

Reading Modernism by Peter Childs: A Book Review

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In the realm of literary theory and criticism, Peter Childs' *Modernism* is widely regarded as an influential and illuminating work ever to be published. This book makes an effort to investigate a variety of facets of modernism in addition to its adjacent ideas, and it does so in a straightforward, comprehensive, and effective manner. Despite the little area available, it has successfully depicted the enormous task of modernism while also presenting the many facets of this movement. The book is broken up into three main chapters in addition to an introduction. It begins with explaining the many literary movements, including Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Childs makes an effort to address the topic of debate from a comparative perspective, most notably the contrast between modernism and postmodernism presented in the introduction. Instead of getting tangled up in purely abstract notions, the book provides a detailed examination of movements that occur inside settings and literary works. The conversation concerning modernism includes not just modernism itself but also related trends like postmodernism and realism and previously excluded points of view. Instead of attempting to provide definitions that are ironclad, Childs looks for signs of one movement in the other, as well as how the two movements overlap and are interconnected.

Regarding the introduction, a close reading of the beginning of Samuel Beckett's play *Murphy* (Children 5) has been selected. The key ideas of Modernism are explored in this section, including commitment to the thought rather than the body, intended difficulty in texts, theological doubts, fixation with repetition, and a cyclical notion of time. Childs' selection of a late modern art illustrates his desire to portray a dynamic awareness of the period. Simultaneously, he urges the reader to recognise Modernism and Postmodernism from many perspectives while also recognising the distinctions between the two philosophies. Because the most standard definition (i.e., after World War I) is denied as the original

account for the movement in the second part of the introduction, it is evident that the book goes against the grain of fixed and bookish definitions. In light of this, in addition to the fundamental objectives of introduction, which are to establish the tempo, it also provides a critique of the practise of classifying Modernism under a single flag.

The first chapter introduces the various intellectuals who have been crucial in the development of modernism. These thinkers include Marx, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, Saussure, and Einstein. Before delving into a conversation about different genres in the second chapter, an overview of the conceptual underpinnings of modernism is presented. Childs gives a succinct summary of the philosophers' lives before avoiding a detailed, theoretical study of the fundamental components of the thinkers' views, as he did in the introduction. Instead, he focuses the conversation on the literary personalities who were impacted by or came across these thinkers' ideas. He does so by examining the thinkers' interactions with the literary characters. Childs emphasises the unfavourable reception of modernist literature based on the earliest Marxist theorists' explanation of Marxism. One of the essential Marxists, Lukács, denounced modernist writers, accusing them of being ignorant of current events and disconnected from modern society (32). The theories covered in the first chapter are related to modernist literature, and each time they are studied, a specific work of modernist literature is utilised as a point of reference. For example, *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells, in which determinacy, degeneration, and the beneficial benefits of eugenics are capitalised on, provides an explanation for the impact that Darwinism had on Modernism (Childs 40). Childs continues with this technique all the way up until the end of the chapter when she conducts a deeper analysis of the immediate impact that these intellectuals had on the spirit of modernism as well as its subsequent influence on postmodern thinkers. Childs does not limit the discussion to the particular thinkers to whom each section is dedicated; rather, he adds supplementary notes about other important thinkers like Bergson, Jung, Adorno, Jameson, and William James. This is despite Childs assigning each section to a specific thinker. As a consequence of this, the first chapter does not only provide the various concepts of the philosophers as mentioned above; rather, it also discusses the implications of these ideas for contemporary history and the historians who have written about it.

In the book's second chapter, we take a cursory look at many artistic and cinematic genres. Novels, short stories, poems, and plays are all included in the discussion of different genres. As Childs pointed out, the development of these genres occurred far sooner on the continent than it did in England. Ibsen and Baudelaire are two notable exceptions to the general rule that he associates these literary subgenres more closely with late Victorian writers than with continental authors. The vast quantity of information that Childs is exposed to may make it difficult for him to make decisions, so he has little option but to be picky about the kind of music he listens to. In the introduction, he discusses works, and asserts that Henry James is the founder of both forms due to his use of symbolism and "psychological realism" (75). However, he does not include any Russian or French authors in this section. James had the goal of bettering the "classical realism" of the 19th century, which depicted people whose personality qualities were thought to be necessary and largely provided (Belsey 74-5). Childs examines the books in light of Roland Barthes' division between the "readerly" and "writerly" (76), and he puts into emphasis the experimental components of the Modernist novels as well as the writerly parts. The fundamental addition that Henry James made to modernist novels was the meticulous reveal and ambiguity of language that he used. This forced readers to be more active and participating in the reading experience.

Henry James, an American author, is renowned for his plotless short tales, which follow in the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. These pieces are considered to be in the genre of short stories. A close reading of two short stories, "Cantleman's SpringMate" (1919) by Wyndham Lewis and "The Virgin and the Gipsy" (1930) by D. H. Lawrence, is given in which Childs muses on the issue of sexuality free of the limitations of Victorian morality. Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence are the writers of these tales (85). Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss," and how free indirect speech is used to penetrate the protagonist's thoughts, highlights the "writerly" text once more. This time, the focus is on the "writerly" text. Mansfield has done a good job of coordinating the writing with the events that take place in the novel. To put it another way, female modernist authors have a purpose to represent women's repression in their writings, and they must slay the "Angel in the House" both inside themselves and in the narratives they produce. Authors in the modernist tradition, such as Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, are examples.

The discussion of contemporary poetry will continue in the next section. A significant portion of the discussion in this section focuses on the French Symbolists and the American Imagists because of the immense impact that these two schools of poetry had on the English poetry that was written in the 1920s. The late nineteenth-century correspondence, inspiration, and aestheticism that influenced W. B. Yeats' visionary, prophetic, and symbolic poetry are what define symbolism. Symbolism is also characterised by the aestheticism of that time period. Imagism was a rather autonomous trend that gained influence among Modernist writers during the period of time when scientific advancement and linguistic precision were at their peaks. T. E. Hulme and F. S. Flint are credited with being the pioneers of the new poetry, which was characterised by the adherence to the tenets of clarity, discipline, objectivity, lucidity, and directness (Childs 97). Childs also draws attention to the predicament that poets found themselves in after the war in an effort to reaffirm the waning tradition of elitist and high-brow writing, all the while attempting to prevent poetry from becoming a simple instrument of science or business (100).

According to Childs, play was typically a late product of the English Modernist movement, with its origins perhaps outside the country's boundaries. In spite of the fact that Childs asserts that modernist authors did not place the same level of importance on the theatre as they did the novel or the short story (102), he dismisses the influence that the Irish Abbey Theater and T. S. Eliot's play had on the field. It is commonly believed that Beckett and Brecht are the greatest, and perhaps the most successful, contemporary dramatists because of the emphasis that they place on the modern-postmodern gap. This overlap is brought up in the main body of the text.

The following section examines art trends, which change in two ways: First, the advancement of photography lowered the value of realistic paintings; second, the reduction in the cost of colours made it possible for artists like Van Gogh to finance their expenditures. When the art galleries were opened up to the general public, the artists were no longer reliant on patrons to support them financially. Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Surrealism were the art movements that transitioned from representational to nonrepresentational art. Childs examines each of these trends in light of their literary contemporaries and makes an effort to acquaint the reader with the fundamental principles that underpin contemporary art.

For instance, in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, the narrator refers to Seurat's impressionist style when he says, "the whole world for me is like specks of colour in an enormous canvas." Seurat was a French painter who developed the impressionist style (20).

On the other hand, the book does not intend to provide an exhaustive examination of different art trends. The same strategy is seen at the beginning of motion pictures and the development of the cinematic medium. The first steps of cinematography were primarily taken within the streams of Surrealism and Expressionism, such as Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Both of these films are considered among the earliest examples of cinema. Of course, the topic of study is restricted to the early phases of film production, and the focus is not so much on the history of cinema itself as it is on concurrent developments in a variety of other areas. The glossary in the book provides the reader with a variety of meanings as well as a comparative examination of the words and deeds that are found in the surrounding area. Researchers interested in modernist philosophy and looking for a book that gives fresh insights into an understanding of modernism that is varied, dynamic, and critical will find this book to be an excellent resource.

References:

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