NOTES ON MODERNISM

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL EVENTS

- Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams, 1910
- World War I (The Great War)—1914—1918
- Russian Revolution—1917
- Great Depression—1929
- World War II—1939-1945
- Socialism
- Communism
- Fascism
- Jingoism

THEMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

- Isolated self; suicide
- Absurdism
- Reconciling self to an orderless, often self-destructive world
- Mental relationship to the world of solid objects
- Increasing interest in myths and mythmaking
- Religious uncertainty
- Depression, hopelessness, disillusionment
- Waste
• Meaninglessness of world
• Historical perspective—one’s heritage
• Social commentary
• Non-conformity in language, thought, structure
• Tragedy of the “little man”
• Use of Eastern religions
• Fragmented industrial (technological world)
• Re-evaluation of the American “hero” in business and religion

STYLISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

• Conscious composition; on the other hand, often a lack of conventional form, structure, language
• Shifts in point of view
• Focus upon one central image
• Experimentation with idiom, dialect
• Surrealism—workings of the unconscious as manifested in dreams
• Return to classic forms—elegy, ode, and sonnet
NOTES ON ROBERT FROST

“I’ve been more or less unhappy since 1896. More or less unhappy, but not very unhappy.”

Frost, like other modernists, addressed questions that express the central modernists themes:

- How do we exist in a world in which reality is subject to agreement or lacks referentiaity altogether?
- How do we express the experience of fragmentation in personal and political life?
- How do we live with increasing awareness of our own mortality (“Home Burial,” “After Apple Picking,” and “Out, Out—“)?
- The death or absence of God?
- Our own powerlessness (“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”)?

The qualities of Frost’s seemingly simple poetry are actually complicated, subtle and illusive. At first glance, many of his lyric, descriptive, and narrative poems seem to have merit because they observe little noticed details of natural objects and rural characters; however, even in his least lyrics, Frost manages to achieve a strongly **dramatic element** primarily through a sensitive capturing of **“voice tones”** which add a sense of meaningfulness to all his poems. More than that, his imagery is developed in such a way as to endow even the most prosaically represented object like a wall or a tree or a path with implied **symbolic extensions** of meaning. His blend of matter and manner in his poems cause them to transcend the immediate relationships of the individual to the self, to others, to nature, to the universe as they probe the mysteries around which religious faith is built. While many of his separate poetic moods explore possible attitudes towards human experience, they repeatedly return to an implied attitude of devout reverence and belief.
Though his poetry remained unaltered in form and theme, the critical response to his work was incredibly varied throughout his career. Critics have attacked Frost for failing to show faith in man’s divinity, for lacking a comprehensive overview of nature, for advising men and women merely to be shrewd and to struggle only to survive, and for exhibiting shifts in tone that subside at their conclusion into coy or ironic epigrams that express only certainty, doubt and spiritual retreat. He actually did not receive critical acclaim until his work was reviewed in England. Initially, Americans were inclined to see him as a regional poet with limited scope and appeal. It wasn’t until his later works that that the depth and complexity of his poetic skills and themes were recognized by the American audience.

Frost agreed with Emerson that “natural facts are spiritual facts” or at least that the human heart has a deep desire to read nature as the symbol of spirit. In Frost, knowledge of the cyclical character of life is always visible in nature. In nature, the truth of new life emerging in last year’s waste is visible and that truth is capable of assuaging man’s anxiety over his transience. For Frost, the challenge of human existence is in the acceptability of mutability and the affirmation of the beauty within the cycle of life. Because nature includes transience, death, and destruction, he does not depict it as a comforting cure all for man; beauty is always accompanied by terror. The acceptance of nature on its terms is true sanity to Frost, for to quarrel with nature is true foolishness.

Critics have noted Frost’s dialectical style of trying out both sides of an idea as in “The Mending Wall.” For Frost, rural images symbolize significant human experiences as in “After Apple Picking.” “The Road Not Taken” is said to express the spiritual drifter in Frost. The poem is actually based on a friend of Frost’s who was notorious for not making up his mind, and when he did, regretting his choice. The poem was intended to gently mock his friend’s indecisiveness. Instead, the poem is taken to be a melancholy lament about choices—their narrowness and permanence once made. In “Birches,” the top of the tree has been taken to be a symbol of human aspiration and the bottom a symbol to the reality to which we must return. Some critics have noted that the impulse of men and women urban
civilization has long been to contemplate country subjects and then by detachment, simplification, and reflection arrive at a better view of complicated urban life.

**Notes on Willa Cather**

“The highest processes of art are the processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write and then he must unlearn it; just as a modern painter learns to draw and then learns to utterly disregard his accomplishment.”

Cather held that the task of the novel was not documentation but suggestion and selection. It was an instrument of culture, not a vehicle of social reportage or character mongering. She also indicated her devotion to the “timeless” qualities of the novel—her protagonists look for what is eternal and lasting, what is cultural, as well as natural both in the land and in the great achievements of human habitation. Cather is usually categorized as a realist, but her works have also been criticized for their sentimentalism, especially in the endings of her novels. Cather is said to have an imagination “which deeply identified cure of the soul with care for soil, care for the cultivated earth” (Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*). Kazin also commented on the “purity” of Cather’s style, which has been described as “serene” and “poised.”

We can enrich our reading of Cather if we can see her as key figure in the creation of a modernist pastoral, a mode that represented everything that Pound and Eliot spoke of, but presented those moods and perceptions on the American Great Plains rather than in the context of the city.

In a “Wagner Matinee,” Cather introduces us to a woman who briefly experiences the richness of the urban culture of the East and then must return to life in a bleak prairie town. Cather’s description of Nebraska infuriated her friends and members of her family, who also objected to the harsh portrait she painted of a self-sacrificing Nebraska farm-woman. “Paul’s Case” also presents an unsettling contrast as Paul somehow tries to endure the stultifying effects of ordinary life while mentally living in a far-removed realm of luxury, elegance, and
refinement. His inability to bridge the gap between the two makes his life ineffectual and, finally, impossible as he hurls erratically towards self-destruction.

NOTES ON JOHN DOS PASSOS

For its pessimistic determinism and its portrayal of defeated Americans, both rich and poor, U.S.A. has been called “one of the saddest books ever written by an American. It presents a set of recurring themes:

- The U.S. is a wasteland with a promise only of defeat
- Americans are misguided worshippers of industrial and commercial success
- Americans, both the weak and the powerful, must inevitably be defeated by the excesses of capitalism and the force of historical events
- Failure is a constant experience in the lives of representative Americans, regardless of socio-economic status

Dos Passos uses biographies and devices of montage (used in those days used to describe the juxtaposition of contrasting scenes in a motion picture), such as Newsreels and Camera Eyes to link the three novels of U.S.A. together and provide continuity for the trilogy. The book is made up of four different literary forms:

a. Twelve biographies of fictional characters—six men and six women
b. Twenty-eight brief biographies of real characters
c. Fifty-one Camera Eyes
d. Sixty-eight Newsreels

He used the printed page as a visual device, employing techniques from film makers, painters, and graphic artists in an effort to present his vision of the jumble of reality and to provide the reader with an immediate personal experience.
His writing can be compared to Whitman’s poetry; note is use of the following Whitmanesque devices:

- Panoramic display of the sights and sounds of America
- Portrayal of anonymous yet representative men and women
- Celebration of the common folk
- Breathless, fast-paced prose
- Long sentences
- Catalog of things seen and felt
- Unusual spellings
- Poetic refrains