by its eclectic approach - i.e. the use of fragmented forms (recall Eliot in *The Wasteland*: "These fragments, I have shored against my ruins"), by its preference for aleatory writing and the absence of the omniscient narrator. But the difference arises in the mood, attitude and outlook of the two genres towards these three features.

Modernism is characterized by regrets for having lost those fragments from the earlier age. Eliot's line quoted above is a despairing nostalgia for what has been lost. But the post modernist celebrates the fragmentation as it liberates him/ her from fixed systems of belief. The second difference relates to the attitude or tone of the work. Modern art, literature and architecture were critical of the over-elaborate art forms of the 19th century. Fierce asceticism was one of the features of modernism. Modernist architects ignored decoration, pointing out that the house is a machine to live in. The remarkable thing about this high idealism was that even when it was ascetic in nature and shunned all aesthetic ornamentation, it had the power to move.

In postmodern literature written in the 1950s, soon after the end of World War II, this is reflected in minimalism and by shrinking poems to two-word lines. Samuel Beckett brought a new theatre of minimalist plays – plays that have a stage time of 13 minutes, plays that have just one speaker, plays where the setting is bare and the costumes reduced to the barest minimum of faded and torn jeans and shirts, but encapsulating within them profound observations on the meaninglessness of life and on the futility and absurdity of existence.

Check your progress 2

1. Discuss the major characteristics of modernism.
2. Name five British modernist writers and write a short essay on their literary achievements.
3. Explain how the characteristics of postmodernism are different from those of modernism.

1.5   POSTMODERN CRITICISM

1. Postmodern themes like the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence, the loss of hope of restoring meaning and order to life, are explored in the literary works of the 20th century.

2. Postmodern identities are not seen in a single genre representing a literary work, but in a mixing of genres such as thrillers, myths, psychological novels and detective stories in a work of fiction. This is also seen in the notion of language. Beckett and other absurd dramatists use language to show its emptiness and its vacuity and which therefore cannot be used to capture any transcendental reality.

3. The past is not destroyed as in modernism, but the postmodernist revisits the past with irony. The word Godot in Samuel Beckett's play is a pun on God. The two tramps at the centre of the play wait for Godot - a nostalgia for the lost wholeness of the past and a pale imitation of waiting for a non-existent Godot. Lucky's garbled speech is also an example of the mind seeking to recall the past religious beliefs and ending with a deranged outpouring of words that parody the certainty of language and faith of the past.

The meaninglessness of waiting - an activity that we carry out throughout our lives - is again an attempt to seek a non-existent external savior or force to alleviate our misery and suffering. Waiting is seen in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* where they wait for twenty-three hours in a train for an external force to enter and transform their provincial, mundane life. Their optimism for the future is seen in their creation of an image of Moscow, full of glitter and glamour, a mix of memory and desire as a kind of hyper-reality or simulacrum.

1.6   Post- Postmodernism in Literature and Art

We have seen that the 20th century was dominated by modernism and postmodernism. In the last decades of the century, there came a shift to post-post modernism or metamodernism that was both a reaction against and a perpetuation of modernist aesthetics. The later postmodernism of the 1980s rejected modernist asceticism as elitist and insisted on mixing bits and pieces from the past ages - such as colourful imagery, viewpoints and vocabulary in a bizarre and jumbled way. One such example is that of Craig Raine, who along with Christopher Reid invented what is known as 'Martian poetry'. In his poem "A Martian sends a Postcard Home", the poet expresses his impressions of humanity in terms that seem strange and puzzling at first and need a little working out before one realizes what the poet is referring to. It is in working out the puzzles that the reader derives a lot of fun from this poem.

A Martian sends a Postcard Home (1979)

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
and some are treasured for their markings –
they cause the eyes to melt
or the body to shriek without pain.
I have never seen one fly, but
sometimes they perch on the hand.
Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
and rests its soft machine on ground:
then the world is dim and bookish
like engravings under tissue paper.
Rain is when the earth is television.

It has the property of making colours darker.

Model T is a room with the lock inside –
a key is turned to free the world
for movement, so quick there is a film
to watch for anything missed.
But time is tied to the wrist
or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.
In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,
that snores when you pick it up.
If the ghost cries, they carry it
to their lips and soothe it to sleep
with sounds. And yet, they wake it up
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.
Only the young are allowed to suffer
openly. Adults go to a punishment room
with water but nothing to eat.
They lock the door and suffer the noises
 alone. No one is exempt
and everyone's pain has a different smell.
At night, when all the colours die,
they hide in pairs
and read about themselves –
in colour, with their eyelids shut.

The poem is in 34 lines and in unrhymed couplets. It presents human culture as seen by a Martian. Look at the pun on 'Caxtons' which here refers to big birds and at the same time takes us to the 14th century, when Caxton invented the printing press. The pages of the book are seen as the wings of the birds. The act of holding a book when reading is seen as one of mechanical birds perching on a hand. Mist is beautifully described while rain is linked to television. Just as a TV screen can be adjusted to different degrees of brightness, rain has the property of making colours darker and the sky dim and grey. Just as books are referred to as Caxtons, a car is referred to as model 'T'. The car is described as 'a room with the lock inside'. Turn the key to move into the world. As the car moves, the world flits by like a film and by looking at the rear mirror one can re-watch the film 'for anything missed'.

The puzzling references to wrist watch and phone mark the poem as one about perception. In this light, the familiar is strange because it is being seen in a very unfamiliar way. The use of the Martian is therefore a narrative device for 'seeing ourselves as others see us' and pointing to the strangeness of some of the actions of humans if removed from their context. The reader can laugh at the Martian but must also bear in mind that anyone, when thrown into a completely new environment that need not be all that far from home can make similar mistakes.

The poem highlights the frequently asked question whether what we perceive as reality is nothing but illusion. The classical Greek philosopher Plato in his "Allegory of the Cave" speaks about the world we perceive as a world of appearances, an imperfect copy of the real. All that we see and experience are framed by the cultural and social milieu in which we are brought up. The human world is a shadow world of the pure forms that exist in the realm of ideas. Our interpretation of the universe varies accordingly. As a result, we see how our perceptions are caught up in our desires and how what we consider to be real is tied to our own conventions of

language and naming. This poem is in the postmodern style, which differs from that of modernism.

In 1980, German theorist Jurgen Habermas looked at modernism as a continuation of the age of Enlightenment with its focus on reason, its break with blind faith in tradition and slavish obedience to religious precepts and its proscriptions as a means to reform society. He felt that the French Structuralists like Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida repudiated Enlightenment and attacked the ideals of reason, clarity, truth and progress.

Jean Francois Lyotard in his essay 'What is Modernism' in 1982 obliquely questioned Habermas's attack on Modernist attempts at artistic experimentation and at ending 'the heritage of avant-gardes'(the 'advance' group of artists, writers, musicians, whose works are unorthodox and experimental.) He said that the Enlightenment had been authoritative, prescriptive and overarching in legislating our life. Such meta-narratives seeking to explain reason and order did not accommodate plurality and differences. Lyotard defined post modernism as 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'. Lyotard analyzed the notion of knowledge in postmodern society as the end of 'grand narratives' or meta-narratives, which he considered a quintessential feature of modernity. Lyotard introduced the term 'postmodernism'. Those grand rules that purported towards establishing progress and human perfectibility are no longer tenable. Hence the change was for mini-narratives that provide a basis for different groups placed in different circumstances. Postmodernism is in a way the deconstruction of Enlightenment.

Another French writer Jean Baudrillard's book *Simulations* was translated into English in 1983. The book deals with the concept 'of the loss of the real', which happens as a result of images from films, TV and advertisements making it difficult to distinguish between the real and the imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The superficial reality hides the hidden reality and has brought in a new culture of hyper-reality. He explains it in this way: in the past a sign was an outward representation of an inner depth of reality such as blessing as an outward sign of an inner grace. But according to Baudrillard, sign is not necessarily an index of inner reality, but that of other signs. Then the whole system becomes one of simulacrum (a slight, unreal, or superficial likeness or semblance). Representation is substituted by simulation. How does this happen?

1. <u>A sign in the earlier times represented the basic reality</u>. An industrial city of the 20th century is shown by painting crowds of lean thin figures in a street, the horizon showing the factory like buildings, grey and in muted colours, to stress the monotony and mechanical quality of life there. This is a representation of basic reality.

2. <u>Misrepresentation or distortion of reality</u>: The 19th century Victorian artist shows the city at night, glamourising it by showing wet pavements reflecting the bright light from the shops , the moon rising from the clouds and ships' masts silhouetted against the sky. This is a wonderful painting, but far distant from the reality of grime and soot that typify an industrial city. Here the sign is a distortion of reality.

3. <u>A sign is a representation of representation</u>: Surrealistic painting that portrays, expresses, or interprets the workings of the subconscious mind is a good example. Let us consider an example of a painting by Rene Magritte - a painting that shows an easel with a canvas on it along with a window. On the canvas is painted the exterior scene as seen through the window. This exterior scene is not what one sees outside of

a window, but it is an imaginative representation of reality in a painting within a painting. This sign has no reality and it disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath.

4. <u>The sign bears no relation to reality</u> . This is seen in abstract painting which is not representational at all.

The painter who created this painting, Marcel Duchamp said: "My aim was a static representation of movement, a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement—with no attempt to give cinema effects through painting. The reduction of a head in movement to a bare line seemed to me defensible".

The four signs signify four different ways in which the paintings signify or represent things. So also within literature the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses. 'Everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth and this is the hyper real' (Baudrillard).

What had been seen as a solid real world is nothing but a tissue of dreamlike images. So the postmodern condition is the loss of the real. This causes a problem for positing any literary theory, because all literary theories like Marxism, Feminism, and Stucturalism depend upon the differentiation between what is seen in the text and its underlying meaning. Here in post

modernism what we see is all we get and nothing more. The loss of the real is equated with the collapse of reality.

The third sign that conceals an absence – the idea that there is nothing beyond the canvas, nothing beyond the surface painting is the crucial concept of postmodernism. The image tends to become the reality. Let us take a look at our advertisements. The perfect man or woman or family shown in the advertisements are not real but shown as real.
.

1.7   SUMMING UP

After a detailed study of the unit, you would have gained a comprehensive understanding of

 *the three constituent movements – modernism, postmodernism and post- postmodernism
 *the differences between modernism and postmodernism, and between postmodernism and post- Postmodernism or metamodernism

1.8   UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Define Modernism. Explain with examples how it is different from the earlier literary and artistic styles of presentation.
2. Distinguish between postmodernism and post-postmodernism.
3. Describe the four ways in which signs represent reality

1.9   GLOSSARY

Classicism: the following of ancient Greek or Roman principles and style in art and literature, generally associated with harmony, restraint, and adherence to recognized standards of form and craftsmanship.

Romanticism: a movement in the arts and literature that originated in the late 18th century, with emphasis on inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual.

Neo Classicism: a Western cultural movement in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that drew inspiration from the art and culture of classical antiquity.

Realism: Realism began as a literary movement in response to and as a departure from the idealism of the Romantic period. Realism emerged in literature in the second half of the nineteenth century,

Rubric: a title or heading under which something operates or is studied.

Aesthetic: a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement

Exodus: A mass departure of people

Psychoanalysis: Psychoanalysis is defined as a set of psychological theories and therapeutic methods which have their origin in the work and theories of Sigmund Freud. The primary assumption of psychoanalysis is the belief that all people possess unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories.

Alienation: a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment or estrangement from the values of one's society

Prudery: excessive propriety or modesty in speech, conduct, etc

Genocide: the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group.

Ethnic cleansing: the mass expulsion or killing of members of one ethnic or religious group in an area by those of another. (Ethnic: relating to a population subgroup (within a larger or dominant national or cultural group) with a common national or cultural tradition.)

Agnosticism: refers to the impossibility of knowledge with regard to god or the supernatural.

Utopian: modelled on or aiming for a state in which everything is perfect; idealistic

Dadaism: an art movement of the early 20th century in Europe, characterized by mockery and humour and the aim to destroy traditional values in art and replace them by a new art.

Surrealism: a movement which takes off from Dadaism - it is one way of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in "an absolute reality, a surreality."

Cubism: a new approach to representing reality by bringing different views of subjects (usually objects or figures) together in the same picture, resulting in paintings that appear fragmented and abstracted.

Constructivism: a style or movement in which assorted mechanical objects are combined into abstract mobile structural forms. The movement originated in Russia in the 1920s and has influenced many aspects of modern architecture and design.

Vorticism: a style or movement in which assorted mechanical objects are combined into abstract mobile structural forms. The movement originated in Russia in the 1920s and has influenced many aspects of modern architecture and design.

Futurism: an artistic movement begun in Italy in 1909, which strongly rejected traditional forms and embraced the energy and dynamism of modern technology.

Fauvism: an art movement characterized by a radical use of unnatural colors that separated color from its usual representational and realistic role, giving new, emotional meaning to the colors.

Gothic: the style of architecture prevalent in western Europe in the 12th to 16th centuries (and revived in the mid 18th to early 20th centuries), characterized by pointed arches, rib vaults, and flying buttresses, together with large windows and elaborate tracery.

Baroque: Relating to or denoting a style of European architecture, music, and art of the 17th and 18th centuries that is characterized by ornate detail

Naturalism: a style and theory of representation based on the accurate depiction of detail.

Open and Closed endings: open endings allow the reader to imagine the eventual denouement of the lead character (and allow spin-offs, of course!), while closed endings bring closure to the reader as well, particularly if the read is interesting.

Symbolism: the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea.

Individualism: the belief that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the whole society or group; the actions or attitudes of a person who does things without being concerned about what other people will think.

Formalism: an emphasis on form over content or meaning in the arts, literature, or philosophy.

Absurdity: in literature usually focuses on characters or situations who can find no meaningful purpose in life

Aridity: extreme form of dryness

Impressionism: Instead of painting a reflection of real life, painting an 'impression' of what the person, light, atmosphere, object or landscape looked like to them.

Stream of consciousness: a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust are among its notable early exponents.

Omniscient: knowing everything

Collage: a piece of art made by sticking various different materials such as photographs and pieces of paper or fabric on to a backing; a collection or combination of various things.

Eclectic: deriving ideas, style, or taste from a broad and diverse range of sources.
Aleatory: forms chosen at random like making a poem out of sentences randomly selected from newspapers

Asceticism: severe self-discipline and avoiding of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons

Simulacrum: something that replaces reality with its representation, the generation of the hyperreal

Avant-garde: new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music, or literature.

Meta narrative: a narrative account that experiments with or explores the idea of storytelling, often by drawing attention to its own artificiality.

Mini narratives: stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts. Mini-narratives are always situational, provisional, contingent, temporary and make no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability.

Simulation: A way of seeing a thing happen without it actually taking place in the same way.

Suggested Reading:

Sarup, Madan: *An Introductory Guide to Post Structuralism and Post Modernism*
Patricia Waugh: *Post Modernism, A Reader*
Roger Fowler: *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*
M.H. Abrams: *A Glossary of Critical Terms*.

UNIT 2   MODERNISM IN POETRY

Structure

2.0   AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

At the end of your study of this unit, you would have learnt about:

*the meaning of the term "modernist' with special reference to art and literature
*the terms 'paleo-modernism' and 'neo-modernism' and the difference between the two
*characteristics of modernism with emphasis on modernist poetry
*relationship between tradition and modernism and
*characteristics of modernist poetry

2.1   INTRODUCTION

The term 'modernist' associated with the 20th century, is misunderstood as a chronological development starting with the beginning of the 20th century, and spanning the full century.

It is not as though all those who wrote from 1900 are labelled 'modernist' writers. The term 'modernist' as it is applied to arts and literature, music and dance, sculpture and architecture, designates a distinctive kind of imagination which to begin with seems *obscure* and therefore *difficult* to apprehend at the elemental level. It also demands some degree *of acquaintance with ancient and classical texts* from different parts of the world. Thus *obscurity* is the first defining characteristic of modernist literature. Hence this Unit will introduce you to modernist poetry which is different from poetry written prior to this period and thereby make you appreciate why it is difficult to understand.

2.2   MODERNISM IN ART AND LITERATURE

Modernism started in the last years of the 19th century and has subsequently impacted the character of most 20th century art and literature. The movement reached its peak between 1910 and 1930, though it had begun in the last few years of the 19th century. These twenty years were a period of great turbulence and suffering as a result of World War I (1914-18)

and yet culturally they turned out to be a very creative period. Some of the outstanding British writers of this time were T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence, while Europe had Rainer Maria Rilke, Guillaume Apollinaire, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Boris Pasternak to name a few.

We also have the War poets belonging to the first World War period whose central theme was an 'anti-war' position. War poetry captured themes that carried across generations. It also sought to create a new language, which later generations used as a framework for understanding war history. Notable among them were W. H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, and Robert Graves to name a few. But the impact of Eliot and Yeats who started writing before the War, and continued to write well after the War ended, left a strong influence on English poetry. The War poets mentioned above had their own stature among English poets, but they did not influence many successors: "*In general, they had admirers more than imitators".[1]*

Activity:

1. Take any Anthology of Modern English Poetry and read at least one poem of Eliot or Yeats and try to see where the obscurity and difficulty of understanding arises.

2. Read a few poems of the War poets mentioned above to get a feel of War poetry.

We are familiar with terms like 'realism' and 'naturalism' which represent a style in arts and literature that seeks to represent the familiar or typical in real life as opposed to the abstract or the ideal. Sometimes works of realism are known as works presenting what is known as "slice-of –life" representation. But in modernist literature and in particular in modernist art, realism is replaced by many other-isms such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism, Fauvism, Constructivism, Futurism etc (Refer Unit 1- Modernism).

Though most of the –isms relate to art, we have some of them reflecting the literary style of the Modern period. For example, literary impressionism reveals the authors' preoccupations and experiences at the moment of literary creation. Similarly expressionism in literature conveys emotion rather than meaning - a revolt against realism and naturalism, seeking to achieve a psychological or spiritual reality rather than record external events in logical sequence. Constructivism in literature enables the readers to better understand themselves, their culture and society. Constructivist theory postulates that personal experience cannot be separated from knowledge. In analyzing the literature of the day, the author found that constructivism can be viewed at the cognitive (individual) and social (community) levels.

In the novel, the term is closely allied to the writing of Franz Kafka and James Joyce and new styles of writing such as the stream of consciousness mode. These new –isms found expression not only in poems, novels and drama but it also brought in new literary theories and aesthetic manifestoes. The 20th century can be best described as the age of literary theory.

Thus what comes to mind when speaking of modernist literature is that it is something new and broadly imaginative that impacts intellectual and creative thought. This is its second characteristic. Before we discuss modern poetry with particular reference to early 20th century English poetry, let us once again define 'modernism'.

1. Why do we regard the years between 1910 and 1930 as a peak period in poetic creativity?
2. How have –isms in Modern Art impacted Modern Literature. Give examples
3. Why is the 20th century known as the age of literary theory?

2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNISM WITH REFERENCE TO MODERN POETRY

What makes for modernism in art and literature? Even in our daily parlance, when we say, someone is modern it means that s/he does not wholly subscribe to traditional beliefs and traditional culture. It also means the person is daring and desires to be different from the accepted practices and norms of the day. Modernism or the modern movement was built on the catchy slogan "Make it New". It changed the character of all creative art and literature. The phrase "Make it New'' was coined by Ezra Pound, the American poet and critic (1885-1972) though he did not advocate jettisoning the past, but argued in favour of gathering the odds and ends of the past tradition and repurpose them for modern times.

T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* is a good example where Eliot uses the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King and many literary and cultural allusions from the Western canon alongside quotations from Buddhism and the Hindu Upanishads which he says are the fragments he has shored against the ruins of time - suggesting it will be possible to continue despite the failed redemption.

Modernism did not stop with the 1930s, but continued through the 20th century. There has been a continuity of modernism in its original sense of being anti-tradition and anti-realism though it has in the post War II period, taken a distinct direction both in style and content. Frank Kermode speaks of the two phases of modernism- *paleo-modernism and neo-modernism, also known as postmoder*nism. Those who wrote till the 1930s were the Paleo-modernists like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, the later Yeats and those who wrote after the 1940s were the Neo-Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf.

2.4 DISTINCTION BETWEEN PALAEO MODERNISM AND NEO MODERNISM

Paleo-modernism	Neo-modernism
Sought quality and perfection	Criticized quality and perfection as elitist and un-democratic. All values should be valued equally
Paleo-modernists wrote enormous poems and books sprinkled with Greek & Latin quotes, with footnotes or explanatory texts without which they could not be read.	Wrote short poems. They thought Greek and Latin quotes were bad by definition because they were elitist.
They were likely to be Christian (Eliot) or fascist,where the fascists valorized the	Philosophically committed to individual and cultural relativism (the theory that beliefs, customs, and morality exist in relation to the

Nation-state and rejected the autonomy and human dignity of the individual	particular culture from which they originate and are not absolute.
Words are to be understood in the contexts where they are used	Words are used in the realistic sense and presented in sentence fragments without the context by stripping off all unwieldy associations.
Closer to Structuralism (what things mean and how they mean)	Closer to deconstructionism(meaning cannot be decided) i.e. try to understand the relationship between text and meaning, to conduct readings of texts, looking for things that run counter to its intended meaning or structural unity.

Modernism is thus anti traditional, anti-naturalism and anti-representationalism. The best way to define modernism is to signify its constant attempt at experimentation in art and literature. Blank verse, atonalism in music, anti-representationalism in art, fragmentation, and stream of consciousness in novel were the outcome of modernism. Another characteristic of modernism is that *it establishes a new relationship between the reader and the writer.* For example, in the 19th century Victorian novel the writer writes about reality that he shares with his reader, where the experience of life is common to both the reader and the writer. Similarly in poetry as in novel, the focus was on morals or ethical values that could be easily understood by the reader.

But there came a reaction to the idea of a writer being a moral spokesman as it imposed restrictions on him/ her such as a taboo on writing about sexual relationships. With modernism, such moral earnestness was challenged as it spoke about beautiful but untrue things. The aesthetic revolution of the 1890s challenged Victorian orthodoxies. The end of the 19th century saw the breakdown of all assumptions - ethical, moral, social and artistic. One other distinctive feature of Modernism is the intertwining of literary criticism and poetic creation as is evident in the poetic works and critical works of Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell (of the early 20th century) and Philip Larkin in the postmodern period.

Complexity is yet another aspect of modernism. Accepting obedience, loyalty to authority, and even ideals like patriotism, doing one's duty, adherence to Christianity etc which were valorised by earlier centuries became questionable ideals. Hence modernism is characterized by various experiments of form. Chronological narrative was replaced by "spatial form" – where narrative is organized in order of space or location and not in order of chronological time We see this in Eliot's *The Wasteland,* Pound's *Cantos,* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. What is provided is a pattern, not a story. *The Wasteland* is full of references and one has to discern the meaning by an understanding of the pattern of references that reflect the poet's experience. Eliot spoke about Joyce: "Instead of the narrative method, we can now use the mythical method. It is, I believe, a step towards making the modern world possible for art." This method, the use of myth (not in a rootless fantasy but in an intelligent way). is relevant to Eliot's poetry as well as to Joyce's novel. Eliot uses the myths of death and regeneration, the cycle of nature, the order of the seasons etc.

ACTIVITY
Read a few poems of the modernist poets and analyze the myths associated with them.

Check your progress
1. Distinguish between paleo-modernism and neo-modernism.

2. What are the myths associated with modernist poets like Eliot and Yeats?

2.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MODERNISM AND TRADITION

If we closely follow the characteristics of modernism it will be evident that there is a paradoxical relationship between modernism and tradition. On the one hand, modernism seeks to liberate itself from inherited tradition of values, ideals and cultural forms. There is a resistance to inherited culture, a complete break with the past. At the same time, as shown above there is a return to ancient myths from various cultures and religions with a deep sense of alienation, loss and despair." These are the two phases, positive and negative, of the modern as anti- traditional; freedom and deprivation, a living present and a dead past."[2] Modern imagination is both liberated and alienated. Thus modern writers in search of originality have gone back to ancient myths and traditions.

2.6 WHAT IS MODERNIST POETRY?

1. It is poetry that has broken away from the traditions of the past.

2. It is aggressively and consciously different from the poetry of the past.

3. All of modern poetry does not hang as one united movement, but it is characterized by

   a bewildering diversity.

4. A change of attitude towards poetic syntax (the ways in which we order specific words to create logical, meaningful sentences.) Syntax in modern poetry is wholly different from syntax as prescribed by grammarians. This is because modern poetry comes close to symbolist poetry.

5. What is symbolist poetry?

Symbolists believed that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. Thus, they wrote in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. Symbolism was hostile to "plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact description", and its goal instead was to "clothe the Ideal in a perceptible form" whose" goal was not in itself, but whose sole purpose was to express the Ideal." For example an emotion is not described but a symbolic action or description of a place that stands as an equivalent is employed to express that emotion. Landscape often presents the experience through the choice use of words and syntax. Even though "The Solitary Reaper" was written in the early 19th century, it is a good example of using landscape to express the feelings of the solitary reaper. T.S. Eliot calls it 'the Objective Correlative": expressing emotion through a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that 'particular' emotion. Free verse, symbolic imagery and synaesthesia, (where poets sought to identify and confound the separate senses of scent, sound, and colour) were the techniques used.

Feeling is to be derived from the images and the poem itself rather than overtly describing the feeling.

2.7   AN EXAMPLE OF MODERNIST POETRY

Modernist poetry is difficult poetry. Since logical meaning has been replaced by images, there is a tendency on the part of the poets in the modern era to focus on intensity rather than on meaning to satisfy the reader. An example of modernist poetry is Eliot's *The Wasteland.* It is one of the most significant poems of the 20th century, and a central work of modernist poetry.

Eliot's poem has provoked two responses that contradict one another. It is seen to harbour defeatism, reflecting the state of personal depression in the guise of a full, impersonal picture of society. F.R. Leavis said that the poem's "rich disorganization" is an index of the modern plight, the state of society in modern times - "the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness that seems necessary to a robust culture. Life in the modern wasteland is sterile, breeding not life, but disgust, acedia and unanswerable questions."

But if one looks at the technique, it is seen how the poem moves from one experience to another. In Section II, "A Game of Chess" the shifting style throws light on different women protagonists. Starting with Cleopatra's ornate lifestyle, the poem moves to Belinda, the heroine of the *Rape of the Lock*, living in an idle, expensive world of make-up, dress and conspicuous consumption, then to the unpleasant reality of modern times.

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me

Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

Similarly in the mid section, "The Fire Sermon", one sees the change of class - from the wealthy class to the lowly class and the way the women of different classes talk show the transitions of time and transitions of the coarse talk by the pub women followed by the typist who reveals his own superiority. Eliot's use of older literature reveals his admiration for better quality of life, though he does not make it so explicit. If the reader like the critic, F.R. Leavis is pessimistic, he will not share that rich life of the past. So is the comparison between The Thames river today with empty bottles and sandwich papers as a contrast to the Thames of Spenser's time - of the Elizabethan times. The poem's meaning is clear: "modern civilization does nothing but spoil what was once gracious, lovely, ceremonial and natural"[3](David Craig);

The poem contrasts Elizabethan magnificence with modern sordidness. But even in that past period, love for love's sake in an ideal fancy world of Spenser is shown as empty and sterile as in the modern world. Elizabeth and the typist are alike as well as different. Is Eliot warped in the past and full of revulsion for the present? If one is pessimistic, one sees the filth, poverty, low class life in contrast to the magnificence of the past. On the contrary Eliot seems to be manipulating history and reality to express his own prejudices and almost writing about his personal experience. Eliot's conscious use of literariness, his use of different styles for different people are meant to hold at arm's length his personal dislike of the unfeeling grossness of

experience between the typist and the young man endeavouring to engage her in caresses. His description of modern apartment:

On the divan are piled (at night her bed

Stocking, slippers, camisoles and stays (women's undergarments and corset

which shows the lack of sociableness is an attack on modern civilization. This is the irony/ smart sarcasm in the contrast between old grandeur and modern squalor by the use of literary allusions - not so facile to grasp but which is so intelligently manipulated. One notices Eliot's snobbery in the presentation of the young man- "a small house agent's clerk and what right has he to look assured? And the passage ends with Goldsmith's line "When lovely woman stoops to folly, she smoothes her hair with automatic hand/and puts a record on the gramophone."

It is not a presentation of moral decline – it is not an attack as some critics say on the uprooting of life in the machine age. While *The Wasteland* has generated opinions that are negative about modern life, Eliot's last section "What the Thunder said" is inspired by Hindu faith. In a dramatic moment, thunder cracks over the scene, and its noise seems to say three words in Sanskrit: *Datta, Dayadhvam,* and *Damyata*, which command you to "Give," "Sympathize," and "Control." This is followed by a repetition of the word *Shanthi*, which means "the peace that passeth all understanding." After all the slogging, T. S. Eliot possibly gives us a little hope with this final word.

Let us just look at Line 431: *These fragments I have shored against my ruins,* which might actually be the most important line in the entire poem, because it basically sums up everything Eliot is trying to do by writing *The Waste Land*. What do we mean by that? Well, he has taken broken fragments from a culture that was once whole, and is just piecing them together in order to "shore up" his ruins.   In other words, he sees himself standing in the middle of a waste land that's littered with pieces from a glorious, cultured past, and in writing this poem, he has collected these broken pieces and piled them together in a sort of testimony, which he feels is the most he can do now that Western culture is shattered. For such a depressing poem, *The Waste Land* actually ends on a slight note of hope, pointing us toward non-Western religions as a way to restore our faith and to start acting like decent, unselfish human beings again.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
 ShantihShanithShantih

Well, at least that's something. Maybe we're not so doomed after all. Maybe. Maybe not.

2.8   SUMMING UP

   After a close study of this Unit on Modern Poetry, you would have learnt
* the definition of modernism as a literary term with specific reference to art and literature
* the two distinct terms of paleo-modernism and Neo-modernism and the difference between them
* characteristics of modernism with specific reference to modernist poetry
* relationship between tradition and modernism
* what constitutes modernist poetry and
* why modernist poetry is difficult poetry.

2.9 **UNIT END QUESTIONS**

1. What are the Characteristics of Modernism with reference to Modern Poetry?
2. What is Modernist Poetry? Why is Modernist Poetry difficult poetry? Illustrate your answer with one example.
3. Discus the relationship between tradition and Modernism.
4. What is Free Verse, Symbolist Poetry and Objective Correlative? Explain each citing an example.

2.10 **GLOSSARY**

1. Obscure: not clearly expressed or easily understood.
2. Apprehend: understand or perceive.
3. Slice-of-life: a realistic representation of everyday experience in a film, play, or book
4. Cognitive: concerned with the act or process of knowing, perceiving,
5. stream of consciousness: a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or convention.
6. parlance: a particular way of speaking or using words, especially a way common to those with a particular job or interest.
7. Jettison: discard
8. Redemption: the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil.
9. Represenaionalism: Representationalism (also known as indirect realism) is the view that representations are the main way we access external reality. According to this version of the theory, the mental representations were images (often called "ideas") of the objects or states of affairs represented.
10. Atonalism: music that lacks a tonal center, or key.
11. Aesthetic: concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.
12. Orthodoxies: authorized or generally accepted theory, doctrine, or practice.
13. Intertwining: connecting or linking closely
14. Paradoxical: Seemingly absurd or self contradictory
15. Metaphorical: involving, invoking, or intended to be taken as a metaphor, something used symbolically to represent something else, suggesting a comparison or resemblance.
16. Free Verse:poetry that does not rhyme or have a regular rhythm.
17. Symbolist Poetry: attempts to evoke, rather than primarily to describe; symbolic imagery was used to signify the state of the poet's soul.
18. Objective Correlative: the artistic and literary technique of representing or evoking a particular emotion by means of symbols which become indicative of that emotion and are associated with it; something (such as a situation or chain of events) that symbolizes or objectifies a particular emotion and that may be used in creative writing to evoke a desired emotional response in the reader.
19. Synaesthesia: a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated.
20. Overtly: without concealment or secrecy; openly.
21. Defeatism: demonstrating expectation or acceptance of failure.
22. Acedia :apathy and inactivity in the practice of virtue.

23. Neurotic: describes mental, emotional, or physical reactions that are drastic and irrational. At its root, a neurotic behavior is an automatic, unconscious effort to manage deep anxiety.
24. Sordidness: wretched, shabby, base.
25. Warped: abnormal or strange; distorted.
26. Literariness: to distort or cause to distort from the truth, fact, true meaning, etc.; bias; falsify- for example, prejudice warps the mind.
27. Grossness: outrageousness; the quality or state of being flagrant: atrociousness
28. Caresses: touch or stroke gently or lovingly
29. Camisoles: a woman's loose-fitting undergarment for the upper body, typically held up by shoulder straps.
30. Sociableness: the relative tendency or disposition to be sociable or associate with one's fellows. synonyms: sociability.

2.11 REFERENCES

1. Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle; The Poetry of the Great War,* Palgrave/Macmillan, 1998.
2. Ellmann and Feidelson, *The Modern Tradition.*
3. Patricia Coughlan, & Alec Davis, eds. *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s.*
4. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*.
5. Perkins, David, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* Harvard Press, New Haven 1987.
6. Schmidt, Michael, (ed) *The Great Modern Poets*, Quercus Poetry 2012

UNIT 3   MODERNISM AND THE NOVEL

Structure

3.1   OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to make known to you a literary trend termed 'modernism.' As you would be aware, the trend arose in the early years of the twentieth century that was distinct from the previous period in many ways. Its parameters were different from the ways in which writers and artists of the nineteenth century perceived their surroundings. From knowledge of the trend, the unit will take you into the general background of modernism and explain the constraints under which it worked. This unit will explain what modernism stood for and how it approached the many cultural challenges of the day. That will then be followed by the social thought working behind modernism, the class interests that the trend served and the shape it gave to the writing of the period. Finally, you will be made aware of the relevance and significance of modernism to the British novel in terms of the aesthetics, the literariness given by modernism to the fiction in question. Modernism dictated the way in which the fiction in the twentieth century would shape particularly the experiences and viewpoints of the time.

3.2   INTRODUCTION

There is something new and unique about modernism. It reflects the mental states that the closing decades of the nineteenth century in England generated. There were new social groups, new individuals, new economic activities, new explanations of the existing phenomena, and new answers to old questions. The changed responses of the writing carried specific traces of the existing thought but tended to review them in the light of difficulties that raised head in the new situation. The newness we talk of brought to the fore doubts and apprehensions about the unfolding scenario at the time.

3.2 (A) THE REVIEWING EFFORT AT CORE

The reviewing effort resulted in not just a rejection of the prevailing approaches but put modernism in opposition to what the writers had done in the preceding years. One example will suffice. The nineteenth century had begun with the role of a romantic assertion of ideals. These ideals were utopian in nature, and activated the faculty of dreaming in the human beings. What lay in front was thought to be undesirable. Romanticism replaced that with a new construct that appeared capable of solving inequalities and miseries in the surrounding world. Later, the romantic ideals ceased to be appealing. That led to the recognition of scientific thought as a viable alternative. Combined with the vigour and vitality of the common people, scientific thought became a strong critique of the ideology and politics of the time. Meanwhile, within scientific thought, the variant of psychology emerged to offer a parallel map of human initiative. Under its influence, the mental dimension of human practice gained primacy.

3.2. (B) ACTIVE MIND GAINING PRIMACY

An active mind roaming in the land of imagination and entering human history from the side of myths, legends and folklore may have appeared difficult to handle, but it finally proved a path worth examining. The endeavour was intellectual and creative, and the two offered simultaneously a tough challenge to the great realists of the existing period. Leon Edel has said about Henry James the following:

> He had begun as a realist who describes minutely his crowded stage. He ended by leaving his stage comparatively bare, and showing a small group of characters in a tense situation, with a retrospective working out, through multiple angles of vision, of their drama. In addition to these technical devices, he resorted to an increasingly allusive prose style, which became dense and charged with symbolic imagery.

Here, we note the period of transition crystallizing later into a new kind of prose fiction. Mark the emphasis on tension, retrospection and multiplicity that might flower in due course to assume a view far away from what the nineteenth century realists had attempted.

3.3 TAKING COGNIZANCE OF THE TERM 'MODERN'

Modernism is a descriptive term taking note of a specific phase in British fiction. The period it refers to is the close of the nineteenth century that stood at a crossroads. As you have been briefly told above, the time was marked by many new questions and doubts. It did not know what to contend with and which direction to move in. Writers and artists of this period found it imperative to break free from the stresses as well as progression and onward movement of social life. As things stood, wonder and enthusiasm ruled the roost, even as visionaries scaled new heights of knowledge. The opening years of the twentieth century on the other hand felt too weak to express their aspirations. Perhaps no aspirations worth pursuing existed. The problems and challenges were different. It was left to fiction, poetry and drama to evolve a position in the existing scenario of turbulence and uncertainty.

3.3 (A) SOCIAL DEADLOCK CAUSED BY CAPITALISM

The social deadlock of the period suggested an era of violence. Turbulence could not be handled with ease since it related to economic relations in Europe. Trade and commerce at the time faced stasis and capital-entered production did not see a clear path of gaining stability and ensured profit. That affected the social health of the different economies coming to terms with unemployment, poverty and the resulting misery. Literary fiction in the related period took note of the malaise caused by growing inequalities. Gone was the mood of social ascendency of the mid-Victorian period that had witnessed an era of relative peace in the eighteen sixties and seventies. George Eliot's novels such as *Middlemarch* had captured glimpses of dynamism and initiative in England. The writing had philosophical dimensions to explore as also to engage with dilemmas of choice. There had been intellectual fervour in the air with studies of evolution and psychological processes adding depth to literary depiction. All this became a thing of the past as clouds of despair hovered over Europe that would soon find the ways of progress blocked.

3.3 (B) RISE OF THE MODERN CONDITION

Could that be called the modern condition? The question cropped up before novelists such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the children of the late nineteenth century. The answers did not come out clearly but were yet addressed. The modern condition offered challenges of inertia as well as a reversal of the social dynamic. The times saw no future ahead. In the context, the following observation of J.A. Cuddon might help:

> As far as literature is concerned, modernism reveals a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at man's position and functions in the universe and many (in some cases remarkable) experiments in form and style. It is particularly concerned with language and how to use it (representationally and otherwise) and with *writing itself.* Thus, structuralism was (and is) from the outset closely connected with modernist tendencies, though the theories of structuralism did not gain a strong foothold until the 1960s, by which post-modernism was well established as a new movement. (Emphasis in the original, 551)

Mark the qualifiers in the above quote. Cuddon is tentative, not clear where the clue to the issue lies. However, the direction is indicated which is the act of writing, the language being at the centre of its expression. Equally uncertain are the thought categories. The expression "Man's positions and functions in the universe" is too broad a hint to carry conviction in the background of discoveries by Darwin in the preceding century. Also, the ideas regarding man and language remain unconnected since the concrete social life is not a part of the frame. Cuddon is right though, stressing the break away from established rules. For that reason, modernism is presented as a foray into the unknown, a phenomenon requiring new ways and means to make sense of the existing scenario.

3.4. MODERNISM: THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

The view ingrained in modernism does not recognise the role of history in social life. It remains uninfluenced by the popularly accepted notion that there has been a past of the society in which the human individual is placed. Contrarily, modernism gives credence to the view and reveals itself as rooted in the early twentieth century alone. The word used for the prevailing time is 'contemporary,' bearing implications of that which is palpably present, that

which can be seen and felt. For it, all else is false and illusory or at best a burden that we erroneously bear on our backs. According to modernism, the past is best forgotten and considered as dead and gone, since of no consequence. For it, only the present is real. It has a sense and rhythm its own.

The second philosophical implication of modernism is that life in the existing moment is without hope or ideals. Instead, it is a necessity, suggesting that individuality alone is the crux. It lets us know that we as the supposed population are thrown together as single entities, there being no connection of one with others. It tells us that we are islands in the sea, each having an area of living with resources our own. It is a case of utmost isolation from all that surrounds each island which has to look for sustenance within itself. Further, the isolation is characterized by the individual having a self that got built by extraneous influences and the influences leaving their mark on it.

3.4 (A) MODERNISATION AS INHERENT IN MODERNISM

As is rightly believed, the modern individual is critically aware of the surroundings operating in the manner of problematic obstructions. The catchword in the context is critical awareness requisite for freedom and fulfilment. In context, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf come to mind. They share the overall perspective of history and society as problematic categories for the critically aware and freedom-seeking individuals. D. Kolb has explained the view in the following manner:

> The proponents of modernisation promise that it will liberate us from brute forces of nature, oppressive social powers and the alien within our psyches, bringing us self-reliance through reason and dispelling illusion and superstition in a self-authorising and self-transparent manner. So, it seems to be the final and culminating stance towards the world, society and ourselves. It is not just another particular traditional mode of living, with its own individualistic values. It is what we get when we remove all traditional modes of living, a degree zero of bare humanity. So, modernisation seems to be a universal process, a development beyond any fixed set of values, rather than the imposition of a particular set of Western values. (Protevi 404-405)

We might use "modernisation" here in the sense of modernism. In it, reason is highlighted in preference to what are termed illusion and superstition. Further, the trend is supposed to be in the mode of a "universal process." That precisely is the issue to be kept in mind. One might believe the development to be a fundamental departure from the socio-historical viewpoint. There is no wonder that from thereon, other isms such as structuralism and postmodernism will take over and be proceeded with.

3.4 (B) INDIVIDUAL AS THE DECISIVE FACTOR

Indeed, in the philosophical sense, modernism remains stuck to the impression the surroundings leave on the individual. Even as the impression has a blemish, an impurity that the surroundings had received from practices in society, it draws boundaries for the individual to observe and becomes a protective wall for the individual to ensure his safety from ideas and opinions of the time. If the wall did not exist, the individual would be open to attacks from the outside endangering his selfhood. See that for the individual in the period of modernity, isolation is a value keeping him away from the logic of circumstance where life's

distortions rule the roost. In the process, as the self stands alienated, it gets a chance to work out the strategy to finally free himself from the boundaries received in the form of the initial impression. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* presents the point of Becket's final escape from worldly selfhood as a fulfilment of the modernist aim. Through it, Becket has earned the release from worldly bonds of ambition.

Mark that the early years of the twentieth century were particularly reactive to the march of historical progression as well as dialectical time and the doctrine was the mode to counter effectively the change-oriented realism of the preceding time.

3.5   MODERNISM: THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Modernism attained a firm ideological base in the years around the First World War. The rationale of the phenomenon likely to offer an alternative to the nineteenth century emphases of social change along egalitarian lines had appealed to a whole section of the deprived and underprivileged. Understandably, it became a desperate situation for the European bourgeois class. True to say, in a class-divided society with the haves and have-nots, the crucial aspect is of property. Everything else comes after it. The last decades of the nineteenth century in England were witness to the prospect of fierce opposition to capitalist exploitation. In view of this, the people with economic and political might had of necessity to forge an ideology countering politics of justice and humanism, not an easy task but necessary nonetheless.

5 (A) REFLECTION OF CONFLICTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

That was one side. The other side was of social tensions and contradictions that had left the scene of mixed possibilities, unique in the sense that the materialist historical answer of socialist orientation, if concretised, would be entirely novel and unprecedented in human history. As such, ideology was a decisive issue, all the more so as the period saw the spectrum of a nascent upheaval at the grassroots. In this part of the discussion, we have to bring in literary fiction specifically since it deals with the common people who are worst affected by an economic crisis. The background of the crisis compelled artists, writers, thinkers, and the enlightened middle classes to take cognizance of the complex situation with serious engagement. The consequence could be seen in the impatience, concern and intellectual churning in socio-ideological sphere.

5 (B) MODERNISM AS THE IDEOLOGY OF REJECTION

Modernist ideology was of rejection of all that was established and accepted. It consisted of new ways to explore and experiment as well as to challenge popular notions. Literary forms, too, came under attack since they followed established patterns of composition. In many a case in the opening decades of the twentieth century, the respected and sacrosanct came under the lens for scrutiny. Institutions of family, marriage, education, religion, and morality—were earmarked for questioning as denying freedom to the individual. The modernist denial was uncritical and based solely on the argument of solitariness.

In one specific sense, ideology of modernism was clear in its aim—it was to campaign against the goals of equality and justice taken up by the nineteenth century writers and thinkers. As had been asserted at the time, adherence to social change and to a free society from the shackles of capitalism sent shock waves to the privileged and mighty in Europe. It

became the case of now or never for them. The upper crust of European societies took measures for crushing the rising ideological challenge to their supremacy. The atmosphere made it difficult for the visionaries of the day to pursue their cause as supporters of orthodoxy and faith regrouped. If the discourse of realism, social progress, and scientific thought did not find favour with the voices of modernism, one knew where to look for reasons behind such a choice. The answer lay in a changed preference for the paradigm.

Making a point about "the image of man" in modernism, Georg Lukacs has observed that man for the modernist writers "is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings." Lukacs quotes Thomas Wolfe who stated his position on the issue thus: "My view of the world is based on the firm conviction that solitariness is by no means a rare condition, something peculiar to myself or to a few special solitary human beings, but the inescapable, central fact of human existence."[1] The view of man as projected by modernism extends to the whole humanity that carries the influence of separating every individual from the other. In this sense, the modern-day human existence is characterised by loneliness that puts initiative at the mercy of circumstance. This condition leaves no scope for the individual to make any contribution to the life surrounding him. It also snatches from the individual the capability to produce, experiment or align with a general endeavour since no endeavour indeed exists in reality. Taking Heidegger's authentic historicity as a historicity in effect, Lukacs explains his point as follows:

> This negation of history takes two different forms in modernist literature. First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him—and apparently not for his creator—any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is 'thrown-into-the-world': meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only 'development' in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be. The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static. (Lukacs 20-21)

This can be specifically applied to the stream-of-consciousness British fiction that came up in the early decades of the twentieth century. The roaming protagonists and narrators in it talked unto themselves about what they witnessed in the surrounding world. In the observations and responses of the protagonists got reflected a given set of structures, social, ideological and to some extent political. Indeed, the structures were a given, not those that had evolved or were evolving in a context. After they found a place in the consciousness of the narrators or protagonists, they stood as unchanging rocks, be they family, love relationship, chance alliances on the road, or the buying and selling agency of the market.

Check your progress 1

1. What is meant by the ideological dimension in modernism? Does it indicate the view of man at the time the trend of modernism struck roots in English writing? Explain and discuss.

3.6 MODERNISM: THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION

In Modernist writing, illusion and fantasy come in for active use. Generally, illusion is the antonym, the opposite of the real, and thus might take one into a land of dreams with no basis in the material world, the world of norms, principles and structures. Through illusion, one goes anywhere and experience a pattern never thought of before since it is in fact non-existent. Yet, one likes illusion for its flexibility, freedom and possibility of quick turns and twists. Illusion shows that person one wants to be with, to talk or listen to and believe in. With the help of illusion, one can do or be what one wishes and desires. Come to think of it, only humans have this capacity to cross over from a surrounding of hard facts and ideas to a sphere where one is free from obstructions and is a master, a mentor, a guide.

At this point in discussion, we move to a different area, connected with the faculty of mind but one equipped with producing a reality working as an alternative to the existing one. It is fantasy that has traits of its own. Fantasy is many notches higher than illusion, based itself on illusion and taking flights into the unknown or unfamiliar. In fantasy one's mind is immensely active, forming patterns after one's heart and sustaining or demolishing them at will. Since it is a conscious act, the artist and the writer see to it that a new, somewhat shocking path is visualised and shaped. Fantasy puts demand on the viewer and the reader to exert an extra bit for knowing and grasping the creative intent. One thing is clear though. Rejection and experiment are the key factors of modernist art. Since the environment is tangled, raising doubts and questions than affirming the available literary expression, modernism emerges in the twentieth century as a bridge between the viewer/reader, an affirmation of the difficulties involved.

3.6 (A) IRONY IN THE MODERNIST VENTURE

We might also read an irony in the modernist venture. The writers of the new phase were enabled by studies conducted in the nineteenth century. In the context, they showed the required approach unblocked by structures of morality, faith, ritualism and convention. The process had been set in motion by doubting the entrenched view of creation, morality and social power. Romanticism invoked flights of imagination, took attention into the mysteries of the mind, whereas realism showed the exploitative path for what was. Alongside this, the evolutionary thought revealed struggles of the species crystallizing into conscious living. That was the overall background of modernist queries and uncertainties. This expressed itself effectively not in the utmost negativity of modernist thought but in its aesthetics.

Here lay the seed of modernist activism and daring to exhibit a complex scenario. Take away the knowledge of science, of the working of the mind and the dialectic of history from the spectrum and see that modernism would cease to mean much.

There are other approaches that are at variance with what has been stated above. In aesthetic terms, there is discernible the use of allegory in fiction. The subject matter under allegory is given an aesthetic complex shape—the account works not just at the level of direct statement, howsoever intense and sharp, but also at the level of abstract message. Allegory points towards an older norm embedded in a tale. A popular pattern is evoked to run parallel to the narrative. The aesthetic of allegory widens the scope of meaning even as it works as a counter to the immediate context in a novel.[2] Then, there is the question of abstract particularity and concrete particularity. The former is a departure from the sensuous reference and takes the expression away from life's reality. The latter joins the expression to the immediate reference

and at the same time raises the detail to the level of a felt idea. That is how Kafka could be critiqued as a modernist who leaves an impact with his intensity but does not connect with life's dynamism, its concrete issues.[3]

3.6 (B) PRECURSOR OF LITERARY THEORY IN XX CENTURY

In another sense, modernism became an important precursor to the increased activity of theory in the academic domain later in the twentieth century. Modernism was a trend setter that necessitated exploration in the specific direction of language, the fluctuating aspect of the perspective and thematic widening of the literary text. Terry Eagleton has stressed the point in the following manner:

> It is in fact the literary movement of modernism which brought structuralist and post-structuralist criticism to birth in the first place. Some of the later works of Barthes and Derrida are modernist literary texts in themselves, experimental, enigmatic and richly ambiguous. There is no clear division for post-structuralism between 'criticism' and 'creation': both modes are subsumed into 'writing' as such. Structuralism began to happen when language began an obsessive preoccupation of intellectuals; and this happened in turn because in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, language in Western Europe was felt to be in the throes of deep crisis. How was one to write, in an industrial society where discourse had become degraded to a mere instrument of science, commerce, advertising and bureaucracy? (121)

In this quote, Eagleton sees creation and criticism merging in the text that enables the writer to see himself involved in putting to paper what he wishes to portray aesthetically. That makes the writer self-reflexive in which act he ceases to be the maker or author of the text and becomes instead a site of the conflicts of the existing world. This began happening, for instance, in Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett, who broke the sanctity of the narrative in fiction. Instead of being centred on a theme, the text became a replication of the mental act of composition in which the struggle to express takes the front seat and invites the reader to become a helpful participant in choosing words and phrases, and rejecting them if they block the flow of writing in the natural course. The plan of writing becomes a subject of questioning since the language used in it might revolt against the turn the writer imposes on the broader track of creative movement. These were inherent in the depiction that was in the process of forming itself during the act of writing.

Can we say that modernism propped up issues of reconsideration, possible falsification of the intended subject and questioning of a fixed meaning in the word and phrase selected for the authorial use? The modernist writer felt the need to examine other related areas of writing that were consistently pushed under the carpet by the author for projecting a specific viewpoint in preference to others. There were indeed difficulties the writer faced at the conscious level, not being able to justly and authentically present the tensions of the chosen time-segment. That was because thought and rationality put restraints upon the literary form, the novel, poem or drama, and taking the writer's attention to the invisible factors of dreaming and imagining.

The ball had been set rolling in the writings of Joseph Conrad who brought in discussion time and again in the course of a narrative sequence. He deliberately created hurdles with the help of questions and counter-questions and stopped the movement of the narrative midway. All this indeed happened within the limits of the form, the writer not coming out clearly for

putting forth philosophical or ideological questions. Yet, shadows started hovering over the literary forms that disallowed words and phrases from going their own independent ways. The whys and wherefores lurking behind modernist experimentation, doubts and uncertainties drew attention of the scholars of the twentieth century and soon a platform for theorizing got created. Thus, the credit for a whole process of examination, self-reflexivity, expansion of debate should go to modernism showing to the thinker and reader the boundaries shackling the human experience. In this sense, modernism may not be a theory by itself, but it necessitates a serious consideration of the supposed autonomy of the form in literature, thought and ideology—structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism being the offshoots of the venture.

Check your progress 2

1. Would you say that literary theory as a discipline closely followed the modernist trend in the latter half of the twentieth century? Give reasons in support of your answer.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we had a close look at the phenomenon of Modernism in the twentieth century literary domain. The point of reference in the discussion has been British fiction. The use of the term itself raises important questions concerning modern as the existing. The net of modernism was so wide in the early twentieth century that it required a separate discussion of the three clearly identifiable facets of the trend—philosophical, ideological, and aesthetic. In the unit, these have been analysed in some detail for capturing a comprehensive view of the subject. It is also suggested finally that the manner of theory taking over the literary landscape in its entirety points towards what Modernism came to project in the first half of the twentieth century.

Notes and References:
[1]qtd in Lukacs 20.

[2]See Lukacs 40.

(https://www.britannica.com>Henry)

Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Delhi: Doaba, rpt. 2000.

Lukacs, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. London: Merlin Press, 1972.

Protevi, John. Ed., *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*. Wilts: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Glossary:

social thought working behind modernism: the ideas that caused modernism to happen directly or indirectly. In many a case, the said ideas work as a pressure on the writer, compelling him/ her to think in one way and not the other.

the unfolding scenario at the time: this has reference to the First World War that emerged initially as a probability, in the form of fear or apprehension. Soon, it became a threatening presence and symbolised large-scale destruction. One could visualise it in terms of the changing scenes in a larger episode.

period of transition: in it, the process of change is suggested. Transition may not necessarily be for the better. Transition is a phase of uncertainty and wonder. The factors working in the phase would be at cross purposes with one another. At the same time though, a few of them assume a decisive role and take things towards a strong and palpable trend.

Unit end Questions:

A. Write a critical note on modernism as a trend in the early twentieth century British fiction.
B. Modernism may offer a critique of life, but does not offer a realistic portrayal. Comment.

UNIT 4. MODERNISM IN DRAMA

Structure

4.0   AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This unit is intended to give you

*an overview of Modern British Drama
*Characteristics of Pre-War Modern Drama (1900-1950)
*Element of Propaganda in Problem Plays of the pre-War period
* Characteristics of Post-War Modern Drama (after 1945)
 *Absurd Drama (from 1950 onwards)

4.1   INTRODUCTION TO MODERN DRAMA

If you turn to Unit 1, you will recall how modernism had three different phases that spanned the whole of the 20th century. After Shakespeare – after the 17th century, there were hardly any notable playwrights in England for nearly three centuries. The 18th century saw the rise of the Comedy of Manners and Sentimental Comedy. Both have now become period pieces. The 19th century theatre was known as "boulevard theatre," introduced melodrama, a form that was to dominate theatre in the 19th century. Melodrama, in turn, by popularizing departures from Neoclassicism and capturing the interest of large audiences, paved the way for Romantic drama.

The renaissance of British theatre began in the early 20th century. Modern British drama consists of two major phases - early 20th century drama (pre-War drama) and later 20th century drama (post-War drama). A minor phase can be seen in plays written soon after World War II ended in 1945. One of the distinguishing features of Modern Drama is that it is a drama of ideas rather than action. The dramatists are focussed on making theatre an expression of political, social and metaphysical ideas that makes a theatre experience both entertaining and instructive. It will be no exaggeration to say that after the paucity of plays for nearly three centuries, the 20th century revved up British theatre. It is more of an intellectual drama than it ever was in the history of drama before the present age.

4.2 MODERN EUROPEAN THEATRE: EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The early 20th century, with its slogan 'Make it New' was mainly marked by rejection of the realism of the 19th century. The idea of introducing innovations in theatre prevailed in all European theatres. These innovations in the theatre were similar to innovations in the visual arts such as painting, architecture, and sculpture - all of which had a singular focus of rebelling against realistic representation. The theatrical experimentations especially in Europe gave fresh impetus to the development of theatre after they set the tone and widened the theatrical vocabulary for all the innovations that followed.

1. Instead of cluttering the stage with authentic realistic details, the focus shifted to simplicity and austerity, with 'a heightened expressiveness that could convey the true spirit of a play rather than provide merely superficial dressing.'
2. The actor was to be given centre stage and all other detailed setting should not rob the actor of this focus. It has to be just a suggestion of reality. For example, the German director Max Reinhardt rejecting the idea of "one style," demanded for modern plays a style that was realistic in feeling but that avoided the drab exactness of realism.
3. The many –isms you read about in Unit 1 (Introduction to Modernism) in painting, like Symbolism, Impressionism, and Expressionism were also attempted in European theatre.

Let us turn to Modern Drama in Britain and Ireland where the emphasis was marginally different from the rest of European theatre.

Modern British drama spans the period from the end of the nineteenth century through the present. The term "modernist" is generally applied to a group of early twentieth-century writers who rejected realism and traditional forms. But British drama of the early 20th century (approximately 1900 -1950), turns away from the anti-realistic focus of the European experimental theatre, and presents realistic social drama. Modern British drama comprises comedies and poetic dramas during the first half of the century and a new theatre known as the Theatre of the Absurd after 1950.

The early influence on British drama came from Ireland. When we speak about twentieth century British theatre we can trace its origin to the Irish Literary Theatre founded by the three most famous Irish dramatists, William B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J.M. Synge. Their purpose was to provide a specifically Celtic and Irish theatre to stage 'the deeper emotions of Ireland' to the Irish people. The playwrights of the Irish Literary Theatre that later came to be known the Abbey Theatre, was one of the key influences on British theatre revival. The major Irish playwrights were Sean O'Casey, J.M. Synge, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, to name a few.

In England the "well-made play" of the earlier era was replaced by a new theatre with its appeal chiefly to the young audience who were politically and socially conscious. The dramatic characters in their plays were primarily based on this young audience, reflecting their ideas, views, culture, aspirations and attitudes. The noteworthy dramatists were George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville Barker, W. Somerset Maugham, and John Galsworthy.

When we talk of Modern British Drama of the early 20ᵗʰ century, the first dramatist in this list is George Bernard Shaw, Irish by birth, but domiciled in Britain. He used theatre as a lively platform for the discussion of social and philosophical issues, and wrote plays that were relevant to his age. Shaw is known for his wit and his plays can be best described as serious comedies. Some of Shaw's plays come under the rubric "Problem Plays" - also known as Comedy of Ideas, and as 'Thesis Plays'. These are meant to bring to life some contemporary controversy or social ills such as women's rights, unemployment, penal reform, class privilege etc., to stimulate thought and action in the audience. Problem plays usually take up an issue - social or political, present the inherent problem in the issue and ends on an open note, leaving it to the audience to find their own solution.

The first playwright to present Problem Plays was from Europe - the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen with his innovative epochal play *A Doll's House*. It is a dramatic representation of serious familial and social conflicts and raises the issue of women's rights. For the first time, patriarchal dominance was under scrutiny and gender conflict was brought onto the open stage. Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* examines the attitudes towards prostitution. In another of Shaw's plays, *Candida,* the dramatist raises the problem of marital bliss in the form of the protagonist wanting to re-marry a younger person after a contented life of about ten years. *Pygmalion*, which was later filmed as "My Fair Lady" has an open ending. A flower girl educated and trained by an upper-class gentleman is seen at the end wondering what would be her status as she can neither return as a flower girl or move into the aristocratic society that refuses to accept her, as she hails from a working class milieu. It is left to the audience to recognize the problem and arrive at its own conclusion. *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah* deal with the metaphysical concept of "Life Force". This "Life Force" concept of Bernard Shaw contains the central idea that Life is a vital force (*elan vital*) or impulse that strives to attain greater power of contemplation and self-realization in the process. Unlike drama having action as its mainstay, *Man and Superman* does not have action but a long debate to discuss the problematic issue.

Shaw's mercurial strength is his awesome power of debate and wit. 'He was a brilliant debater and public speaker and most of the dialogues in his plays—both for and against the issue in hand—are witty and often very absorbing, but they do not constitute real dramatic action. The noted British critic, Ifor Evans observes: 'The brilliance of his dialogue sometimes leads him beyond the bounds of dramatic propriety so that the stage becomes a hustings.' In the plays of a lesser artist like Galsworthy this defect is all the more serious because his debates and lengthy dialogues are without any sparkle or engaging vitality. Galsworthy's *Justice* exposes the cruelties of solitary confinement and the legal system.

These plays were not written for the sake of theatricality or to create a beautiful dramatic piece but to direct public attention to social evils and misconceptions. "And, what is more, a problem play is not something merely diagnostic but also something therapeutic; in other words, it not only spells out the ills but also prescribes possible solutions that the audience will have to chose from… Shaw scoffed at the slogan "art for art's sake." He said that for the sake of art he would not undertake the labour of writing even one sentence, not to speak of a whole play".

Thus the new theatre of the first three decades took up social and political issues and the tone of the plays was both satirical and rebellious. Apart from political and social themes as stated above, Shaw's plays were also philosophical, trying to discuss the who and why of human life and existence. Industrialization also had an impact on twentieth century drama, resulting

in plays lamenting the alienation of humans in an increasingly mechanical world. During the 1930s, new genres in place of straightforward naturalism came up. Noel Coward's *Private Lives* (1930) is a return to the Comedy of Manners; J.B. Priestley explored the cyclic concept of time in *Time and the Conways* (1937).

Check your progress 1

1. What are the characteristics of Modern Drama of the early twentieth century?
2. Discuss the Nature of Problem plays.

4.3 VERSE DRAMA

T.S. Eliot introduced verse drama and five of his plays found a modern idiom for the poetic drama. In his verse play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), originally performed in Canterbury Cathedral, Eliot makes a special case for Poetic/Verse drama. Eliot claimed that "the greatest drama is poetic drama, because poetry is language raised to its highest power and drama is that form of representation which allows greatest concentration of effect, and when one fuses the two, it accounts for the greatest drama". Verse drama is drama written in verse form to be spoken by the actor. The insistence of Eliot that 'if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be said, it follows that it will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all' is one of the most important insistence about the unity of poetry and drama. According to this view of poetic drama, poetry exists as latent and sleeping existence in drama. In his essay, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" Eliot says that prose drama emphasises the ephemeral and superficial while verse drama expresses the permanent and universal. T. S. Eliot's belief in the value of poetic drama is based on the ground that poetic drama is the fine resource which can express the permanent struggles and conflicts of human beings and can transcend the ephemeral and the superficial.

After Eliot and Christopher Fry, verse drama fell out of fashion in the latter half of the 20th century, and British Drama returned to the well made play about the middle class which appealed to the middle class. The conventional looking plays of Terence Rattigan heads the list of the well made plays. His plays exposed the emotional forlornness behind the polish and genteel appearance of middle class society. In 1956 John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* forcefully signalled the start of a very different dramatic tradition known as the 'kitchen sink' school of drama with the working class taking centre stage with its rawness, sexual openness and anger and bitterness against the well heeled members of the society. Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Arnold Wesker's trilogy, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960) gave further impetus to this movement. Osborne's later play *The Entertainer* (1957), attacked the tasteless flashiness and brazenness of post-War Britain. Arden wrote historical plays such as *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) to advance radical social and political views and making a powerful influence on left-wing dramatists.

Check your progress 2

Discuss T. S. Eliot's views on the use of verse in drama.

4.4 DRAMA AFTER THE 1950s – "THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD"

We will briefly touch upon the 'theatre of the absurd' even though it belongs to a period later than that covered by this course, since it is an important development in modern drama. At the end of the two major World Wars (1914-18 and 1939-45) that accounted for the deaths of millions in England and Europe, an alarming trend of anxiety, hopelessness and religious scepticism spread among Europeans. Faith in God along with the traditional belief in sin and punishment came under question leading to an existential crisis and increased scepticism in the existence of a just and benevolent God. The post- War world was caught between the old world that was dead, and the new yet to be born. In the context of the two World Wars that included atomic holocaust and Nazi acts of genocide, divinely authenticated values became suspect. How is it that God or the Divine Power, could not prevent the horror, cruelty and inhumanity unleashed on innocent men, women and children? In the absence of any meaningful and logical explanation to the nightmarish tragedy all around, life seemed absolutely meaningless except to serve as a link between birth and death. But again, life to what purpose? This was a baffling irresolvable question. Several European, British and American writers gave expression to the concept of the meaninglessness of life and their writings came under the rubric "Literature of the Absurd".

The word 'absurd' in common parlance denotes something utterly senseless, something that defies logic and reason and is therefore, laughably ridiculous. Hence the term 'Absurd' perfectly fitted the post-war state where life seemed bereft of all meaning and purpose. The concept of the Absurd was initiated by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* though the term was coined on a much later date in 1961 by Martin Esslin to describe the works primarily of a number of European playwrights who wrote in the 1950s and 1960s and focussed largely on the meaninglessness and purposelessness of existence. These plays also highlighted the vacuity of words and actions in a universe that functioned on its own where human interference was irrelevant and inconsequential.

Thus after the two world Wars, human beings found themselves in a world with no religion to believe in, no faith to comfort them, and faced the biggest existential crisis - how to exist in a world where there is no certainty or predictability about the shape life would take in the future. "Literature of the Absurd" and in particular the "Theatre of the Absurd" gave expression to this feeling of loss, lack of purpose in life and absence of logic and reason in happenings over which one has no control.

Albert Camus from France, Eugene Ionesco from Romania, Arthur Adamov from Russia, Samuel Beckett - Irish by birth who wrote initially from France before settling in England, and Harold Pinter from England were the early contributors to the "Theatre of the Absurd". The surprising thing is that none of them knew each other but they wrote individually and their work collectively dealt with the absurdity of existence. Camus's perception of absurdity gave him an awareness of 'a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness'.

The plays under the rubric "Theatre of the Absurd" and in particular, those of Samuel Beckett deal with the predicament of men and women in the universe, saddled with an existence that is out of harmony with their longing for logic and order. Beckett's famous

sentence sums up the modern writer's predicament: "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express".

Nearly four centuries back, Shakespeare had similarly written about the smallness of human beings against the vastness of the universe where the gods reign supreme: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport'. It is clear that Beckett's statement is an extension of Shakespeare's understanding of Man's smallness vis-à-vis the great power of the universe that is presided by an invisible Super Power- call it God or Fate or Destiny or simply Godot as Beckett terms it. This power is unknown and incomprehensible as the human mind is limited in scope to understand the complexity of life that seems wired to a remote Power. Hence the major theme of the Absurd drama revolves round nothingness- we know nothing, our words and actions mean nothing as the shape of things to come is hidden from us. Life moves on perennially through the birth- death cycle with neither a beginning nor an end in sight. The cycle goes on unceasingly without any predictable pattern except that of a cyclical movement through birth and death. One of the characters in Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot,* says: 'Nothing happens, no one comes, no one goes, this is awful'.

The Theatre of the Absurd has for its content man as 'nothing' in eternal confrontation with Nothing. In short, it is about nothing circumscribed by Nothing. The problem for the playwright arose as to how to present 'Nothing' on stage! For any artist to draw a picture imaginatively featuring 'nothing' becomes a creative falsehood because the moment he /she titles a picture 'Nothing', the picture gets a reference and becomes something. Hence Beckett's statement that there is 'nothing' to write(content), 'nothing rom which to write'(means of writing such as language, as words cannot communicate nothingness), 'no power to write' (as he is limited by his rational, empirical, logical power), 'no desire to express' (as he is aware of the futility and impossibility of attempting to express that which is Not) and finally the 'obligation to write'(as a writer cannot remain silent and is forever attempting to communicate even if the means, substance and desire he / she possesses do not have the power to express).

This is the new theatre that discarded the well made plays which followed the dramatic structure with a beginning, middle and an end, where the delineation of characters was done through action and words, and the structure consisted of plot, dialogue, action, climax and denouement. The Theatre of the Absurd had no use for such a structure, as the story line was not linear and there was neither a beginning nor an end. The new plays were circular with the plays ending at the point where they began. It will not be far off the mark to say that these plays present not a story but a situation, a daily occurrence of life.

One other innovative aspect of the Theatre of the Absurd is the usage of words/dialogues despite their lack of potential to communicate nothingness. These plays resort to minimal dialogues that are repetitive and employ non sequiturs and complement them with purposeless actions and vacuous gestures to convey the futility of all put together. The play's 'action' is something that does not move the play forward. Since the play does not have a storyline, no action can take it further. All action is limited to 'here' and 'now'.
Beckett employs the art of the grotesque that was prominent in ancient Italian comedies like the *Commedia dell' arte*, Vaudeville, Music Hall, and Cross talk. He uses the grotesque to present the theme of a hostile force- a hostile mechanism reducing life to nothing and at the same time to give us the awesome perception of a ceaseless continuity of life through the

birth-death cycle. Life is like *Chakravyuh,* a labyrinth in which when one gets trapped, one cannot escape; one simply keeps spinning through the maze.

The grotesque is both funny and frightening. Beckett tries to heal the gaping wound of the absurdity of life through a healing release of laughter. We become aware of the humour of cruelty and the cruelty of humour in his plays. The grotesqueness assaults our aesthetic sensibility as it is disturbingly at odds with the way we are accustomed to view our situation. The disorderliness of life is conveyed through a new form of formlessness - where there is no story, no plot, no characterization - and is presented with the help of farce and clownery. This new form of play that belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd reflects the paradoxical relationship between the intolerable condition of human existence and the possible achievement of art.

4.5   SUMMING UP

* Modern Drama is categorized into two major kinds that corresponds with Pre War Drama (1900-1950) and Post War Drama (1950-80)
* The first phase consists of comedies and problem plays. They deal with social and political issues, raise questions but provide no solution, leaving it to the audience to arrive at their own conclusion. Yet another development was that of Verse Drama meant to express the deepest emotions through verse. There was a short interregnum of drama after 1945 that has come to be known as 'kitchen sink' school of drama
* The second phase is the Theatre of the Absurd, where the plays are circular (and not linear), with no story but a common situation that we daily go through, where there is more action and minimal –all to convey the meaninglessness of existence, where the costumes and stage settings are reduced to a minimum in keeping with the focus on presenting life as nothing surrounded by Nothing.

4.6   UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Enumerate the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd

4.7 GLOSSARY

Comedy of Manners: witty, cerebral form of *dramatic* comedy that depicts and often satirizes the manners and affectations of contemporary society.
Sentimental comedy: a dramatic genre of the 18th century, denoting plays in which middle-class protagonists triumphantly overcome a series of moral trials.
Period piece: A period piece is a play, book, or film that is set at a particular time in history and describes life at that time
Boulevard theatre: Commercial theatre, consisting mainly of comedies. Boulevard theatre is a theatrical aesthetic that emerged from the boulevards of Paris's old city.

Melodrama: a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions

Celtic: generally refers to the languages and respective cultures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man, also known as the Celtic nations.

Perennial: long lasting

Holocaust: destruction or slaughter on a mass scale,

Genocide: the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group

Vicissitudes: a change of circumstances or fortune, typically one that is unwelcome or unpleasant.

Cognitive: conscious mental and intellectual activity.

Delineation: the action of describing or portraying something precisely.

Denouement: the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved.

Laybrinth: a complicated irregular network of passages or paths in which it is difficult to find one's way; a maze

Open ending: allowing the formulation of any answer, rather than a selection from a possible set of answers.

Metaphysical: concerning existence and the relations among things that exist.

Commedia dell' arte: where performances were unscripted and employed few props and costumes,

Vaudeville: a light often comic theatrical piece frequently combining pantomime, dialogue, dancing, song and acrobatic acts

Music Hall: a mixture of popular songs, comedy, acrobatics including clownery,   and variety entertainment

Cross talk: a common term for a particular kind of two-person routine by Vaudeville performers.

4.10 REFERENCES

Modern Dramatists A Casebook of Major British, Irish, and American Playwrights. 1st Edition. New York: Routledge.

Luc Gilleman, *John Osborne, Vituperative Artist*. Routledge.

David Krasner. *A History of Modern Drama, Volume I*. Wiley and Blackwell.

J. L. Styan.*Modern Drama in Theory and Practice. Volume 3. Expressionism and Epic Theatre*.

Richard Gilman. *The Making of Modern Drama:A Study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Handke*. Yale Univ. Press

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr. *Modern Drama: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Penguin Random House

Michael Y. Bennett. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Literature and Theatre of the Absurd.* Cambridge University Press.