

Module 8: Voices of Courage During Modernism



Topic 1 Content: Historical and Social Context of Modernism

Introduction

Historical and Social Context of Modernism

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Modernism is defined as an age of disillusionment and confusion. The Modernist writer raised all of the great questions about life: Who are we? Where are we going? What values should guide us on the search for our human identity? People asked questions but reached no answers. The turmoil that reflected in their art and shook the foundation of the way they viewed the world arose from many changes that occurred in the early 20th century. Use the timeline icon or the **NEXT** button to examine the rise of Modernism and its literary landmarks in greater detail.



World War I The Roaring Twenties The Great Depression

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America Enters the War (1917)

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In 1914, war broke out in Europe and quickly spread throughout the world, dividing nations between the Allies and the Central Powers. The United States avoided the conflict as long as possible, but after the sinking of the passenger ship the *Lusitania* among other conflicts and further hostility from the Central Powers, America felt compelled to enter the war in April of 1917. Millions of American men were drafted into the war that eventually claimed the lives of over nine million soldiers from numerous countries. Advancing technologies had wrought death and destruction on a scale never before seen.



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Eliot Publishes *The Waste Land* (1922)

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T. S. Eliot was born and raised in America and moved to England where he published his epic poem *The Waste Land* in 1922. Reflecting the disillusion cast by the horrors of World War I, the poem is in its essence a critique of the spiritual debasement of the modern world. Eliot uses a blend of numerous cultures and ideologies within a disjointed structure characteristic of the emerging Modernism movement.



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Fitzgerald Publishes *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* was a mirror of the social paradigm shift that dominated American culture in the "Golden Twenties." While men were away fighting in the war, the women left behind to fend for themselves worked hard at keeping the nation afloat. Liberated by the right to vote and boosted by the confidence of their autonomy, women for the first time bared their legs under short skirts, bobbed off their hair, drove cars, smoked, and drank alcohol, behaviors that were previously unthinkable. Women, minorities, and veterans alike tried to drown out the memories of war with extravagant parties, jazzy music, and glamorous style.



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The Stock Market Crashes (1929)

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The entertainment and pleasure in which Americans indulged with reckless abandon did not last forever. When the Stock Market crashed in 1929, economic collapse burdened America in what became known as the Great Depression. On top of the staggering rates of unemployment, many families suffered from drought that left them in abject poverty. As people struggled to survive by uprooting their families in search of new opportunity, the American Dream began to crumble.



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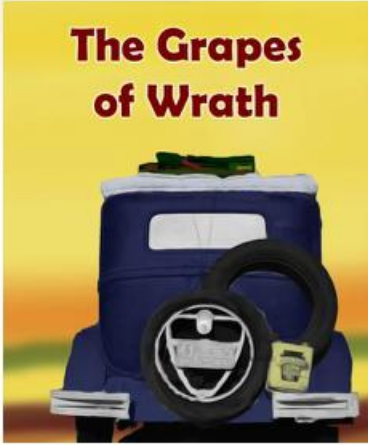
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Steinbeck Publishes *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

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Up until this point in American history, both cultural and literary, there had been one constant: the persistence of the American Dream. America was the "New Eden," the land of beauty, bounty, and unlimited promise. It was possible to achieve wealth and happiness despite social or economic class as long as one was willing to work for it. The Great Depression proved that sometimes no matter how hard people work, external forces can crush those dreams. Nobody captured this disillusion better than John Steinbeck, whose novel *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the heartbreaking story of just such a family oppressed by economic hardship and labor exploitation.



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