



Book Review

Revisiting Modernism:

A Review of Peter Childs' *Modernism*

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Review ID: CLS-2002-1039

Received: January 11, 2020

Reviewed: February 15, 2020

Accepted: March 5, 2020

Peter Childs' Modernism is one of the most significant and informative books written in the field of literary theory and criticism. It is an easy-access, wide-ranging, and efficient book that tries to explore different aspects of Modernism and its neighboring concepts. Despite its limited space, it has fully rendered the humongous burden of Modernism and demonstrating its various aspects. The book comprises an introduction and three main chapters. It starts off with a set of definitions for Romance, Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Childs endeavors to approach the discussion in a comparative light, particularly the comparison between Modernism and Postmodernism in the introduction. The book is more concerned with the close analysis of movements in contexts and literary works rather than entangling with pure abstract definitions. The discussion about Modernism is accompanied by adjacent movements such as Postmodernism and Realism, and marginalized points are included as well. Instead of coming up with rock-solid definitions, Childs seeks to look for traces of each movement in the other and how these terms are overlapped and intertwined.

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As for the introduction, the opening of Samuel Becket's *Murphy* is chosen (Childs 5) for close reading, within which the main tenants of Modernism such as adherence to the mind rather than the body, the deliberate difficulty of texts, religious doubts, preoccupation with repetition and circular conception of time are explored. Selecting a late Modern work illustrates the fact that Childs tries to represent a dynamic understanding of the period; at the same time, he encourages the reader to identify Modernism with Postmodernism from various points of view; while being cognizant of their differences. The book obviously goes against the grain of fixed and bookish definitions, since in the second part of the introduction there are multiple definitions for Modernism and the most conventional one (i.e., after World War I) is debunked as the original storyline for the movement. Thus, apart from the primary tasks of introduction to set the pace, it also contains a critique of identifying Modernism under one banner.

The first chapter is the introduction to thinkers who have built the pillars of Modernism; namely Marx, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, Saussure, and Einstein. The theoretical framework of Modernism is explicated before the discussion about genres in the second chapter. Childs gives a brief account of the thinkers' lives and then much like the introduction does not engage in the sophisticated, theoretical analysis of the major aspects of their thoughts, rather he directs the discussion towards the literary figures who either were influenced by these thinkers or came across their opinions. Regarding Marxism, Childs points out to the negative reception of modernist literature based on earliest Marxist thinkers. Lukács, one of the most significant Marxists, denounced the Modernist writers as ignorant of the historical situation and isolated from society (32). The theories, argued in the first chapter, relate to modernist literature one way or the other and are always explored with reference to a particular modernist work. For instance, the influence of Darwinism on Modernism is explained through H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in which determinacy, degeneration and positive effects of eugenics are capitalized on (Childs 40). Childs follows up this approach to the end of the chapter and analyzes even more the immediate effect of these thinkers on the spirit of Modernism and its later influence on postmodern thinkers. Despite assigning each part to a particular thinker, Childs does not constrain the discussion to them but adds up supplementary



notes of relevant thinkers such as Bergson, Jung, Adorno, Jameson, and William James. As a result, chapter one is not only the exposition of different ideas of the above thinkers but also it engages with the implication of these ideas for modern history and its writers.

Chapter Two of the book briefly deals with genres, art, and films. The discussion around genres comprises of novel, short story, poetry, and drama. These genres bloomed much earlier in the continent than in England, as Childs rightly put it. He often regards these genres in close affinity with late Victorian writers rather than continental ones, Ibsen and Baudelaire being exceptions. Perhaps the huge amount of input information has made Childs choice rather difficult, thereby leaving him no choice but to be selective regarding genres. In the opening part regarding the novel and the short story, he maintains that Henry James is the pioneer of both with his symbolism and “psychological realism” (75) without including Russian or French writers. James aimed at improving the “classical realism [of nineteenth-century] which presented individuals whose traits of character, understood as essential and predominantly given” (Belsey 74-5). Childs evaluates the novels in the light of Roland Barthes’ “readerly/writerly” distinction (76) and brings into focus the writerly and experimental aspects of the Modernist novels. James’ main contribution to Modernist novels is careful revelation and ambiguity of language which required readers to be more active and participatory.

Regarding short stories, Henry James is applauded for his plotless short stories following the tradition of American writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. There is a close reading of two short stories: Wyndham Lewis’s “Cattleman’s Spring-Mate” (1919) and D. H. Lawrence’s “The Virgin and the Gipsy” (1930) in which Childs reflects upon the theme of sexuality freed from the restraints of Victorian morality (85). Again, the “writerly” text is highlighted with Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss” and how free indirect speech is utilized to access the protagonist's mind. Mansfield has suitably matched the prose with the content in the story. Female writers in the modernist tradition, like Woolf and Mansfield, have to kill the “Angel in the House” within themselves and in their stories; in other words, the female modernist writers have a mission to express the women’s repression in their writings.



In the next part, modern poetry is discussed. The influence of French Symbolists and American Imagists on English poetry of the 1920s is enormous and much of the argument in this part revolves around these two schools of poetry. Symbolism is characterized by its correspondence, inspiration, and aestheticism of the late nineteenth century which affected W. B. Yeats' visionary, prophetic and symbolic poems. As quite an independent movement, Imagism rose into prominence among Modernist writers in the age of scientific progress and linguistic clarity. T. E. Hulme and F. S. Flint marked the new poetry with principles of precision, discipline, objectivity, lucidity, and directness (Childs 97). Childs also highlights the crisis of the post-war period among poets to reassert the declining tradition of elite and high-brow literature; while avoiding poetry to turn into a mere instrument of science or commerce (100).

The drama was often a late product in English Modernism and its origins, as Childs asserts, are to be found outside the borders. Childs claims that modernist writers were not in favor of drama as much as novel or short story (102) yet he fails to mention the influence of Irish Abbey Theater or the play of T. S. Eliot. Beckett and Brecht are introduced as the final and perhaps the most successful modern dramatists who again highlight the overlap between Modernism and Postmodernism.

The next part addresses the art movements which transform in two major ways: firstly, the invention of the camera winnowed out the reputation of representational paintings; secondly, the lower prices of colors allowed painters like Von Gogh to afford their expenses. The art galleries became open to the public and artists had no need of patron to provide their expenses. The art movements changed gears to non-representational art in Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, expressionism, and surrealism. Childs regards each of these movements with their literary parallels and tries to familiarize the reader with the basic tenets of modern art. As an example, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* alludes to the Impressionistic technique of Seurat when the narrator declares that "the whole world for me is like spots of color in an immense canvas" (20). However, the comprehensive analysis of art movements is beyond the aims of the book. The same approach is demonstrated in the introduction to films and the birth of Cinema. The baby-steps of cinematography took place mainly within the streams of Surrealism and Expressionism including Dali's *Un Chien*



andalou and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The discussion, of course, is limited to the earliest stages of film-making and is more concerned with parallel movements in other fields than the actual history of cinema. Last but not least, the glossary of the book acquaints the reader with a wide variety of definitions and comparative analysis of adjacent terms and movements. The book is highly recommended to researchers interested in modernist thought as it provides new insights into a diverse, dynamic, and critical understanding of Modernism.





References

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Suggested Citation

Hassanpour Darbandi, Ali and Ramin, Zohreh. "Revisiting Modernism: A Review of Modernism by Peter Childs." *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020, pp. 229-234.

