

Mr. Francis
American Literature II

Modernism & the Lost Generation

As an epigraph to his The Sun Also Rises (1926), Ernest Hemingway credits the American writer Gertrude Stein with coining the term génération perdue. This label has come to be applied to a group of American writers "who served in the First World War and reacted against certain tendencies of older writers in the 1920s" (Harmon 291). Amongst others, they are traditionally said to include Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Other writers of this era (including James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, H. D., and Ezra Pound) are often categorized more broadly as modern or modernists. A Handbook to Literature (9th ed.) makes a distinction between literature that is modern and other twentieth century or contemporary literature: "Modern refers to a group of characteristics, and not all of them appear in any one writer who merits the designation modern" (Harmon 318). The text continues:

In a broad sense modern is applied to writing marked by a strong and conscious break with tradition. It employs a distinctive kind of imagination that insists on having its general frame of reference within itself. It thus practices the solipsism of which Allen Tate accused the modern mind: It believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. Modern implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. [...] Although by no means can all modern writers be termed philosophical existentialists, EXISTENTIALISM has created a schema within which much of the modern temper can see a reflection of its attitudes and assumptions. The modern revels in a dense and often unordered actuality as opposed to the practical and systematic, and in exploring that actuality as it exists in the mind of the writer it has been richly experimental.

Modernism can also be thought of as a reaction against realism and naturalism. Realism is "fidelity to actuality in its representation" (Harmon 421). Naturalism is "the application of principals of scientific determinism to literature" (Harmon 329).