

# **Modernism and Disillusionment:**

## **A Study of the Prominent Works of the British Modern Period**

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**Abstract:** In this study, the concern is laid upon the emergence of modernism in literature and the advent of modernity in society and how this modernity led to disillusionment and pessimism in return. It has been portrayed how changing society has affected literature and literary works. An attempt has been made to examine the modern period through three writers of the modern era with respect to their three significant works and the change in the concept of reality in these works has been analyzed by various philosophers and their dominant philosophies of the time. The paper begins with a concise introduction to modernism. It then talks about the three notable works of three different modernist writers followed by various philosophers and their philosophies. They are W.B. Yeats (“The Second Coming”), Bertolt Brecht (“Mother Courage and Her Children”) and Samuel Beckett (“Waiting for Godot”).

**Keywords:** Modernism, Modernity, Avant-Garde, Fragmentation Flux, Verfremdung Effect.

### **I. Introduction**

*“On or about 1910, human character changed.” (Virginia Woolf)*

Modernism was a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement. In literature, it was a reaction against realism and romanticism. It was dominant during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a reaction against realism in a way, as realists focused on the objective outer reality whereas modernists focused on the subjective inner reality, as importance was given to the Character’s psyche. As far as romanticism is considered, I/Self for them was of utmost significance: “...I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (P.B. Shelley) whereas in modern works three things are followed - artistic autonomy, objectivity (in terms of criticism) and impersonality. Modern art is known as ‘Avant-Garde’. Modernism is purely a literary or intellectual movement. But modernity is a broad historical epoch which is characterized by ‘change’. So, 20<sup>th</sup>-century European society witnessed enormous changes in the form of a collapse in the social order, a collapse of ideal foundational truth, a collapse of faith in rational theory and a collapse of faith in authority and religion. Due to

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the erosion of the status quo, people became anxiety-ridden, pessimistic and disillusioned. Eventually, all these events had an effect on the literature of the time. The keyword for modernism is 'Fragmentation Flux' because no doubt society was facing a continuous change: flux, in every aspect but at the very same time it became fragmented as there was the erosion of the status quo.

### **II. Three notable works of the three prominent writers of the Modern Era.**

Modern works, be they novel, poetry or drama moved away from the accepted notions in which a work of art ought to be written. As there was a change in plot, character, narrative technique, setting, language, theme etc. Apart from the structure, there was an impact of the society on literature; in which the first category consists of writers who wanted the revival of the classical rules. The second category consists of writers who wanted to learn from the past and change the present and in the third category, there were writers who were totally hopeless and disillusioned from the prevailing situation and they thought that there is no way out. Therefore, one writer from each category has been taken. It is followed by their one notable work.

#### **i. W.B. YEATS: "THE SECOND COMING"**

"The Second Coming" is a modern poem which was written by "W.B. Yeats" and was published in the year 1921, in his collection of verses titled 'Dial Michael Robartes and the Dancer Christian'. It is viewed as a prophetic poem that envisions the close of the Christian epoch and the violent birth of the new age. The poem has been divided into two stanzas, in which the first stanza depicts the condition of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and the second stanza puts forth the vision of the poet about the ruined future.

The lines in the first stanza suggest an apocalypse. The poem starts with the line, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre". Gyre literally means a spiral or a vortex. A gyre comprises two thousand years. The first two thousand years mark the birth of Helene (pre-Christian era) and the second two thousand years mark the birth of Jesus Christ. So, by this, he wants to suggest that there will be an end to the Christian era (Final destruction of the world). In line 2, 'The falcon cannot hear the falconer' depicts the end of authority. As Yeats was a fascist, he believed in the order (status quo) of things. This line symbolizes the tinge of disobedience/revolution. It suggests the age when they had lost the reigns of authority. Falcon can be the aristocracy, patriarchy and falconer can be the common masses and women. Line 3, 'Things fall apart the centre cannot hold'. The Centre here is symbolic of religion, tradition, authority, patriarchy etc. In line 4 the use of the

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word, 'Mere' suggests that there is no authority. In line 5 the word, 'blood dimmed' suggests violent killings (that had taken place during three historical events of WW1, Russian Revolution and the Easter killings). Line 6 suggests two things. First, those people who were obedient towards the law began to revolt against it and second those who didn't want any war or erosion of the status quo were drowned or left behind (Those who opposed the philosophy of the time). Line 7-8, The best lack all the conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity alludes to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and it depicts the condition of the society where those people who wanted order were left behind and those who wanted to erode the same were passionate about it.

The second stanza is a vision of Yeats about the forthcoming ages. The title of the poem has been taken from the 'Book of Genesis' which suggests the resurrection of Jesus. But here Yeats has used it in a different manner. He says that 'Surely the second coming is at hand' (line 10) but it'll not be the second coming of Jesus but of the wicked/monstrous era where everything will fall apart. In line 12 the mention of the term 'Spiritus Mundi' (a concept by Carl Jung) means a collective unconscious. Here it means the spirit of the world and refers to the collective spirit or consciousness of humanity. Line 14 suggests that something sinister is going to take place. Line 17 depicts that either the birds are revolving around this monster or are frightened by it. Line 18 'The darkness drops again...' suggests that a cycle of history is going to end and a new era is going to start. In lines 19-20, 'The twenty centuries of stony sleep/Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle'. The stony sleep refers to the Greek and Roman era as they were pagans and also it alludes to William Blake's Urizen. Line 20 which depicts the birth of the Christ came as a nightmare to the previous ages but now again the world was going towards darkness due to the birth of 'Rough Beast' (line 21) which symbolizes the technological power, political regime, philosophies, women etc. The poem ends with a rhetorical question, 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?' Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus, so here it symbolizes that the monster is going to overtake Jesus's position by making an end to the previous age of law and order.

Thus, a critic says that 'Yeats wanted a totalitarian regime to take place. He hated scientific society. He believed in hierarchy'. So, it is clearly evident from the poem that Yeats wanted the revival of the old rules and thus believed in the status quo.

The structure of the poem is modern. Ezra Pound whose theory of modernism was "Make it new" suggested Yeats do three things in order to make his work modern in the true sense: that is to make his poems clearer, use the economy of language and make his poems relevant to the modern times. From the above poem, it becomes evident that he has followed all three conditions.

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Darwin (1809-82) in his book “On the Origin of Species” (1859) propagated a theory that is “the theory of evolution”. This theory launched an attack on religious doctrines as it questioned the origin of human beings. It stated that human beings have evolved from apes and thus created doubt in the people against accepted religious notions.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in his book “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (1883) claimed that ‘God is dead’. His philosophy focused on this thing, that religion puts limitations on a human. Religion has labelled some things as good and some as evil and when we follow them, our desires get crushed. It stops us from doing those things which we desperately desire to do. So, he believed that we must move beyond this good and evil. He launched an attack against Christianity which stated that we must give up all material desires and thus should serve our souls. He said that we should live fully in this world as we don’t actually know whether there exists some other world or not. Further, he also attacked Plato, who had said that this world reflects the ideal world. He argues that this is the only world we are aware of, so we should live our life fully over here. This philosophy had an adverse effect on 20<sup>th</sup> century society where people freely did whatever they wanted to do without any fear of any authority which eventually led to degeneracy.

So, these two philosophies can be directly linked to W.B. Yeats ‘The Second Coming’. As indeed after such philosophies things surely began to fall apart.

### ii. BERTOLT BRECHT: “MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN”

“Mother courage and her children” is a play which has been written “Bertolt Brecht” and was published in the year 1941. As we know, Brecht falls in the second category of writers, who were of the thought process that we have to learn from past events and bring change in contemporary times. In mother courage and her children, Brecht describes an event from history because he wants to question the present from the past. He takes up the event of thirty years of war between the Protestants and the Catholics but is actually addressing World War I. The war which is familiar to us as a token of destruction appears quite normal for the characters in the play because they earn a lot of money from it by selling the war equipment and that is why they never want the war to end. So, by applying the technique of Verfremdung Effect, he wants to pose the question that why does history repeat itself? It is because we don’t take lessons from it. So, he wanted people to take a lesson from this past event and wanted to bring a worthy change in the contemporary situation of World War I.

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He had his own theatre which was known as “their epic theatre”. So, the modern structure of the play is based upon the same.

Karl Marx (1818-83) along with Friedrich Engels (1820-95) wrote a book titled, “The Communist Manifesto” in “1848”. The main crux of the book is to put an end to the capitalist world order and lay down the emergence of a communist society: that is, a classless society. Except for this, they also touched upon the subject of capitalism and morality. They say that the evils of capitalism led to the greed of the bourgeoisie. Due to capitalism, a person is made to enter into cut-throat competition where greed becomes inevitable at the cost of morality. So, for them, if a person acts like this in a capitalist society, he is not at fault because the situation demands the same from him. *“Man’s ideas, views, conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the condition of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life” (Marx and Engels).*

This philosophy can be directly linked to the play where capital becomes much more important for the characters than that of bloodshed.

### iii. SAMUEL BECKETT: “WAITING FOR GODOT”

‘Waiting for Godot’ or ‘A tragicomedy in two acts’ is a modern drama which has been written by, ‘Samuel Beckett’. It was originally written in French in the year 1952 under the title ‘En attendant Godot’. Its first performance took place in Paris in 1953. It comprises two acts.

As Samuel Beckett himself said, “One Act would have been too little... And three Acts would have been too much.” It is undoubtedly modernistic in its structure and totally depicts the existential crises which people faced during the modern era. Thus, the play becomes auto-referential as its form imitates the content.

In philosophy, the term ‘Absurd’ means out of harmony with reason or plainly opposed to reason. It applies to the vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship with the universe. This condition of man arises from the need to provide an explanation of man’s purposeless existence in the ‘world’ which seems to be devoid of any meaning. More appropriately, the philosophy of absurdism states that the universe is meaningless and life is nothing but a decaying journey from birth to death. As God created the universe out of nothing; so, “Nothing will come of nothing” (~William Shakespeare/King Lear).

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Albert Camus was a philosopher who believed in absurdism. He was of the opinion that human beings are not absurd and the world is not absurd but for humans to live in this world is absurd. He discussed this philosophy in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus". Like Sisyphus rolled the rock up the hill, although she knew that once it would reach its zenith it would fall again but still, she continuously did it. In the same way Estragon and Vladimir waited for Godot, although they were aware that he wouldn't come but were not having any choice except for waiting.

The reflection of Beckett being pessimistic about the contemporary situation of 20<sup>th</sup> century society has been portrayed in the context of the play 'Waiting for Godot'.

1. Plot: The play doesn't possess any sort of plot as we can claim that it is an anti-plot play. It doesn't possess a beginning, middle and a neatly tied-up ending but it starts at an arbitrary point and just ends up arbitrarily. It has been divided into two acts which reflect the arbitrary and irrational nature of life. As Vivian Mercier' puts it, it is a play where "Nothing Happens Twice." This statement also symbolizes the circular movement of Time where change is an illusion. With every change comes decadence; one such evidence is of Estragon and Vladimir calling each other Gogo and Didi which is symbolic of decadence as Lucky puts forth that man "... shrinks and dwindles."

2. Character: Beckett is more concerned about the philosophical notion of existence. The names of the characters have been taken from different languages; Estragon (French), Vladimir (Russian), Lucky (English) and Pozzo (Italy). It means no matter where a person belongs as Vladimir puts it, "... The essential does not change." There are some biological and temperamental differences between the main characters although those differences cannot add any sort of characteristic to them. Estragon suffers from chronic foot trouble, Vladimir from chronic bladder trouble. Vladimir is slight philosophical than Estragon. Apart from it, Estragon and Vladimir represent the whole of mankind who are trapped in this world and cannot escape from suffering. One such piece of evidence being the refrain used by Estragon that is "Nothing to be done" represents the plight of the whole of mankind.

Estragon: We lost our rights!

Vladimir: We got rid of them.

Estragon: We are tied.

Also, the want to escape from their miseries again makes them universal characters.

Vladimir: Will night never come?

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Lucky's speech also puts forth the absurdity of life "... Birth, waste and pine..." Pozzo for that matter stands for God as he is the one who gives Lucky a purpose for living that is why he is much luckier than the two tramps.

Time is habit and habit is a great deadener. It is evident in the case of Pozzo and Lucky turned blind and dumb in Act 2. It again symbolizes that the journey from womb to tomb is full of miseries.

3. Setting: There is an austere stage setting in the play: the stage is almost bare. It is shorn of stage properties: an open road, a mound of earth and a bare tree. As Hugh Kenner remarks that it is a play about, "Nowhere, No when." The deprivation of the play from its space and time symbolizes the absurdity of human life. The stage world symbolizes this world which is a trap for humans where they cannot even use their freewill.

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: Ah! Yes.

Another piece of evidence is when Estragon and Vladimir decide to suicide by making use of their 'freewill'. They are not able to do so. As Beckett makes use of 'Black Humour' in it.

The whole drama seems to be about Time. As the only thing moving in the play is Time otherwise all other things in the play are static in nature. As we are told, "Time is a habit... Habit is a great deadener..." One such evidence being of Pozzo and Lucky turning blind and dumb in the second act. Pozzo: "...One day, is that not enough for you?... One day we were born, one day we shall die."

4. Language: The breakdown of language symbolizes the absurdity of life. One such evidence is of Lucky's speech which appears fragmented to us but has its own deep significance. The silences used in the play symbolize the difficulty in expressing one's thoughts and also the birth and death of a being as when one is silent and isn't able to express anything.

5. Theatricality: The theatricality underlines the absurdity of human life. Beckett makes use of gestures and mannerisms in his play. One such piece of evidence is Pozzo doubling up to



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search for his watch in his fob. There is a drama within a drama. One such evidence being of Lucky's performance where the two tramps become the audience which in turn symbolizes that in this life sometimes, we act as sufferers and sometimes as an audience but the irony of life is that time doesn't stop.

Vladimir: That passed the time.

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

6. Theme: Beckett believed that initial words should introduce the theme of the play. Estragon's words, "Nothing to be done" does so. As we come into this world, decay and finally die. So, no one can change the essentials although it may appear to us that we are different but we are moving in the same vicious circle of absurdity. No doubt what we achieve in this absurd world at the end of the day we are going to die and "...nobody will ever recognize us". "What then" a poem by "W.B. Yeats" is one such example of it.

Thus, through his conception of the absurdity of human life, "Beckett portrays man as a helpless prisoner and all human endeavours as mere meaningless routine."

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) wrote a book titled "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" in 1901 in which he gave the concept of 'psychoanalysis'. He came up with this philosophy, that the human mind can be divided into three parts: conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious. According to him, the psyche was of utmost importance and in this play, we observe that the psyche of the characters is given more importance rather than the external environment.

### III. Conclusion.

Modernism in literature and modernity in society altogether brought a change in the concept of reality. There were certain conventions which were followed to produce a work of art but modern art wiped out all those conditions and introduced altogether different techniques and thus leading to the change in the accepted reality in the context of literature. The modern period witnessed a change in the moral, social, economic, and political aspects along with knowledge and reason. Due to this people had to accept the changed reality; as its inherent in human nature that we resist change but at the very same time, sometimes change becomes inevitable. Thus, one should accept the reality and move on otherwise it leads to pessimism and disillusionment as we observed during the modern era.



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