What Is Modernism?

Modernism refers to the bold new experimental styles and forms that swept the arts during the first part of the twentieth century.

- Modernism reflects a loss of faith in traditional values and beliefs, including the American Dream.
What Is the American Dream?

America is a new Eden, a “promised land” of beauty, unlimited resources, and endless opportunities.

The independent, self-reliant individual will triumph. Everything is possible for the person who places trust in his or her own powers and potential.

Progress is a good thing, and we can optimistically expect life to keep getting better and better.
A Harsh Awakening

Events of the early twentieth century brought a loss of innocence and a strong disillusionment with tradition. These events included

- World War I (1914–1918), which resulted in destruction on a scale never before seen
- the Great Depression that followed the 1929 crash of the New York stock market
A Modernist Timeline

**Historical Events**
- 1914: World War I begins in Europe
- 1920: Women in the U.S.A. win the right to vote
- 1929: Beginning of the Great Depression
- 1933: Roosevelt’s “New Deal“ program begins

**Literary Events**
- 1922: T. S. Eliot publishes *The Waste Land*; James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*
- 1925: F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes *The Great Gatsby*
- 1929: Ernest Hemingway publishes *A Farewell to Arms*
European modernist painters such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso explored new ways to see and represent reality.

In the Russian Revolution of 1917, Russians adopted socialism as the new system of government. Socialism was in direct opposition to the American system of capitalism.

Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, introduced new insights into the working of the subconscious mind.
Cultural Changes

- The 1919 Prohibition law led to bootlegging and ushered in the Jazz Age.
- In 1920, women in the U.S.A. won the right to vote.
Characteristics of Modern Literature

- New experiments with form and technique in both poetry and prose
- A new kind of hero who is flawed and disillusioned yet honorable and courageous
- Questioning of traditional beliefs and social structures
Symbolist poetry focuses on the emotional effect that objects can suggest and leads readers to discover truths through their own intuition and imagination.

The Imagists emphasized the importance of using the “exact” word to create a clear image. They chose everyday words over flowery, sentimental language.

The Harlem Renaissance was a powerful upsurge of African American cultural expression begun in 1920 in Harlem, New York.
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Psychoanalysis sparked new interest in the workings of the psyche. This interest led to the writing technique called stream of consciousness.

- The stream of consciousness style portrays the inner, often chaotic workings of a character's mind.
- This style was used famously by Irish writer James Joyce in his novel *Ulysses* and later by American writers Katherine Anne Porter and William Faulkner.
Flawed Heroes

Fictional heroes began to reflect disillusionment.

• Ernest Hemingway introduced a new kind of hero to American literature—a man of action who is disillusioned yet honorable and courageous and who shows “grace under pressure.”

• In *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser portrayed an ambitious but luckless man whose life ends in ruin.

• Edgar Lee Masters gave voice to the dark side of small-town life in *Spoon River Anthology*, a collection of poems narrated by the town’s dead.
Some poets still favored traditional poetic forms, although their subject matter was modern.

• Robert Frost used conventional poetic forms to create a unique, modern poetic voice.

• Some Harlem Renaissance poets, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, used conventional forms to express urgent, timely concerns about African American experience.
What Still Remains

• American Modernists challenged the American Dream, but they also retained some of its ideals.
  • The ideal of self-reliance persisted.
  • Writers such as Hemingway still envisioned the American landscape as a kind of Eden.

• Regardless of their experiments with literary form, writers still continued to ask basic, universal questions about the meaning and purpose of our existence.
What Have You Learned?

1. After World War I, American writers completely rejected traditional styles.
   a. true  b. false

2. The mass destruction of World War I caused disillusionment with the American Dream.
   a. true  b. false

3. Imagist poets used flowery, sentimental language.
   a. true  b. false
The End