

MIHAELA GAVRILĂ

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**FRAMEWORKS
OF BRITISH MODERNISM**



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Conf. univ. dr. Florentina Anghel

Lect. univ. dr. Sorin Cazacu

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf offered 1910 as the date marking the beginning of modernism, the year that King Edward VII died and left England as the world's largest empire, dominating world trade and politics. The generally accepted period characterized by the features of modernism spreads until roughly 1965 when artists of a newer generation started to promote a more democratic, pluralistic style for literature.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century social and political change had been felt for quite some time for all aspects of British society. The industrial and capitalist evolution in Victorian England prepared the land for this change and the generation of the modernist period started to reject the values and traditions of its predecessors.

Writers and artists began to oppose the views of not only their confident Victorian and Edwardian forerunners but also of their bourgeois contemporaries. Nonetheless, modernism cannot be entirely isolated from other wide movements of the time and the cultural forces that created them, and so, like the symbolists before them, writers focused on interiority, private symbolization and urban vibrancy as materials for their creations (T.S. Eliot's poetry, Virginia

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, E.M. Forster's *Howards End* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

In complete opposition to the Romantic worldview, the Modernists were no longer concerned with Nature, Being, or the general structures of history. They replaced progress and growth with corrosion and a crescent alienation of the individual, viewing modern society as impersonal, capitalist, and hostile to the artistic impulse, ideas most certainly induced by the effects of the two World Wars on Western civilization.

The new century brought great transformations in the everyday life of people in cities due to innovations that led to the introduction of inventions such as the automobile, the airplane and the telephone which shortened distances between places and people and accelerated the pace of life. The radical shift of mind, values and artistic expression occurred in different domains and with the help of a number of breakthroughs that proved the world was not the predictable stable place once presumed to be: Sigmund Freud's theories of psychology (the influences of the subconscious on the conscious and his theory of infantile sexuality permanently changed the common understanding of the mind and identity), Karl Marx's political theories (forces that govern human behaviour much more than reason and logic), Friedrich Nietzsche's principles (that discredited the traditional notions of truth, certainty, and morality), Isaac Newton's physics, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, etc.

Probably as response to this advancement of life and thought, a flow of groundbreaking movements, sometimes called “modernist” because of their accent on radical creativity, extended throughout Europe. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque developed cubism, the painting style that left realism and traditional perspective behind in the detriment of fragmented spaces and exploded forms. Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp started a war against the acknowledged concepts of sense and the boundaries of art. Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky were beginning to experiment with rhythm and harmony and opened the way for the direct atonality of composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg.

Having lost important guidelines in their perception of the world writers fought to bring to the surface the new, authentic individual and collective identity by reflecting the transience of modern existence. British modernism was shaped primarily by the members of the Bloomsbury Group, the “men of 1914,” (Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce) and the perspectives of immigrants like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield etc., who had in common an appetite for the exploration of the consciousness of the individual. Since they could no longer identify with the organization of family and society, they sought to dissect the psychological interior lives of their lost, alienated characters.

British writers, affected by this explosion of modernist investigations, were united by a common yearning to break with conventional forms and subjects and began renouncing

realistic descriptions and traditional assumptions. The novel form was shaped by Freudian analyses of the characters' psyches through the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue while poetry mingled slang with elevated language and experimented with free verse, manipulating structures and admitting that knowledge is not absolute. Poets strived for a verse focused entirely upon "the thing itself," and this meant the use of minimalist language, indulgence concerning structural rules and a kind of bluntness that Victorian and Romantic poetry seriously lacked. The Pastoral ornamental poetry of the Victorian era was forgotten in favour of this new mechanized poetics and gone was also the concentration on beauty and nature. Future subjects for poetry were now infinite, and the modernist poets fully benefited from this new opportunity.

But all these changes required also a new style, a new language to help them express the reality of the modern world. Joyce developed a method that surpassed the conventions of plot, character development, and reason. Similarly, Eliot invented a lexicon of allusion and layering, mixed references to ancient texts, popular song lyrics, and mythology and managed to reflect the freedom of speech of the modern world. Woolf, Mansfield, Stein and other female modernists were entirely experimental and started investigating the boundaries of sexuality besides the change they proposed in gender roles.

Following Ezra Pound's slogan for reaction and awakening ("Make it new") the modernists did everything in

their power to revolutionize and so they challenged the apathy that had surrounded the British way for centuries, reacted to the apocalyptic damaged world before, during, and after the war and revived fresh, internal, individual voices, within new narrative structures.

Frameworks of British Modernism reviews the most iconic authors of the modernist period in British literature presented in chronological order, starting with Henry James, a key transitional figure between literary realism and literary modernism, and ending with Harold Pinter, who also occupies a controversial passing position between modernism and postmodernism, although he denied any form of labelling. The volume focuses on the pioneers and innovators of a literary period that would shape the literary canon in a way never seen before. Each chapter starts with a biographical sketch that enables a better understanding of the direction they evolved from and continues with an analysis of their artistic identity, the influences that moulded their voices and their literary techniques and styles, applied on one or more of their representative works addressing universal themes that cross the frontiers of time and place.

The first section, “Images of Death in Henry James’s Fiction” strives to explore the author’s insight on mortality and its influences on his style and perception of the subject. Henry James constructed his narrative using death images that set the plot into motion and draw attention to the overall atmosphere. In James’s works death occurs in various shapes and forms like

falling, drowning, shooting, contamination with poison, execution and even the most obvious situation, death from natural causes. The typology of his characters stretches from suicidal artists to criminal lovers, variety that gives a unitary facet to the final act of dying by moulding identity and ultimately creating a gothic spectacle of the connection between life and death.

The second chapter focuses on examining the transition mechanisms and the modern devices employed in the poetry of William Butler Yeats, paying particular attention to his tendency towards traditional forms, especially his calling for the revival of the ancient Greek tragedy. This is probably his motivation behind the need to restore the genre by retracing the more primitive and pure roots of the past. Acting also like a pivotal bridging author between traditional and modern forms, Yeats, much like the golden bird of “Sailing to Byzantium,” sings about “what is past, or passing, or to come” and succeeds in generating new constructions that use the past for the needs of the present and ultimately represent the link between the old and the new.

The subject of space and its association with modernist studies is not new. Since Joseph Frank’s essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1948) the preoccupation with space has been crucial in understanding the modernist formal aspects of juxtaposition, montage or collage that give a whole unit to the works of art inside the representation of a fragmented society. Without denying the importance of the subjective and

psychological dimension in modernist aesthetics and without impairing the importance of external reality which is understood as being in opposition to the inner consciousness but admitting the dichotomy between the inside and the outside, “Virginia Woolf’s Palimpsestic Composition” addresses this branch underlying modernist vision and revealing the way in which Woolf was both intrigued and fascinated by the human psyche. The chapter also looks into the palimpsestic aspect of the narrative composition showing how the cyclic repetition of the same images creates a unique web of reverberations of the past that exceeds the works and always emerges to the surface.

“James Joyce’s Metatextual Dynamics” starts an investigatory study having at its centre his novel of initiation, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, whose core element is represented by Stephen Dedalus’s narrative thread, chiefly designed through the exploration of unusual, subjective and multi-dimensional perspectives, giving clues to the protagonist’s existential conflict and portraying the future artist’s order of thoughts accomplished through epiphanies. The result is nothing but tension between reality and imagination, because Joyce, by expanding on Stephen’s independent senses, is in reality stimulating his consciousness exhibited through the various degrees of his hero’s perception.

Often regarded as misogynist by his most fierce critics, a close inquiry into D.H. Lawrence’s works reveals that those concentrated on male protagonists are also regarded as lacking

substance, whereas the most successful ones are built around strong female characters trying to find their life trajectory. “D.H. Lawrence and Gender Essentialism” fuels the author’s concept of “impersonality” and the way in which it is transformed into a vision of a world beyond gender.

The next chapter aims at distinguishing the mythic mechanism that holds together the web of cross-cultural correspondences and evaluating the multitude of intertextual paradigms present in Thomas Stearns Eliot’s poetry in general and in “The Waste Land,” in particular. Almost 100 years after he revolutionized and metamorphosed the route of poetry with “one of the most important poems of the twentieth century,” Eliot’s “The Waste Land” remains the most iconic modernist work dealing with the psychological and cultural crisis that followed the loss of connection with moral and cultural unity.

In a different manner than that of some of his contemporary writers, tolerant towards sexuality, criminality or pornography, George Orwell embraced a real artistry of disgust, dealing with the topic without any dissimulation or false claims and being both haunted and enchanted by the ugliness of the soul since loathing conducted a great part of his social and moral world. He strived for a mild form of democratic socialism that in his view was impeded by disgust and its relation to class and hierarchy. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he mocked socialism, reflected the spirit of postmodernism and managed to go beyond the dramatic construction.

“Samuel Beckett’s Dualistic Philosophical View” presents the way in which, one of the most iconic playwrights of absurdist fiction, tackles with the inspection of human condition, emphasizing its despair, meaningless, nothingness and hopelessness in the face of a hostile universe. The chapter studies Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* from the point of view of an existence without meaning, in which the tragic and the comic are perfectly intertwined. Underlining imagination and reality, Beckett’s works feature the functionality of time and space within the world of thought while the protagonists’ selves are presented as divisions between the physical and mental reality.

The following chapter, “William Golding’s Allegorical Modernism,” treats Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, with regard to the evolution of law within an artificial society created on a deserted island by a group of wrecked schoolboys who renounce the rational and civilized norms that have ruled their lives and lapse into barbarism, ritualism, and murder. The utopian experiment fails completely and the idyllic atmosphere that opens the novel quickly turns into a dystopian reality as the logical and wild sides of human nature, represented by the two groups of boys, are neither completely accepted nor denied.

Often being considered as exceedingly occult and intricate, Dylan Thomas’s poetry contains many elements that devise a mythology of death, and this chapter tries to delineate the idea that the spiritual presence that stealthily lives inside his

poems is deeply rooted in the notion of primordial origin and that, in the poet's vision, life and death mature into a unique common path – just like time becomes the agent of fiction, memory can become the agent of death.

“Modernist and Postmodernist Parameters in John Fowles's Treatment of Time” explains how the author's works remould past periods from the viewpoint of the present, tracing language, text and the material culture of the past and permitting it to flow into the present by rejecting the traditional frontiers between facts and fiction. By mingling realism with experimentation Fowles restructures the past disintegrating all stereotypical beliefs about history.

The last chapter analyses Harold Pinter's ability to create dramatic poetry out of ordinary language and to offer expertise in the depiction of plot, setting, act and scene while his protagonists have to withstand crucial moments of transformation. This section considers the thematic structure of the transitional period, identifying the stage of uncertainty, alienation and captivity and that of rebirth and independence that appears after the passage of both the physical and the metaphorical limits.

Images of Death in Henry James's Fiction

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. Henry James – *The Art of Fiction*, 1953

Henry James (born April 15, 1843, New York, New York, U.S.A. – died February 28, 1916, London, England) was named after his father, a notable social theorist and lecturer who inherited a great fortune from his own father that enabled him to live a very comfortable and socially prominent existence, travelling throughout Europe and offering his two precocious sons, William (who would become an acclaimed pragmatic philosopher) and Henry Jr., the best education.

From very early in life, Henry was a shy, book-addicted boy who was privately tutored in New York during his preadolescent years and, together with his elder brother, was taken abroad to London, Paris, Geneva and other parts of Europe for special schooling where they gained language competences and knowledge that was not available to many Americans in their times.

Right before the beginning of the American Civil War Henry injured his spine and the accident kept him from serving. At 19 he enrolled at Harvard Law School but spent his time there mostly reading. Two years later he began writing and found his place inside the most prestigious literary magazines: his first story was published anonymously and his first book of reviews was published in the *North American Review*.

In 1869 James went on a tour of England and the Continent to develop an international perspective and in 1875 he published his first collection of short stories, *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*. During this first period he wrote *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *Daisy Miller* (1878), novels that investigate and expand upon the contrasting social values of America and Europe.

The middle phase of his literary career found James detaching himself from the international themes and writing more complex social novels like *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) or *The Tragic Muse* (1890). Between 1890 and 1895 James began experimenting with writing for the stage but without much success. This made him adapt his dramatic experience to fiction which resulted in a change in his storytelling style: *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw*, *In the Cage* (1898) and *The Awkward Age* (1899).