

“A Botched Civilization”: World War I and Modernism

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The shockwaves of the First World War, which reverberated through history, politics, and society also extended to the world of art and literature. Though the modernist movement in literature began much before the war, the aftermath of the tragedy consolidated it and heralded its clear arrival. This is why World War I is often credited with ‘birthing the modern.’ World War I had a direct impact on the modernist movement as many writers and poets participated in the war as soldiers and nurses, and some even lost their lives on the battlefield. The first-hand experience of war became a reason for several modernist writers’ disillusionment with the Empire and its policies. In my term paper, I will explore the modernist disenchantment with the Empire, and focus on its critique of the violence and destruction caused by the war. The objective of this paper is to highlight the modernist writer’s efforts to reconcile the changes wrought by World War I through their art and through their responses to the trauma caused by the war. My term paper will focus on Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* as representative texts of this time period to initiate a discussion about the relationship between modernism as a literary movement and the experiences of war.

Literary critic Michael Levenson in his book *Modernism* observes that, “the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 was a provocation, a trauma and a stimulus that changed the course of modernism.” This can be seen in the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who are considered to be not only seminal modernist writers but are also credited as being among the ‘primary theorists’ of the modernist movement. Their work is informed with an underlying disillusionment with the disintegration of western civilisation in the post-war world, which finds expression in their experiments with language and form. The influence of modernism extended not just to poetic output but also revolutionized the novel as a form of literary expression. Virginia Woolf’s novels are a testament to the modernist idiom, characterized by their unconventional handling of content and form.

Some proponents of the avant-garde movement were enamoured of the idea of war as an aggressive, cleansing force. Ana Carden-Coyne, in her article published in *The Guardian*, titled ‘*Wounded Visionaries*’, points out that “violent experiment was one

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