

**Introduction to Literary Theory**  
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**Lecture – 32**  
**Modernism and Postmodernism I**

Hello and welcome back again to this lecture series on Literary Theory. With our previous lecture we have completed our discussion on feminism. And today we are going to take up a new topic; which is modernism and post modernism. Now both of these terms modernism as well as post modernism have at their root the word modern.

So, we will start our discussion today by looking at this particular word, and the kind of temporal experience that it signifies. And then we will move on to see how this notion of the modern plays out in the field of literature in particular and art, in general especially during the period that is usually designated by the terms modernism and post modernism.

So, what is modern? Well, at it is simplest the term modern is an adjective that specifies a point in time. It represents whatever is current and present, the time now as opposed to the time that is past or the time that is yet to come. But modern is not just a point in time, it is also what may be called a temporal experience, a particular way through which time is experienced. This concept represented by the term modern comes out beautifully in the seminal work of the American Marxist literary scholar Marshall Berman, and the book that I am referring to is titled all that is solid melts into air it was published for the first time in 1982.

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**Marshall Berman**  
(1940 - 2013)

• *All that is Solid Melts into Air*



Source: Goodreads

Now, I have mentioned the number of books in the course of this lecture series, and I have asked you to read them if possible. But if you were to just pick one of the books that I have mentioned, I would like you to pick and read this book by Berman.

This is a book that I encountered quite by chance actually, while I was writing my doctoral thesis. And what captivated me about this book was of course, the tremendous amount of erudition that was displayed, but also Berman's brilliantly entertaining writing style. And it remains one of the very few books of literary criticism that I have encountered; which not only makes you think anew about literature, but also compels you to read the original literary pieces which it discusses.

So, as far as I am concerned this book by Berman along with Raymond Williams is the country in the city, sets the standard as to how literary criticism should be written. And I would definitely recommend you that you should go and read at least these 2 books.

Anyway, let us now come back to Berman's comments about the modern being a particular kind of temporal experience, a particular way in which time is experienced. And he writes I quote.

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“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, a transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences [...] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air”.”

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Now, one might argue that this particular experience of the modern as being caught up in a maelstrom of change that opens up future possibilities, even while destroying the known world of the past; is a universal and eternal phenomenon. And such kind of an experience where all that is solid seems to be melting in thin air is an experience that has been known to all the generations.

Because every generation looks at itself as modern, because it invariably feels itself to be caught up in such vertices of change where past traditions seem to be slipping away, and the uncertain future opening up. But even if we agree to this idea that such kind of experiencing the modern is universal and eternal, we need to concede that there is a difference in degrees. For a 14th century present twilling his land in rural England, the sense of change and modernity would be far less excruciatingly evident than for an early 20th century urbanite, residing in say London or in Paris.

But why is that so? Well this is primarily because the pace of change which affected human life was accelerated to an unprecedented rate especially, in the western world from say around the second half of the 19th century. This piece of change was such that the vanishing of the known past and familiar traditions became the hallmark experience of lived reality. And this was especially in the case in the great urban centers of the western world.

Now, as I have already noted in some of my previous lectures, this sense of being caught up in a violent world pool of change culminated in the experiences of the First World War; which quite literally as well as metaphorically destroyed the western world order as it was known till the early 19th century. It is this period of accelerated change when the sense of the modern and the new overwhelmed all other experiences of reality, that is depicted within the field of literature and art by the word modernism.

The exact deeds demarcating this period is open to debate, but it is generally agreed that modernism starts from around the late 19th century. Some suggest that the date is 1890, and there is also a more or less consensus view about when modernism came to an end.

So, usually 1930's or the beginning of 1940's is regarded as the time when modernism came to an end. And with the beginning of the Second World War and another round of violent changes, that it unleashed we start moving beyond modernism and into the realm of the postmodern. So, this is the generally accepted chronology of modernism and post modernism. And in this lecture we will proceed chronologically, and we will first take up modernism for discussion and then we will move on to a discussion of post modernism. But before we delve into a discussion of modernism as it is understood specifically within the field of literary studies, let us dwell upon the historical context for a moment.

So, what was it that led to such tremendous acceleration of changes in the lived experiences during the period designated by modernism? Well, the reasons well very many, but I will try to discuss some of the more important ones here. The first reason that I think was very important was the increase in human mobility. In the western world the amount of people moving from their places of origin to other far flung places increased in the second half of the 19th century at a piece, that was absolutely unprecedented.

And this was primarily because of the major infrastructural projects that were undertaken during this time at a global scale. One such infrastructural project was the opening up of

the Suez Canal in 1869; which directly connected the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean via the red sea.

Now, in practical terms what this meant was that the distance between Europe and India was reduced by about 7000 kilometers. Because now the ships did not have to circle around Africa to reach India as they were doing earlier. So, that saved them a journey of roughly around 7000 kilometers. And given that during the 19th century south and Southeast Asia were important European colonies, this greatly boosted the traffic movement between the colonial metropolis and the colonial periphery.

However, the great infrastructural innovations of this period were more; obviously, visible on the land than on the sea. And this was because during this time, tons and tons of iron were being forged into railway tracks that crisscross the face of the earth. So, by 1904 for instance it was possible to travel from the French capital of Paris to the city of Vladivostok located at the extreme eastern fringe of Russia entirely by train.

And this overland route of almost 12000 kilometers could be covered at the beginning of the 20th centuries. So, which we are talking about a time that is more than 100 years back, and during that period it was possible because of the railway network, or it became possible because of the new railway networks to cover these 12000 kilometers in just a matter of 15 days. Such gigantic infrastructural projects by making long distance journeys both easier and more affordable made migration a central reality of life for people at least in the west.

But when we talk about migrations, it is important to note that during this time migration was not just transcontinental. One of the major sources of migration was actually people moving in huge numbers to cities; which by the beginning of the 20th century had developed into major hubs of industrial production and labor employment. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out in 1800, there were only 17 cities in Europe, which boasted a population of over 100,000.

And the total population of all of these big cities if they were to be combined together would be less than 5 million and this is around 1800. By 1890's so in a span of roughly 100 years 90 years, there were 103 European cities with a population of more than 100,000. And the total population of all of these cities put together was more than 30 million; which was an increase 6-fold increase in the number. Indeed, there were 4 cities

London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna; which individually boasted a population of more than 1 million. And for the great majority of the inhabitants of these places their experience of living in industrialized cities completely reframed their sense of human existence.

This produced in them in fact, unknown anxieties as well as previously unheard of possibilities. All of which were thickly led with a deep sense of nostalgia for the past ways of life which were now vanishing at a breathtaking speed.

Since these experiences that the new urban dwellers were confronting in their industrialized cities were at the heart of modernism, it is not surprising that the chief centers of modernist literature and modernist art were big cities like London for instance, Paris, Vienna. And as I just mentioned that each of these cities at the beginning of the twentieth century had a population of more than 1 million. Now, the realms of anxiety and possibility, when not only being opened up within western industrialized cities, but they were also being opened up at the periphery of the European colonial world.

Military technological advances especially, the invention of sophisticated machine guns by people like Hyrum Maxim had made the European army almost invincible against the forces of the rest of the world and as a direct consequence of this European colonialism had peaked between the late 19th and early 20th century. During which time an entire continent Africa was neatly parceled out between European states as their colonies.

These colonies were not just sources of raw materials for the European industries, but they were also sites of unknown experiences and these are known experiences where sometimes pleasantly exotic, but more often they were deeply unsettling for the Europeans. And these unknown and unsettling experiences of the distant colonies formed the basis of many iconic modernist literature and art; like for instance the fiction of Joseph Conrad or the paintings of Paul Gauguin.

But so far I have only talked about changes in the material environment that produced the peculiar and unprecedented lived experiences, which were given aesthetic form by modernist authors and painters. It is however, important to note here that there was another very significant source of influence which during the beginning of the 20th century deeply unsettled the domain of the known and the familiar for a number of educated Europeans.

And here I am talking about Sigmund Freud and quote unquote his discovery of the unconscious. This realm of the human psyche was as unknown to the west as the physical species represented by the industrialized cities or the colonized periphery. And an engagement with this psychical unknown also greatly influenced modernism ranging from the surrealist paintings of Max Ernst to the automatic writings of Armand Breton.

Now, as stated earlier the effect of all of these engagements with the unknown and the unfamiliar got compounded by the experience of the First World War. And one of the most iconic images of the western man caught up with in this whirlpool of change, this whirlpool of unfamiliarity, uncertainty is found in the writings of Walter Benjamin. Now in one of my previous lectures I have already mentioned Benjamin's essay the storyteller, but today I have a different piece in mind the essay that I have in mind by Walter Benjamin is titled thesis on the philosophy of history.

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*"Theses on the Philosophy of History"*

In this essay, Benjamin talks about his favorite painting by the artist Paul Klee. And originally the painting was titled Angelus Novus which literally means new angel.

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*Angelus Novus* by  
Paul Klee



Source: [fineartamerica.com](http://fineartamerica.com)

Now, as you can see on the slide, the painting depicts an almost cartoonish figure hovering in mid air with wing like arms and fluttering hair resembling scrolls of paper. Benjamin who bought this painting for himself in 1921 writes about this figure as the angel of history. And he describes the condition of this figure in the following lines and I quote.

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“His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.”

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The figure of modernism is much akin to this figure of the angel of history, because both find themselves looking at heaps of fragments, even as the known world of the past explode and gets reduced to a pile of wreckage. This experience of reality as fragmented would thus emerge as one of the central motives of modernist aesthetics. This is perhaps most strikingly evident at the visual level in the cubist paintings of artists like Pablo Picasso for instance, take for example, this 1910 painting titled girl with a mandolin.

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*Girl with a Mandolin* by  
Pablo Picasso



Source: MoMA

The figure of the girl is entirely made up of fragments, as if the artist or the spectator is trying to look at her from several perspectives simultaneously, and then trying to pile together the different images of the girl into a single representation. And as we can see here the notion of a reality that is familiar; that is uniform, that is smoothly coherent is clearly missing from this painting here.

Now, such artistic attempts to engage with fragments was not just limited to painting, but it could also be noted during the modernist period in the field of music, and most prominently in the form of the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg. But since we are

focused on literature let us discuss some pieces of literary modernism which engages with the experience of a fragmented reality. Among the most famous of such literary pieces we can count w b xs 1919 poem titled the second coming; which announces at the end of the first world war, the destruction and fragmentation of the coherent and the familiar world of the past through these memorable lines. Things fall apart the center cannot hold mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

T S Eliot to whom we have referred to in our previous lecture on new criticism; is even more direct in his pronouncement when he presents our perception of reality as quote.

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"A heap of broken images"

"The Wasteland"

A heap of broken images, in his poem the wasteland a more interesting, but perhaps less direct way in which modernist writers engaged with the notion of a fragmented reality, and the loss of the past and of tradition as a comprehensive whole is evident In James Joyce's novel Ulysses.

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James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)

This novel was published in 1922 which is often hailed as the miracle year of literary modernism. And it is celebrated as the miracle year of literary modernism, because this was a year which of course, saw the publication of *Ulysses*, but this was also the year when Eliot's *The Waste Land* was published as well as Virginia Woolf novel *Jacob's Room* and her short story titled *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*; which should lead to develop into the classic novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.

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Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* and the short story "*Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*", which was later transformed into a novel, were published in 1922 too.

Anyway the reason I referred to Ulysses was because I wanted to draw your attention to the ways in which it engages with fragmentation. And one of the chief reason in which this novel articulates fragmentation is through the writing style. The entire novel in fact, parodies a number of writing style, ranging from that of sentimental literature to catechism to surrealist fiction to pedestrian langes, and by mixing up all of these different stylistic techniques often in the same chapter. The novel conveys a sense of being something like a patchwork quilt, a kind of a collage in which various scraps and pieces of literary traditions are placed together to form a design.

Now, here you might observe that I am actually putting forward a contradiction, when I am pointing out both the fragmented nature of Ulysses as well as it is attempt to create a design. And this contradiction is actually very crucial to modernism. As we noted in Walter Benjamin's elaboration of Paul Klee's painting the figure of the angel caught within the maelstrom of modern history cannot refuse to acknowledge the process of fragmentation that he sees unfolding before his eyes. But neither can he help himself from trying to and I quote.

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“awaken the dead, and make whole what has been  
smashed”

Awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. So, there is a duality at work here in which the process of fragmentation is acknowledged and yet, attempts are also made to bring the fragments together to form a whole again. This duality in fact, is at the heart of modernist literature. So, for instance even while takes like the waste land or

Ulysses present a fragmented surface they also attempt to structure these fragments to produce a sense of wholeness and unity. And one of the major ways in which modernist literature tries to structure the fragments and give them a sense of unity is through using myths.

So, for instance underneath all the various allusions, quotations, stylistic changes that these texts depict, you will find an underlying mythic story that keeps these fragments together. So, whereas, the wasteland employs the fisher king myth of the Arthurian legend, Joyces Ulysses is underlined by the myth of odyssey; which we find narrated in the Homeric epic.

It is through these underlying stories or myths that modernist literary works seek to maintain a sense of coherence. And this coherence is often not visible on the surface and therefore, readers might miss it on their first reading. But these mythic structures are nonetheless present at the subliminal level giving the reader, a sense of wholeness, a sense of connectivity, a sense of everything coming together to form a pattern a design.

And the experience of reading a modernist text is therefore, somewhat akin to the experience of looking at the cubist painting of Picasso that I mentioned a few moments ago because maybe at the first glance the painting will only appear to be a heap of fragments. But when we concentrate on it, we start making out the presence of a pattern; which unites the fragmented surface into the identifiable shape of a girl with a mandolin.

The effect of the underlying subtext is therefore, something similar, because it too binds the fragmented surface of the text and gives it a sense of wholeness. When however, we move from modernism to post modernism; which is assumed to begin from around the time of the Second World War, we notice 2 important things. The first thing that we notice is that the modernist engagement with the notion of fragmented reality remains intact, remains present.

And this is, but expected because all the agencies of change that were at work during the modernist period intensified and accelerated in the decades following the 1930's. And the horrors of the first world war was acted out in a far larger scale by the second world war. But on the other hand with the emergence of post modernism we also start encountering a critique of the desire for wholeness that underlined the modernist engagement with the

fragmented reality. And to understand this further let us now move to study the work of Jean Francois Lyotard.

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**Jean-François Lyotard** (1924 – 1988)

His *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979) was later translated in English as *The Postmodern Condition*.



Source: The MindSmith - Altavista

Lyotard whose deeds are 1924 to 1998 was the author of the highly influential 1979 publication *la condition of postmodern*; which was later translated in English as the *postmodern condition*. And this book was one of the pioneering texts which introduced the term *post modernism* in the fields of philosophical literary and cultural studies. And according to this book, the most fundamental feature that characterize the *postmodern condition* is and I quote.

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“incredulity towards metanarratives”

Incredulity towards metanarratives in other words, distrust towards metanarratives. So, what is a metanarrative? Well, the prefix meta is derived from the Greek language and is usually used to signify something that lies beyond or above. Now according to the Oxford English dictionary, the prefix meta is attached to and I quote from the dictionary.

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the prefix “meta” is attached “to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions”.

The name of a subject or discipline to denote another subject or discipline which deals with ulterior issues in the same field or which raises questions about the nature of the

original discipline and its methods, procedures and assumptions. Now if we turn specifically to the definition of meta narrative in the Oxford English Dictionary we get this.

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“[A] piece of narrative, esp. a classic text or other archetypal story, which provides a schematic worldview upon which an individual's experiences and perceptions may be ordered.”

So, meta narrative is defined as a piece of narrative; especially, a classical text or other archetypal stories like myths for instance, which provides a schematic worldview upon which and individuals' experiences and perceptions may be ordered.

Now, as we have just seen, modernism was heavily invested in the concept of metanarratives. They were looking for archetypal stories, archetypal patterns which would provide some kind of a schematic worldview on which their individual experiences which were fragmented could be brought together and could be ordered.

And when confronted with the fragmentation of the known world, familiar past and accustomed rhythms of life, the modernist artists or novelist or poet tried hard to connect the fragments together by highlighting the presence of an underlying design; a grand metanarrative as it were that would help make sense of the world as a unified whole. However, according to Lyotard post modernism denies the primacy of any such unifying meta discourse or meta narrative and prioritizes what he calls *petit récit*, or little narratives instead of a single unifying grand narrative or master narrative.

Now, this shift from rounding a grand meta narrative to critiquing or showing incredulity towards meta narratives has had significant consequences within the field of



literary studies. But before we come to that let us try and understand why leotard talks about the priority of little narratives over one grand narrative. And to do that, we will have to turn to one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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**Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951)**



Source: Famous People

Because, it is his idea of language games that influence leotard's theorization of the postmodern incredulously towards meta narratives. So, to try and understand Wittgenstein's concept of language games, let us take the help of an example. Let us say that I author the following statements.

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"The ear is burning..."

"The nose is burning..."

"The tongue is burning..."

"The body is burning..."

The ear is burning, the nose is burning, the tongue is burning, the body is burning. Now these are statements with which the religious preacher Gautam Buddha began the different sections of his famous fire sermon, while addressing a gathering of thousand monks or bhikkhus.

Now, in this context the notion of burning is to be understood as the discomfort and restlessness caused by desire which adheres to our senses and to our body as a whole thereby causing us misery or [FL]. The way to achieve liberation from misery or [FL] is to eliminate craving or desire, and this will lead to what Buddha calls nirvana; which literally means the extinguishing of the fire.

Now, let us suppose that I utter these same set of statements about burning while sitting in front of a doctor in his chamber in a hospital. In that context, my statements would be understood quite differently from how Buddha's disciples understood his fire sermon. In the hospital, the doctor would interpret my statements to mean that I am suffering from intense irritation and burning sensation throughout my body because of some physical malady, or probably because I have been physically touched by fire.

Now, why is the understanding of the statements and especially the word burning different in these 2 different scenarios? According to Wittgenstein, they are differently interpreted because the 2 different scenarios set up 2 different kinds of language games. According to Wittgenstein, our language uses are intimately connected to our concrete social activities, what we speak is an integral component of how we engage with the world through action.

Different spheres of activities therefore, produce different kinds of language uses which are underlined by their own distinct rules of meaning making. For instance, the bhikkhus listening to the fire sermon of Gautam Buddha who was delivering it he was using language as a complement to their religious or spiritual activities. Therefore, the understanding of the language comes from within that context of religious action.

This makes it a distinct language game in itself and here Wittgenstein uses the word game, because just like any other game for instance cricket or football or chess. In this language game to the meaning making is guided by its own unique set of rules, it is its own unique set of principles. On the other hand, when I utter the sentences in front of a doctor, the doctor and I are caught up in another unique language game which is distinct

from the previous one. In this little language game, the understanding of the words is based on the medical action which provides the context.

And this context of action generates a sense of meaning making rules that are very different from the rules of the language game in which the bhikkhus and Gautam Buddha participates during the fire sermon. And what we need to keep in mind here is that you cannot use the underlying rules of a language game of a specific language game rooted in a specific context of action to interpret another language game; that is rooted in another specific context of action.

Not only that, we cannot even legitimately critique the meaning making process of a language game from the vantage point of another language game. And this is similar to the fact that we cannot critic the way a game like football for instance; is played or how it makes sense from the vantage point of let us say chess playing or cricket playing, because that would not only be an absurd exercise, but it would be an illegitimate exercise.

Now, in leotards scheme of things the [FL] or the little narratives are distinct language games rooted in different contexts. Therefore, any attempt to understand them through the lens of one single grand narrative in the name of unity is to be considered an illegitimate action. In contrast, the little narratives are actually to be celebrated over a single grand narrative, and this is precisely the celebration that characterizes the postmodern condition. So, for instance in many textbooks, you will see that though both modernism and post modernism engaged with the fragmented reality, it is in post modernism that you see a celebration of fragmentation.

So, this is the celebration that I am now talking about, but then we are confronted with a question; which is why should the plurality of little narratives be celebrated over the singularity of one grand narrative. Well, one grand narrative effectively means the imposition of one specific narrative promulgated from one specific subject position on to everything else.

For instance, the grand narrative of patriarchy is promulgated from a subject position which prioritizes the male and the masculine. In our lectures on feminism, we have already seen how the hold of this grand narrative has led to a systematic denial of women's rights. It is only gradually that we are trying to move towards a world order;

where women centric discourses would be at least regarded to be as legitimate as the man centric discourse of patriarchy.

Similarly, it is only generally that we are trying to emerge out of the grand narrative of heterosexuality, and bring to the mainstream narratives about alternative forms of sexuality. From leotards perspective the postmodern condition is characterized by this growing sensitivity towards the possibility of a multiplicity of equivalent narratives. And one of the major consequences of this celebration and proliferation of alternative discourses has been marked by the rise of post colonialism in the field of literary studies. And we are going to take a post colonialism and its impact on literary theory in our next lecture. Goodbye till then.