

### **Should we regard Modernism as an optimistic or pessimistic movement?**

In literature ‘Modernism’ is a retrospectively applied description of the period approximately between 1890 and 1930. Of this period Bradbury suggests that it is the 1920s that was the “decade of the general triumph of the ‘modern’” during which “many of the epic books at the heart of the Modern movement [...] came out” (1994:143); indeed Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was first published in 1922 and Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* in 1925. The fundamental principles of Modernism are the “radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities” (Keep, McLaughlin & Parmar 1993:1) away from the conventionality of artistic expression of the nineteenth century, and challenging established “morality, taste, traditions, and economic values” (Gale Group, 2004:1).

In order to explore optimism and pessimism within Modernism their definitions need to be determined.

‘Optimism’ is defined as

the doctrine [...] that the actual world is the ‘best of all possible worlds’ [...] in which the most good could be obtained at the cost of the least evil.

(OED 1989: optimism 1)

In more general terms it can be applied to “any view which supposes the ultimate predominance of good over evil in the universe” (OED 1989:optimism 2). ‘Pessimism’ is the antithesis of this being defined as “the doctrine [...] that this world is the worst possible, or that everything naturally tends to evil” (OED 1989: pessimism 3).

Using these definitions which employ the ideas of good and evil is historically pertinent when considering works that were written after the unparalleled atrocities of the First World War in an age which saw global economic decline, and England’s prosperity after the Industrial Revolution being sorely damaged. Post-war literature has been described as a “dismayed reaction to the fragmentation of culture” (Bradbury 1994:144) a quotation in which it is impossible not to hear echoes of Eliot’s “fragments [...] shored against my ruins” (line 403) or to consider the structure of *Mrs Dalloway* especially Septimus Smith’s shell-shocked mind.

The title of Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* immediately creates an image of barren desolation, a symbol of something which has both existed, but now no longer does so. Spender refers to the influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the "primitive horror" in the poem, and the corruption of "civilised consciousness" (1975:120ff); Eliot's grimy description of the Thames (lines 266-276) is also remarkably similar to the second paragraph of *HoD*. The idea of desolation is enforced by the references to death throughout the poem, especially to the war dead, the number of whom Eliot remarks on as being unaware that "death had undone so many" (line 63). In this instance the war dead are also used to symbolise the commuters walking to work living a meaningless nine to five existence, all sharing in a spiritual death.

The awfulness of existence in London, even for the absent survivor of the war, is shown through the episode in the pub discussing Lil's husband (lines 139-172). Notably this passage also refers to death in a worryingly commonplace manner with the pills to induce an abortion, and the closeness of death during a previous childbirth. The five repetitions of "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" work in different ways, superficially it is the only way in which the reader knows that the scene is set in a pub at closing time, but there is also the idea of time being limited for society, providing a proleptic image of the twentieth century. Although Eliot could be criticised for providing a culturally élitist perspective of a 'typical' London scene (a criticism frequently levelled against Modernist works) it can be seen to be a long way from comparable scenes in earlier novels where either the plot or subtext would contain a sense of hope.

The poem can also be seen to be drawing attention to the cultural death of society: the 'Shakespearean Rag' is described as both "elegant" and "intelligent" (line 128ff) which portrays art through jazz music as having been trivialised in the contemporary world; it also provides both a superior and ironic view of popular culture from Eliot's, and implicitly the reader's, view point. The fragmented quotations from Shakespeare and Dante amongst others could be interpreted as an indication of how important literary works have been reduced by society's conscience to what we would, today, call sound bites.

Looking at contemporary society's demise, Eliot could be seen to connect it to Jesus's ultimate sacrifice

for mankind at the start of the final section:

He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience (lines 328-330)

Jesus died to save mankind from their sins, but now "He" is dead something has gone wrong and "We" (society) who had been alive and filled with hope before the end of the nineteenth century, or the start of the First World War, are dying. Dying "[w]ith a little patience" suggests that "we" have become accustomed to, and accepting of, our death and decay, and in doing so have blithely accepted the state of affairs of which Eliot is warning against.

Considering the theme of death within the poem is only one strand of the poem's meaning, but it clearly exemplifies Eliot's perception of London as a society collapsing as "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria" (line 374) have done before. Everything is shown in a very negative way and the undercurrent of badness, especially portrayed through the many loveless relationships (extending to rape in one instance) and allusions to hell, gives a foreboding sense of a tendency towards evil. Although elements of the fertility myth and rebirth are woven throughout the poem, the idea of death and suffering is surely the most prominent.

In contrast to Eliot, Mrs Dalloway's life and London are initially shown in a positive manner, as things "she loved" (Woolf 1992:4). Tambling notes that the view given of the London which she loves is "nostalgic" and not dissimilar to the "myth-making" of earlier generations (1993:58). As Clarissa continues her perambulation she begins to reflect on her inevitable death and the fact that London would continue without her. She then concerns herself with whether she resented this or whether it was "consoling to believe that death ended absolutely" (Woolf 1992:9).

Her literary counterpart, Septimus Smith, on the other hand reaches the conclusion that life is not worth living and ultimately commits suicide by defenestration but not before considering that "He did not want

to die. Life was good” (*ibid* 164). Although Dr Holmes “could not conceive” why Septimus would kill himself, the reader who has greater access to his character knows that it is a result of the horrors of the Great War, and “he sees the world as an evil place from which he is anxious to escape” (Lodge 1993:30).

Lodge views Woolf’s later novels as naturalistic in the respect that they leave the characters “exactly where they have always been” oscillating between “joy and despair until they die” (*ibid* 27) although the characters’ joyful experiences are as fragmented memories such as Mrs Dalloway’s life at Bourton. These piecemeal moments are not unlike brief images in *TWL* such as the description of the walls of the church of St Magnus Martyr as “Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold” (line 265). They seem to offer a flash of beauty within an otherwise mundane, in whatever social strata, existence.

The oscillation of Woolf’s characters is remarked on as always ending on an “affirmative upbeat” (Lodge 1993:27), with the closing words of *Mrs Dalloway* being “It is Clarissa, he said. / For there she was.” (Woolf 1992:213). While this would not necessarily have to be the conclusion to the novel, it is the end of the reader’s shared experience and it leaves Clarissa as a defiant character standing fast in her London regardless of the changes around her until, presumably, she dies. The conclusion of *TWL* is worth examining as it ends with words traditionally found as the end of an Upanishad. This is interesting in two ways, firstly because Eliot looks to Eastern sources for a conclusion to the poem in a way which could be seen to be ultimately rejecting Westernism, but more importantly because an Upanishad is a “speculative treatise dealing with the Deity, creation, and existence” (OED 1989: Upanishad). The feeling of looking towards the potential of the future through speculation gives an affirmative conclusion to the poem: even if the future is not one based on contemporary existence there is a hope somewhere for the future.

Overall the feeling of pessimism pervades modernist literature, which when placed in its historical context is unsurprising. As modernism was a radical reaction to nineteenth century art forms its rejection of Victorian optimism is a natural result. In some ways it also seems to act as a portentous warning of the Second World War which in turn had a massive impact on “human consciousness and artistic expression”

(Bradbury 1994: 264). There is no question that Eliot portrays a bleaker picture of society's demise than Woolf, although considers characters of all social ranks, whereas Woolf concerns herself primarily with a single strata of society which may be why her London is portrayed as a better place than Eliot's.

There is no way in which either text, could be seen as providing a picture of the world as the 'best of all possible worlds', predominantly filled with goodness. Society has been irretrievably changed by evil and the literature reflects this in its negativity. Modernism must therefore be seen as a principally pessimistic movement, although the occasional glimpses of beauty and hope mean that it could never be described as entirely pessimistic.

(1597 words)

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