Modern Literature (Novel, Short Stories, Modern Poetry).

**Modernism**, in the fine arts, a break with the past and the [concurrent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concurrent) search for new forms of expression. Modernism fostered a period of experimentation in the arts from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, particularly in the years following [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I).

In an era characterized by [industrialization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/industrialization), the nearly global adoption of capitalism, rapid [social change](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-change), and advances in [science](https://www.britannica.com/science/science) and the [social sciences](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science) (e.g., Freudian theory), Modernists felt a growing alienation incompatible with Victorian [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality), optimism, and convention. New ideas in psychology, [philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy), and political theory kindled a search for new modes of expression.

**Modernism in literature**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/82/138382-050-2E8FCB26/Virginia-Woolf.jpg)

English novelist Virginia Woolf, 1928.

The Modernist impulse is fueled in various literatures by industrialization and [urbanization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urbanization) and by the search for an authentic response to a much-changed world. Although prewar works by [Henry James](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-James-American-writer), [Joseph Conrad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Conrad), and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I). The enormity of the war had undermined humankind’s faith in the foundations of Western society and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), and postwar Modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation. A primary theme of [T.S. Eliot](https://www.britannica.com/biography/T-S-Eliot)’s long poem [*The Waste Land*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Waste-Land) (1922), a [seminal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/seminal) Modernist work, is the search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. With its fragmentary images and obscure [allusions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allusions), the poem is typical of Modernism in requiring the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text.

Eliot’s was not the dominant voice among Modernist poets. In the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) [Robert Frost](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Frost) and [Carl Sandburg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-Sandburg) evocatively described the regions—New England and the Midwest, respectively—in which they lived. The [Harlem Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art) produced a rich coterie of poets, among them [Countee Cullen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Countee-Cullen), [Langston Hughes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Langston-Hughes), [Claude McKay](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claude-McKay), and [Alice Dunbar Nelson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alice-Dunbar-Nelson). [Harriet Monroe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Monroe) founded *Poetry* magazine in Chicago in 1912 and made it the most important organ for [poetry](https://www.britannica.com/art/poetry) not just in the United States but for the English-speaking world. During the 1920s [Edna St. Vincent Millay](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edna-St-Vincent-Millay), [Marianne Moore](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marianne-Moore), and [E.E. Cummings](https://www.britannica.com/biography/E-E-Cummings) expressed a spirit of revolution and experimentation in their poetry.

A sense of disillusionment and loss pervades much American Modernist fiction. That sense may be centerd on specific individuals, or it may be directed toward American society or toward civilization generally. It may generate a nihilistic, destructive impulse, or it may express hope at the prospect of change. [F. Scott Fitzgerald](https://www.britannica.com/biography/F-Scott-Fitzgerald) skewered the [American Dream](https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Dream) in [*The Great Gatsby*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Great-Gatsby) (1925), [Richard Wright](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Wright-American-writer) exposed and attacked American racism in [*Native Son*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-Son) (1940), [Zora Neale Hurston](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zora-Neale-Hurston) told the story of a Black woman’s three marriages in [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Their-Eyes-Were-Watching-God) (1937), and [Ernest Hemingway](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernest-Hemingway)’s early novels [*The Sun Also Rises*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Sun-Also-Rises) (1926) and [*A Farewell to Arms*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Farewell-to-Arms-novel) (1929) [articulated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/articulated) the disillusionment of the [Lost Generation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lost-Generation). Meanwhile, [Willa Cather](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Willa-Cather) told hopeful stories of the [American frontier](https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-frontier), set mostly on the [Great Plains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Plains), in [*O Pioneers!*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/O-Pioneers) (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), [John Steinbeck](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Steinbeck) depicted the difficult lives of migrant workers in [*Of Mice and Men*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Of-Mice-and-Men-by-Steinbeck) (1937) and [*The Grapes of Wrath*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Grapes-of-Wrath) (1939), and [William Faulkner](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Faulkner) used stream-of-consciousness monologues and other formal techniques to break from past literary practice in [*The Sound and the Fury*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Sound-and-the-Fury-novel-by-Faulkner) (1929).

Across the Atlantic, the publication of the Irish writer [James Joyce](https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Joyce)’s [*Ulysses*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ulysses-novel-by-Joyce) in 1922 was a landmark event in the development of Modernist literature. Dense, lengthy, and controversial, the [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel) details the events of one day in the life of three Dubliners through a technique known as [stream of consciousness](https://www.britannica.com/art/stream-of-consciousness), which commonly ignores orderly sentence structure and incorporates fragments of thought in an attempt to capture the flow of characters’ mental processes. Portions of the book were considered obscene, and *Ulysses* was banned for many years in English-speaking countries. Other European Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) included [Virginia Woolf](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Virginia-Woolf), [Marcel Proust](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcel-Proust), and the American expatriate [Gertrude Stein](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gertrude-Stein).