**Some Attributes of Modernist Literature**

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As with most of my course pages, this document is open to change.   
If you have any suggestions (additions, qualifications, arguments), [mail me](http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/2F55/mail%0Ato:jlye@brocku.ca).

Warning! This is not an exhaustive description. Okay, on to the Attributes...

**Perspectivism:** the locating of meaning from the viewpoint of the individual; the use of narrators located within the action of the fiction, experiencing from a personal, particular (as opposed to an omniscient, 'objective') perspective; the use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective; the consequent disappearance of the omniscient narrator, especially as 'spokesperson' for the author; the author retires from the scene of representation, files her or his fingernails (says Joyce).

Impressionism: an emphasis on the process of perception and knowing: the use of devices (formal, linguistic, representational), to present more closely the texture or process or structure of knowing and perceiving.

**A re-structuring of literature and the experience of reality it re-presents.** (Art always attempts to 'imitate' or re-present reality; what changes is our understanding of what constitutes reality, and how that reality can best be re-presented, presented to the mind and senses most faithfully and fully.) Modernist literature is marked by a break with the sequential, developmental, cause-and-effect presentation of the 'reality' of realist fiction, toward a presentation of experience as layered, allusive, discontinuous; the use, to these ends, of fragmentation and juxtaposition, motif, symbol, allusion.

Language is no longer seen as transparent, something if used correctly allows us to 'see through' to reality: rather language is seen as a complex, nuanced site of our construction of the 'real'; language is 'thick', its multiple meanings and varied connotative forces are essential to our elusive, multiple, complex sense of and cultural construction of reality.

Experimentation in **form** in order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life (see next point); also, not necessarily in connection with the former, to create a sense of art as artifact, art as 'other' than diurnal reality (art is seen as 'high', as opposed to popular).

The tightening of form: an emphasis on cohesion, interrelatedness and depth in the structure of the aesthetic object and of experience; this is accomplished in part through the use of various devices such as motif, juxtaposition, significant parallels, different voices, shifts and overlays in time and place and perspective.

**The (re)presentation of inner (psychological) reality**, including the 'flow' of experience, through devices such as stream of consciousness.

The use of such structural approaches to experience as psychoanalysis, myth, the symbolic apprehension and comprehension of reality.

**The use of interior or symbolic landscape:** the world is moved 'inside', structured symbolically or metaphorically -- as opposed to the Romantic interaction with transcendent forces acting through the exterior world, and Realist representations of the exterior world as a physical, historical, contiguous site of experience. David Lodge suggests in *Modes of Modern Writing* that the realist mode of fiction is based on metonomy, or contiguity, and the modernist mode is based on metaphor, or substitution.

**Time is moved into the interior as well:** time becomes psychological time (time as innerly experienced) or symbolic time (time or measures of time as symbols, or time as it accommodates a symbolic rather than a historical reality), not the 'historical' or railway time of realism. Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards and forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth.

A turn to 'open' or **ambiguous endings,** again seen to be more representative of 'reality' -- as opposed to 'closed' endings, in which matters are resolved.

The search for symbolic ground or an ontological or epistemic ground for reality, especially through the device of 'epiphany' (Joyce), 'inscape' (Hopkins), 'moment of being' (Woolf), '*Jetztzeit*' (Benjamin) (no, evidently not the source of 'jet-set') -- the moment of revelation of a reality beneath and grounding appearances. This relates as well to the move to tighten up form, to move experience inwards, and to explore the structural aspects of experience.

**The appearance of various typical themes,** including: question of the reality of experience itself; the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced.