

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 6 Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant. **RL 9** Demonstrate knowledge of works of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Modernism

The British writer Virginia Woolf once declared that “on or about December, 1910, human character changed.” Woolf picked that date to mark the enormous changes that occurred in her lifetime. Her bold statement sets the context for **modernism**, a literary and artistic movement that developed in the early decades of the 20th century.

Art for Art’s Sake

In literature, **modernism** was a diverse movement that spanned Europe, the Americas, and even parts of Africa and Asia. In England, it took hold in the first decade of the 20th century. As the economic, political, and social structure of Britain began to crumble in those years, British writers began to experiment with ways that would question the basic elements of literature—whether it be the structure of a poem or the narrative elements of a fictional story. A key figure in the modernist movement was James Joyce, whose novels, short stories, and poetry were anything but traditional. The 1922 publication of his work *Ulysses* marked the peak of the modernist movement in fiction. In this work, Joyce used an array of modern writing styles in portraying the random thoughts of his main character, Leopold Bloom, as he wandered the streets of Dublin. Other modernist fiction writers besides Joyce and Woolf included D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and Evelyn Waugh.



T. S. Eliot (1949), Patrick Heron. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

Breaking Form

Modernist poets typically broke new ground in style and form. T. S. Eliot and others abandoned traditional stanza forms and meter for the more natural flow of free verse and experimented with bold imagery and symbolism. Eliot also ushered in a new era in literary criticism. In his work as editor of the literary journal *The Criterion*, he argued for new standards of evaluation and re-examined the literary worth of past poets. While blasting the revered romantic and neoclassical poets, he resurrected the reputation of the metaphysical poets, who had been unpopular for at least a century.

The modernist period lasted through England’s economic depression of the 1930s and the political turmoil of World War II in the 1940s. The period gave way in the early 1950s to **postmodernism**, which is characterized by experimentation with discontinuity, parody, popular culture, irony, and language.

Modernist Content and Techniques

While no two modernist writers employed the same style, their works do share some defining characteristics:

- a sense of alienation, loss, and despair
- rejection of traditional values and assumptions
- elevation of the individual
- emphasis on introspection and the depths of the human mind rather than on outward or social aspects

One narrative technique that allowed the modernist writer to fully reveal a character and to explore the depths of the human mind was **stream of consciousness**, in which the rapid and jumbled flow of a character's thoughts and feelings is presented as it occurs. Fiction writers Woolf and Joyce, along with poet T. S. Eliot, were known for using this technique.

For modernist writers, **irony** became something larger than a literary technique; it became an attitude that permeated the core of their writing. This new ironic attitude of the modernists is often described as detached and questioning. Modernists aimed for objectivity in presenting ideas and regarded such restraint as an appropriate response to the complexities of modern life. Recall that irony in literature is classified in three ways.

TYPES OF IRONY	
Verbal irony	Occurs when a writer says one thing but means another.
Situational irony	Occurs when a character or the reader expects one thing to happen but something entirely different happens.
Dramatic irony	Occurs when the audience or reader knows more than the character(s). Dramatic irony occurs in fiction when a character has a limited view or no view of events, but the reader is fully aware of what is going on.

In Katherine Mansfield's "A Cup of Tea" (page 1128), a young woman begging for a cup of tea is invited into the home of a wealthy woman named Rosemary, who wishes to act generously and help the poor woman. Note how the author describes Rosemary's thoughts as she helps the woman, who is nearly fainting from hunger, take off her coat:

She [the poor woman] seemed to stagger like a child, and the thought came and went through Rosemary's mind, that if people wanted helping they must respond a little, just a little, otherwise it became very difficult indeed. And what was she to do with the coat now? She left it on the floor, and the hat too.

—Katherine Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea"

Close Read

What is ironic about Rosemary's thoughts and actions in this scene? What type of irony is used in this passage?