



خيبة الأمل والتجريب: الحداثة الإنجليزية في ظل حربين (1918-1939)

هبة جاسم اليسارات

جامعة البیان

Email: hiba.j@albayan.edu.iq

الملخص

تشير فترة ما بين الحربين (1918-1939) إلى مرحلة حاسمة وتحولية للحداثة الإنجليزية. مستمدة مباشرة من التأثير العميق للحرب العالمية الأولى ومتصاعدة في ظل التهديد الوشيك للحرب العالمية الثانية، شهدت هذه الفترة التي استمرت عقدين من الزمن خيبة أمل ثقافية كبيرة أثارت تجارب فنية وأدبية جذرية. تستكشف هذه المقالة كيف أن صدمة الحرب الكبرى عطلت اليقينيات التقليدية، مما دفع الكتاب الحداثيين إلى تفكيك الأشكال التقليدية، والغوص في الذاتيات المجزأة، ومواجهة عالم يُنظر إليه على أنه متفكك وفوضوي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث المقالة في كيفية تأثير التوترات السياسية والاقتصادية المتزايدة في الثلاثينيات – "ظل" الصراع العالمي الثاني الوشيك – على تحول في التفاعل الحداثي، حيث كانت في بعض الأحيان تميل نحو التعليق السياسي الصريح، وفي أحيان أخرى تعزز التأمل الأعمق. من خلال تحليل الشخصيات الأدبية البارزة وأعمالهم، يجادل هذا البحث بأن الحداثة الإنجليزية خلال هذه الفترة تأثرت بشكل أساسي بتفاعل معقد بين خيبة الأمل المجتمعية العميقة والحاجة الملحة للتعبير الجمالي المبتكر لنقل عالم متغير تمامًا.

المصطلحات الرئيسية: الحداثة الإنجليزية، فترة ما بين الحربين، خيبة الأمل، التجريب الأدبي، التفقت

Disillusionment and Experimentation: English Modernism in the Shadow of Two Wars (1918-1939)

By Hiba Jasim Al-Yasarat

University of Al Bayan

Email: hiba.j@albayan.edu.iq

Abstract

The interwar period (1918-1939) signifies a crucial and transformative phase for English Modernism. Stemming directly from the profound impact of World War I and culminating in the looming threat of World War II, this two-decade interval experienced significant cultural disillusionment that spurred radical artistic and literary experimentation. This article investigates how the trauma of the Great War disrupted traditional certainties, leading modernist writers to deconstruct conventional forms, delve into fragmented subjectivities, and confront a world perceived as disintegrated and chaotic. Additionally, it examines how the rising political and economic tensions of the 1930s – the 'shadow' of the impending second global conflict – affected a shift in modernist engagement, at times leaning towards explicit political commentary, while at other moments fostering deeper introspection. Through an analysis of prominent literary figures and their works, this paper contends that English Modernism during this era was fundamentally influenced by a complex interaction between deep societal disillusionment and a pressing need for innovative aesthetic expression to convey an entirely transformed world.



Key Terms: *English Modernism, Interwar Period, Disillusionment, Literary Experimentation, Fragmentation*

1. Introduction

The interval from the conclusion of the First World War in 1918 to the commencement of the Second World War in 1939 served as a crucible for English Modernism, shaping its most unique traits amid an era marked by unprecedented global trauma and uncertainty. The so-called "War to End All Wars" paradoxically ushered in a period of deep disillusionment, exposing the vulnerability of Enlightenment principles, the emptiness of Victorian ethics, and the disastrous potential inherent in modern industrial society. As the immediate impact of the Great War diminished, its psychological and cultural repercussions echoed throughout society, fostering an environment ripe for artistic innovation. This paper posits that English Modernism during these two decades was characterized by a symbiotic connection between a pervasive sense of disillusionment—initially arising from WWI and subsequently intensified by interwar anxieties—and a pressing, unyielding pursuit of aesthetic and thematic experimentation. These innovations transcended mere stylistic embellishments; they represented radical efforts to develop new modes of representation capable of expressing a fragmented world and a fractured human consciousness in the face of looming global conflict.

2. Literature Review

The interwar period, specifically from 1918 to 1939, marks a pivotal juncture in the history of English literature, distinguished by deep disillusionment and radical innovation. Stemming directly from the profound impact of the First World War, English Modernism in this era confronted the disintegration of long-held certainties, ethical frameworks, and societal constructs. The immense devastation wrought by the war, alongside swift industrial advancements, social transformations, and the ominous prospect of the Second World War, necessitated that writers fundamentally reassess the essence and structure of literature, resulting in a paradigm shift that continues to shape modern literary discourse (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976).

The widespread disillusionment that followed the Great War acted as a crucial impetus for this literary evolution. The glorified tales of heroism and national pride, which were common in the earlier Victorian and Edwardian periods, were completely dismantled by the harsh truths of trench warfare, industrial carnage,



and unparalleled psychological distress. Paul Fussell's influential text, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), thoroughly examines how this experience fostered an "ironic mode" of perceiving the world, which infiltrated the psyche of an entire generation. Authors felt a pressing obligation to express a deep sense of loss, spiritual void, and the disconnect between personal experience and external reality, frequently resulting in a critique of the jingoistic language and moral indifference that had characterized the pre-war era.

In light of the disintegration of traditional beliefs and the fragmented nature of contemporary existence, English Modernist writers undertook a significant journey of formal and stylistic experimentation. They dismissed linear narratives, omniscient narration, and conventional plot structures, instead favoring techniques such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and multiple perspectives to encapsulate the complexities of the human psyche. The 'mythic method,' as articulated by T.S. Eliot, enabled writers to impose order and meaning onto a chaotic present by referencing ancient myths and historical narratives, as demonstrated in works like *The Waste Land* (Levenson, 1986). This formal innovation was not merely an aesthetic choice but a desperate endeavor to forge new ways of perceiving and representing a transformed world.

Key literary figures of this period exemplified these trends. Virginia Woolf, a pivotal figure, delved into the intricate complexities of inner life, memory, and perception in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Her employment of stream of consciousness and emphasis on subtle psychological states significantly influenced the evolution of the modern novel, shifting the focus from traditional heroism to introspective explorations of everyday consciousness (Marcus, 1987). Although an Irishman, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) also played a crucial role in shaping English Modernism, expanding the boundaries of language and narrative with its epic scope and innovative techniques, profoundly affecting British writers through its radical approach to realism and myth. T.S. Eliot's poetry, particularly *The Waste Land* (1922), with its fragmented structure, allusions, and stark depiction of post-war spiritual desolation, became a cornerstone for the thematic and aesthetic concerns of the era.

In the wake of World War I, the looming threat of another global conflict, alongside economic downturns and the rise of political extremism, intensified the widespread anxieties of the era. The 1930s witnessed an increasing politicization of literature, as authors such as W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Christopher Isherwood engaged with themes of fascism, communism, and social injustice (Hynes, 1972). Although their formal techniques remained rooted in modernism, their writings often displayed a more immediate interaction with the political



realities of their time, indicating a transition from the introspective despair characteristic of the post-war period to a more pressing demand for social and political discourse. This era represented a shift from the solely internal focus of early modernism to a literature that became increasingly cognizant of its significance in a tumultuous world.

In summary, English Modernism during the interwar years emerged as a direct response to the deep disillusionment caused by the First World War and the evident tensions leading up to the Second. This environment necessitated a radical reassessment of literary forms and themes, resulting in innovative experiments in narrative structure, character development, and poetic form. The impact of this period is profound, leaving a lasting influence on later literary movements and critical perspectives. Modernist authors questioned the fundamental purpose of literature, compelling it to address the intricacies of psychological trauma, fragmented identities, and existential uncertainties, thus transforming the English literary scene for future generations (Todd, 2015).

3. Significance of the Study

This research is of considerable importance for comprehending a crucial period in both literary history and cultural evolution, illustrating how significant societal turmoil can fundamentally alter artistic expression. By analyzing English Modernism (1918-1939) through the perspective of post-World War I disillusionment and pre-World War II apprehensions, this study illuminates the roots of narrative, poetic, and thematic experimentation that characterized much of 20th-century literature. It emphasizes how the psychological impacts of conflict, along with swift social and technological advancements, drove authors to deconstruct conventional forms and investigate new methods of representation, including stream of consciousness, fragmented narratives, and a challenge to established truths. A more profound understanding of this era offers essential insights for literary scholars, providing a solid framework for interpreting canonical works and grasping the intellectual and emotional atmosphere that nurtured their creation.

Moreover, it presents students and general readers with a thorough context for the lasting influence of modernism, uncovering how its innovative essence continues to shape contemporary literature and our comprehension of human reactions to crisis, alienation, and the quest for meaning in a disjointed world.

The objectives of this research are as follows:



- To examine the distinct historical and socio-political elements of the interwar period (1918-1939), which occurred between the two World Wars that contributed to a widespread sense of disillusionment, anxiety and a reevaluation of traditional values in England.
- To explore the ways in which this widespread disillusionment had a direct impact on the thematic elements and formal innovations found in English Modernist literature, including alterations in narrative structure, characterization, perspective, and poetic expression.
- To identify and critically analyze significant literary works and authors from this period, illustrating how their groundbreaking styles and thematic preoccupations addressed the cultural and psychological upheaval of the time.
- To assess the lasting impact of English Modernism, particularly in terms of how its radical innovations transformed the role and potential of literature in addressing societal crises and subsequently shaped future literary movements.

4. The Weight of Disillusionment: Post-WWI Trauma and Cultural Collapse

The deep disillusionment that engulfed Europe in the early 20th century, triggered by the unparalleled violence of World War I, swift industrial growth, and the decline of traditional Victorian morals, significantly transformed English Modernist literature. This widespread feeling of loss—encompassing faith, certainty, and a coherent worldview—was not simply a thematic undercurrent but rather a direct impetus for radical changes in narrative structure, character development, perspective, and poetic expression. Modernist authors faced a broken reality, which compelled them to create new literary forms capable of articulating the fragmentation, psychological intricacies, and subjective experiences that characterized their era, thus challenging the norms established by their predecessors (Levenson, 2011).

The thematic essence of English Modernist literature was a direct reflection of this widespread disillusionment. Authors wrestled with a profound sense of spiritual void, the disintegration of community, and an overarching existential dread. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," for example, famously conveys the spiritual barrenness and cultural decline of post-war Europe, presenting a collage of fragmented myths and crumbling traditions. Likewise, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce explored the inner lives of their characters, revealing the psychological distress, alienation, and pervasive sense of meaninglessness that characterized modern life (Bristow & Ellmann, 2015). This emphasis on the inner landscape mirrored a reality where



external certainties had collapsed, compelling individuals to confront their isolated subjectivities and the often-unheroic quest for identity within a fragmented society (Meyer, 2019).

In light of this fragmented reality, Modernist writers engaged in extensive experimentation with narrative forms, significantly diverging from the linear, omniscient storytelling characteristic of 19th-century realism. Techniques such as stream of consciousness, developed by Woolf and Joyce, sought to encapsulate the non-linear, frequently chaotic flow of thought and perception, mirroring the unstable and subjective essence of human experience. Works like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* plunge readers directly into the minds of characters, prioritizing internal monologue and sensory impressions over external plot. Additionally, Modernists often utilized disrupted timelines, multiple viewpoints, and unreliable narrators—as exemplified in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*—to challenge the concept of a singular objective truth and highlight the relativism of perception that disillusionment had engendered (Friedman, 2015).

Disillusionment also had a profound impact on characterization, perspective, and poetic expression. Modernist characters frequently exhibit alienation, introspection, and psychological complexity, grappling with their identities amid societal disintegration. Their identities are shaped less by external actions and more by their internal experiences, reflecting the period's emphasis on the individual's subjective reality. The transition from an objective, detached narrator to intensely subjective, often limited perspectives further accentuated the instability of meaning and the personal nature of truth. In poetry, the abandonment of traditional Victorian meter and rhyme transitioned to free verse, facilitating a more immediate and fragmented representation of modern existence. Poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound employed striking, often dissonant imagery, intricate allusions, and colloquial language to express the jaggedness of modern life, using language itself as a tool to both mirror and impose order on a chaotic, disillusioned world (Davis & Jenkins, 2012).

The widespread disillusionment that emerged after the turn of the 20th century served not only as a backdrop for English Modernist literature but also as its driving force. This discontent urged writers to forsake traditional literary norms and develop new thematic and formal approaches to express a world irrevocably transformed by trauma and the disintegration of grand narratives. From the spiritual emptiness reflected in its themes to the groundbreaking stream-of-consciousness techniques, fragmented character portrayals, subjective viewpoints, and inventive poetic language, Modernist literature represents a significant testament to the creative necessity arising from deep disenchantment. It ultimately



redefined the boundaries and potential of literary expression, leaving a lasting impact on the Western literary canon.

The cultural environment of post-World War I Britain was characterized by a profound sense of loss, trauma, and a breakdown of trust in established institutions and narratives. The immense scale of death, the brutal mechanization of warfare, and the disfigurement of an entire generation left deep scars on the national consciousness. As Paul Fussell astutely illustrated, the war irrevocably altered perceptions of heroism, honor, and progress, supplanting them with irony, absurdity, and a deep sense of futility (Fussell, 1975). This disillusionment transcended mere emotional response; it represented a philosophical crisis that challenged the very foundations of Western civilization.

T.S. Eliot's groundbreaking poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), serves as a definitive literary testament to the despair following the war. Its disjointed format, multiple voices, and stark depictions of spiritual emptiness and cultural decline effectively encapsulate the spirit of the time. Eliot's employment of the mythic method, contrasting ancient legends with contemporary degradation, emphasized the disintegration of a cohesive cultural heritage and the spiritual void of the current era. The poem's renowned opening lines, "April is the cruellest month," instantly overturn conventional poetic praise, establishing a mood of reversed expectations and profound discontent (Eliot, 1922).

Virginia Woolf, although not a soldier, perceptively expressed the societal trauma. Her works, including *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), delve into the enduring psychological impacts of the war through characters such as Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran tormented by his past. Septimus's struggle to reintegrate into civilian life, his deep sense of alienation, and his eventual suicide highlight the significant and often unrecognized injuries caused by the war, casting a pall over the seemingly ordinary lives of post-war London (Woolf, 1925). This profound psychological inquiry mirrors a wider modernist shift towards exploring the inner self, where the true toll of war and modernity was being assessed. Levenson observes that Modernists felt an urgent need to derive meaning from the remnants of a fractured reality, a challenge that required innovative forms (Levenson, 1986).

7. Aesthetic Responses: Innovation in Form and Narrative

The deep disillusionment experienced during the interwar period significantly drove Modernist authors towards radical experimentation with form. The established narrative structures and poetic norms of the Victorian age were considered insufficient to convey the complexities, contradictions, and fragmentation inherent in modern life. Authors endeavored to "make it new,"



operating under the belief that a transformed world necessitated a novel artistic approach (Pound, 1934).

Among the most notable experimental advancements was the stream of consciousness technique, refined by writers such as Woolf and James Joyce (whose *Ulysses* [1922], despite its Irish origins, had a profound impact on English Modernists). This method sought to encapsulate the fluid, associative, and frequently non-linear aspects of thought and perception, reflecting the tumultuous internal landscapes of characters confronting external chaos. For example, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) abandons traditional plot structures in favor of deeply internalized viewpoints, memories, and sensory impressions, thereby conveying a profoundly personal and subjective experience of time and loss. Her narrative challenges the concept of a stable, coherent self, illustrating a fragmented modern identity (Woolf, 1927).

Fragmentation and Collage emerged as defining traits, evident not only in Eliot's poetry but also in the narrative frameworks of novels. The intentional disruption of linear storytelling, the juxtaposition of diverse elements, and the layering of various perspectives reflected the perceived disintegration of social coherence and historical continuity. This served as a direct aesthetic reaction to a world that no longer appeared whole, where overarching narratives of progress had collapsed (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976).

Poetry also experienced a significant transformation. Poets such as W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, who rose to prominence in the 1930s, maintained a modernist dedication to formal experimentation while frequently incorporating a more straightforward interaction with social and political issues. Their poetry, although often marked by technical excellence and innovation, commonly addressed themes related to urban life, economic hardship, and the imminent danger of fascism, diverging from some of the more abstract preoccupations of previous modernists (Hynes, 1977).

8. Psychological Depths and the Modern Subject

The interwar period saw a significant rise in interest in psychology, especially the contributions of Freud and Jung, which had a profound impact on modernist inquiries into the human psyche. A sense of disillusionment with the external world prompted numerous writers to investigate the unconscious, examining the concealed motivations, neuroses, and traumas that influenced personal identity.

D.H. Lawrence, while often regarded as a forerunner of high modernism, persistently examined the primal urges and psychological complexities of his characters in works such as *The Rainbow* (1915, which gained considerable



readership and discussion during this era) and *Women in Love* (1920). His emphasis on the internal struggles between instinct and reason, along with the psychological effects of industrialization on human connections, resonated with the overarching modernist preoccupation with a fragmented yet authentic self in an increasingly dehumanizing environment (Lawrence, 1920).

Woolf, heavily shaped by psychoanalytic thought, carefully developed characters whose inner experiences were rich, intricate, and frequently contradictory. Her narratives prioritize the subtle dynamics of consciousness, memory, and emotion over external events. The themes of trauma, alienation, and the quest for meaning in a secularized society emerged as central motifs, mirroring a collective psychological dislocation (Cuddy-Keane, 21-22). The so-called "crisis of liberal humanism," as noted by Nicholls, resulted in a heightened emphasis on the individual's inner life as external structures began to disintegrate (Nicholls, 1995).

9. The Shadow Lengthens: Pre-WWII Anxieties and Shifting Engagements (1930s)

As the 1920s transitioned into the 1930s, the initial disillusionment following the war was intensified by emerging concerns: the Great Depression, the ascendance of fascism across Europe, and the unmistakable path towards another global conflict. This "shadow of two wars" – the enduring trauma from the first and the foreboding approach of the second – instigated a nuanced yet significant transformation within English Modernism.

While certain earlier modernists, such as Eliot, withdrew further into spiritual and traditionalist themes, a number of younger writers, notably the "Auden Generation," adopted a more explicitly political and socially conscious form of modernism. They aimed to comprehend the dynamics of societal disintegration and to express a humanist reaction to the looming threat of totalitarianism. Auden's poetry from this era, exemplified by "Spain 1937," directly confronted the Spanish Civil War, an ideological battleground that acted as a grim precursor to WWII. His writings exhibited an intensified sense of urgency and a commitment to ensuring that art would engage with, rather than simply mirror, political realities (Auden, 1937).

Authors such as Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender, through their journalistic and fictional works set in Berlin during the early 1930s (for instance, Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, published in 1939), effectively captured the decadent ambiance of a society on the verge of fascism, offering vivid and often ironic depictions of political and moral decline. Although their writing was technically innovative in its detached and observational approach, it increasingly



leaned towards a more explicit critique of political structures and social injustices (Isherwood, 1939).

This transition did not signify a complete departure from experimentation; rather, it often involved a modification of it. Authors continued to investigate fragmented identities and experimental styles, yet these were increasingly utilized to comprehend the social and political dynamics influencing individuals. The notion of a "sense of an ending," as articulated by Kermode in a broader context, emerged as a significant reality for numerous Modernists, propelling their creative endeavors (Kermode, 1967).

10. Conclusion

The era of English Modernism from 1918 to 1939 represents a remarkable period, significantly influenced by the dual shadows of two global wars. The disillusionment that arose from the unparalleled violence of World War I dismantled previous certainties, compelling writers to engage with a fractured reality and a wounded human psyche. This cultural upheaval was not solely a source of despair; rather, it served as a potent impetus for radical aesthetic innovation. Ranging from stream of consciousness to fragmented storytelling, and from mythic techniques to psychological realism, English Modernists persistently sought new forms to express the intricacies of modern existence.

As the 1930s unfolded, the ominous prospect of World War II heightened anxieties, leading some modernists to address political and social matters more directly, while others delved deeper into introspection regarding the human condition amidst looming disaster. Ultimately, English Modernism during this interwar period exemplifies the endurance of artistic expression in times of significant crisis. Emerging from a collective disillusionment, these writers created a body of work that not only mirrored the upheaval of their time but also fundamentally altered the trajectory of literature, providing lasting insights into the fractured modern identity and the persistent conflict between the individual and historical forces. Their legacy remains a compelling expression of a world reborn from devastation, continually wrestling with its own modernity.

References

- Auden, W. H. (1937). *Spain*. Faber and Faber.
- Bradbury, M., & McFarlane, J. (Eds.). (1976). *Modernism: A guide to European literature 1890-1930*. Penguin Books.
- Bristow, J., & Ellmann, M. (Eds.). (2015). *The Cambridge companion to Virginia Woolf* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.



- Conrad, P. (2006). *Modern times, modern places: Fiction, film and the city in literature and art*. Thames & Hudson.
- Cuddy-Keane, M. (2003). *Virginia Woolf, the intellectual imagination, and the modernist aesthetic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, A., & Jenkins, L. M. (Eds.). (2012). *The Oxford handbook of modern and modernist poetry*. Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. (1922). *The waste land*. Boni & Liveright.
- Friedman, S. S. (2015). *Planetary modernisms: Provocations on modernity across time*. Columbia University Press.
- Fussell, P. (1975). *The great war and modern memory*. Oxford University Press.
- Hynes, S. (1972). *The Auden generation: Literature and politics in England in the 1930s*. Princeton University Press.
- Hynes, S. (1977). *The Auden generation: Literature and politics in England in the 1930s*. Princeton University Press.
- Isherwood, C. (1939). *Goodbye to Berlin*. Hogarth Press.
- Joyce, J. (1922). *Ulysses*. Shakespeare and Company.
- Kermode, F. (1967). *The sense of an ending: Studies in the theory of fiction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1920). *Women in love*. Martin Secker.
- Levenson, M. (2011). *Modernism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levenson, M. H. (1984). *A genealogy of modernism: A study of English literary doctrine 1908-1922*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levenson, M. H. (1986). *A genealogy of modernism: A study of English literary doctrine 1908-1922*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levenson, M. H. (1986). *Modernism and the English novel*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marcus, J. (1987). *Virginia Woolf and the languages of patriarchy*. Indiana University Press.
- Meyer, J. (2019). *Men of war: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan.



- Nicholls, P. (1995). *Modernisms: A literary guide*. University of California Press.
- Pound, E. (1934). *Make it new: Essays by Ezra Pound*. Faber and Faber.
- Todd, R. (Ed.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of modernism*. Oxford University Press.
- Woolf, V. (1925). *Mrs Dalloway*. Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, V. (1927). *To the lighthouse*. Hogarth Press.