Modernism: Context for T.S. Eliot

• By the dawn of the twentieth century, traditional stabilities of society, religion, and culture seemed to have weakened, the pace of change to be accelerating. The unsettling force of modernity profoundly challenged traditional ways of structuring and making sense of human experience. Because of the rapid pace of social and technological change; because of the mass dislocation of populations by war, empire, and economic migration; and because of the mixing in close quarters of cultures and classes in rapidly expanding cities, modernity disrupted the old order, upended ethical and social codes, cast into doubt previously stable assumptions about self, community, the world, and the divine. (NA 1889)
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• Early twentieth-century writers were aware of new developments in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, technology, and art.

  – Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)
    • Interest in subconscious desires expressed through symbols.
    • “Stream of consciousness” as a way of revealing meaningful connections.

  – Comparative religious studies and work in anthropology
    • Study of primitive cultures, their myths, and symbols
    • “Western religion was now decentered by being placed in a comparative context of numerous related mythologies…” (NA 1889)

  – Nihilism and “the death of God” discussed in philosophy (Nietzsche)
    • Origins of Existentialism
Modernism: Context for T.S. Eliot

• Early twentieth-century writers were aware of new developments in...
  
  – **Technology:**
    • Electricity was spreading
    • Wireless communication across the Atlantic (1901)
    • First airplane flight, Wright Brothers (1903)
    • Henry Ford introduced the first mass-produced car, the Model T (1913)
Modernism: Context for T.S. Eliot

- Early twentieth-century writers were aware of new developments in Art:
  - **Cubism, Picasso, (c. 1907-21)**
    - A radical departure from traditional Western methods of depicting reality.
    - Influenced by the stark power of African art and the art of other “primitive” cultures “newly discovered” by European intellectuals.
    - Represents a stark break from realism and exhibits bold, new, experimental tactics in disorienting and impacting the psyche of the audience.
Modernism: Context for T.S. Eliot

• Early twentieth-century writers were aware of new developments in Art:

Dadaism (c. 1916-21)

• “Cut & paste” art of reproduced images.

• Breaks with traditional ideas of a single, unified, coherent work of art.

• Another radical departure in traditional Western methods of depicting reality.

• It, too, represents a stark break from realism and bold, new, tactics in disorienting and impacting the psyche of the audience.
Modernism: Context for T.S. Eliot

• Early twentieth-century writers were aware of new developments in Music:
  
  – Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)*, 1913
    • Dissonance, asymmetry, polytonality, and polyrhythm.
    • Gone are the sweet melodies and neat symmetry (of a Strauss waltz)

  • It’s like the musical equivalent of saying something as jarring as

  “When the evening is spread out against the sky
   Like a patient etherized upon a table”

Clip from *Swan Lake* (1877)  (2:33-2:35)
Clip from *Riot at the Rite* (1913)  (0:00-1:00; 4:30-7:00)
T.S. Eliot

- Harvard & Oxford student
- Vast knowledge of languages (French, German, Greek, etc.), literature, and philosophy.
- Influenced by French Symbolists of the late 19thC and imagism of Ezra Pound.
- Preferred metaphysical wits such as John Donne over heavyweights such as John Milton, also preferred Hopkins over Tennyson.
  - He liked complex poetry that was tightly packaged, not drawn out or laden with personal feelings or personal moral pronouncements.
- He used dramatic monologues and some slang in his poetry.
- He disliked Romantic poets (e.g. Percy Shelley) who elaborated about their feelings.