

THE CONCEPT OF MODERNISM AND THE REASONS FOR ITS EMERGENCE

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Abstract:

Modernism represents a radical shift in cultural, artistic, and intellectual life that emerged in response to the transformative effects of industrialization, urbanization, and global conflict. Characterized by a break with traditional forms, modernism embraced experimentation and new modes of expression across literature, art, architecture, and philosophy. This paper explores the foundational principles of modernism, its historical context, and the social, technological, and intellectual forces that led to its rise in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Keywords: Modernism, industrialization, cultural shift, avant-garde, urbanization, World War I, artistic innovation.

Introduction

Modernism is more than an artistic movement—it is a comprehensive cultural transformation that questioned and redefined established norms in art, literature, society, and philosophy. Emerging in the late 19th century and developing through the early 20th century, modernism reflected profound changes in the human experience. As Bradbury and McFarlane (1976) state, “Modernism signaled a self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression to represent modern life.”

Materials and Methods

This article employs qualitative content analysis based on a review of secondary academic sources, including scholarly articles, historical analyses, and theoretical writings. Key texts by modernist thinkers and critics were analyzed to identify central themes of the movement and trace the historical conditions that fostered its development.

Discussion

1. Defining Modernism

Modernism refers to a broad movement that encompasses a range of styles and ideologies across art, literature, architecture, and philosophy. Its key feature is the rejection of traditional narratives and structures. For example, Virginia Woolf argued that writers must look within to portray the “inner life” of characters rather than focusing on external events (Woolf, 1925).

Similarly, Levenson (2011) describes modernism as “a cultural response to the collapse of certainty and the fragmentation of experience.”

2. Intellectual and Technological Background

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed rapid scientific and technological progress. These advances challenged old paradigms and fueled a shift toward skepticism and relativism. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, which revealed the unconscious as a driving force behind human behavior, played a significant role in shaping modernist perspectives. As Friedman (2001) notes, “The modernist project was deeply informed by the insights of new sciences and philosophies that displaced man from the center of the universe.”

3. Social and Political Factors

Urbanization and industrialization brought both progress and alienation. The anonymity and fragmentation of modern city life were common themes in modernist literature. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), for instance, captured the spiritual emptiness and disillusionment of post-war society. According to Childs (2000), “Modernism’s bleakness reflected a deep disillusionment with the social and moral order following World War I.” The war had shattered illusions of progress, leading artists and writers to reject the rationalism of previous centuries.

4. The Rise of the Avant-Garde

The avant-garde played a vital role in accelerating the modernist agenda. Movements such as Dada and Surrealism deliberately opposed bourgeois aesthetics and conventional morality. Dada artist Tristan Tzara famously declared, “Art is a private affair; the artist produces it for himself” (as cited in Levenson, 2011, p. 156), emphasizing the subjective and individualistic ethos of modernism. These movements sought to provoke, shock, and inspire a reevaluation of reality through abstraction, absurdity, and chance.

Conclusion

Modernism emerged as a complex and multifaceted response to the dramatic transformations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It represented a break with the past, a critique of industrial society, and a desire to reconstruct meaning through new artistic forms. Despite its fragmentation, modernism has had a lasting influence on literature, philosophy, and the arts, continuing to shape how we understand creativity and identity in the modern world.

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