

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LITERARY MOVEMENTS IN 20TH CENTURY EUROPE

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ABSTRACT:

This article represents a comparative study of the four major literary movements which dominated European literature in the 20th century. Namely, these were Modernism, Surrealism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism. Each movement originated in response to various historical and cultural changes and intellectual transformations of its time. They offered unique ways of approaching art and literature. Modernism rebelled against traditional forms for fragmentation and subjectivity. While surrealism tried to unleash the unconscious mind, Existentialism fought to find meaning in a world full of absurdity. On the other side, postmodernism did deconstruct grand narratives into irony, metafiction, and playfulness. Through these comparative analyses, the article discusses how such movements reflect the variable literary concerns of 20th-century Europe and how they go on to influence contemporary thought.

Keywords: Modernism, Surrealism, Existentialism, Postmodernism, 20th-century literature, European literature, literary movements, fragmentation, unconscious mind.

Introduction

The 20th century represents a monumental period in the development of European literature. Characterized by profound shifts in artistic expression and thematic exploration, what emerged could little resemble its predecessors in either form or convention. In the aftermath of two crippling World Wars, rapid industrialization, and dramatic change in societal structures, writers sought to give voice to the intricacies of the human experience in ways that decidedly broke with traditional forms of narrative and conventional expectations. This was the era when many major literary movements took place, each mirroring the general mood and intellectual current of the times.

The transformational journey began with Modernism, which discarded all the prevailing norms and adopted experimentation, disintegration, and subjectivity. With the advancement of the century, new dimensions were discovered to lead to

Surrealism, wherein the subconscious mind came to the fore to break the barriers between reality and the realm of imagination. Existentialism bore fruits of war and existential philosophy, digging deep into the conscious mind and the search for meaning among an indifferent universe. Lastly, coming from both previous movements, the movement of Postmodernism deconstructed grand narratives and welcomed irony, pastiche, and the complexities of identities and realities.¹

This paper will examine these four most significant literary movements in 20th-century Europe, covering their peculiar features, influences, and contributions to the literary topography. Only by contextualizing these movements in relation to one another can their interrelations be placed in a light that discloses wider cultural and intellectual flows across European literature in this turbulent yet creatively dynamic era.

The 20th century was a period of transformation in European literature, characterized by waves of dynamic movements in literature. These various movements were the ultimate repercussions of the sociopolitical turmoil, rapid technological changes, and the captivating change in ideologies of the time. The subsequent paper looks at four important 20th century European literary movements: Modernism, Surrealism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism. Each was representative of the diversity of emergent concerns and artistic interest for the time in which each existed and offered a special pair of lenses through which the writers sought to interpret reality, society, and self.

1. Modernism: The Revolt Against Tradition

Modernism was a revolution in which the world of literature got rid of its conventional 19th-century forms and themes; it flowered from the last years of the 19th century into the mid-20th century. Inspired by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the disillusionment of World War I, Modernist writers rejected the Victorian ideal of "moral instruction" in literature and sought fragmentation, subjectivity, and experimentation.

The stream-of-consciousness narrative, the unreliable narrator, and a focus on the inner mechanisms of the human mind were key features of Modernist literature. Writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot experimented with language and form in ways that were disorienting but deeply introspective. The modernist fiction of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) are exemplary in how it tried to represent the perils of individual consciousness rather than well-lit, linear narratives.

¹ **Calvino, Italo.** *If on a winter's night a traveler.* — New York: Harcourt, 1979.

On the other hand, Modernist poetry sought to be correct and condensed in expression. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) typified the spirit of Modernism with its fragmentary structure and allusive language in depicting the disillusionment of post-war Europe and its cultural decay.

2. Surrealism: The Subconscious Unleashed

Emerging in the 1920s as a response to the horrors of World War I and bolstered by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Surrealism had as its target the unconscious mind, striving to undermine the rational. Focused around Paris and galvanized by André Breton, Surrealism was both a literary and an artistic movement placed upon the role that dreams, fantasies, and the irrational played in human experience.

The surrealist writers utilized various techniques, including auto-matism, whereby the writers allowed their thoughts to flow unhindered without any form of censorship or preconceived influence. In addition to André Breton, Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard were the other leading figures who provided surreal works that blurred the boundaries between reality and dream and conscious and unconscious thought. Breton's "*Nadja*" is a novel-like account of insanity and surrealism, revealing how most of them inclined toward the grotesque and dreamlike narration.

While Modernist literature often expressed the fragmentary nature of modern life, Surrealism looked toward the fantastic and illogical, offering a different path to the real by the use of the imagination rather than reason.

Existentialism emerged after World War II as a philosophical and literary response to the perceived absurdity of existence and the alienation of the individual in a chaotic, indifferent world. Though it took root in the works by philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, it really flowered as a full-fledged literary movement in the mid-20th century, primarily in France.²

Existentialist literature might be explained as ideas of freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in an absurd universe. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir are famous representatives who have written about how individuals face the anguish of existing and, at the same time, have nothing to refer to as inherently meaningful in their lives. Characters in the novels *Nausea* by Sartre (1938) and *The Stranger* by Camus (1942) have experienced existential crises and therefore come into question over their standing in this world and the worth of human action.

² Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. — New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

Existentialism wasn't a "tendency" in literature alone but was the name for a philosophical school that rejected any notion of absolute truth and instead depended on individual choice and self-determination. In works considered to be existentialist, it is common for characters to confront the absurdity of life by accepting that they must take sole responsibility for providing the meaning in their own lives.

4. Postmodernism: The Death of Grand Narratives

In Europe, the late 20th century gave birth to a major literary movement called Postmodernism—one hostile toward the certainties of Modernism and Existentialism. Postmodern literature is characterized by irony, pastiche, and playfulness; it denies single and coherent truth or grand narrative.³ In this regard, the works of postmodernist writers like Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, and Thomas Pynchon carry on an undoing of the very notion of reality, authorship, and history.

But one of the defining marks of Postmodern literature is, in fact, metafiction—a self-conscious writing that draws attention to its status as fiction. For example, Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*, published in 1979, does not yield to the reader's expectation as it constantly interrupts the story, breaks the fourth wall, and makes a remark on the very art of storytelling itself.

Postmodern literature often merged high and low culture, fusing popular culture, mass media, and historical events. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) is one such example by Milan Kundera, as it dwells on the framing of personal identity with history and political ideology, while traditional narrative structures and philosophical concepts are deconstructed.

Conclusion

The 20th century was a time of great change and vividness as regards literature in Europe, with each movement adding to the growing understanding of art, culture, and the human experience. The experimental leaning of Modernism into inner consciousness, Surrealism's embracing of the irrational, Existentialism's philosophical inquiry into the condition of human beings, and the playing skeptic of Postmodernism about grand narratives—all provide variant answers to the complex realities of the 20th century. Although these movements are the products of specific historical and intellectual contexts, they nonetheless hold implications for and continue to shape contemporary letters that reflect the changing concerns of writers and readers alike.

³ Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. — New York: Viking Press, 1973.

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