20th Century American Literature.

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Lecture Notes: Introduction to Modernism.

1. Historical Background.
   1. People begin to think of themselves differently.
      1. Freud
      2. Modern philosophy
      3. Einstein
      4. Darwin
   2. The world is changing very quickly.
      1. Communication
      2. Electricity
      3. Transportation
      4. Industrialization
   3. There is a lot of conflict.
      1. Class struggle
      2. Socialism
      3. Capitalism
      4. Imperialism
   4. World War I
   5. Hopelessness and pessimism about the future.
2. What does “Modernism” mean?
   1. The word “modern” comes from the Greek *modernus*. It means “a new way, different from the past.”
   2. It is the opposite of traditional.
3. When does Modernism begin?
   1. Virginia Woolf, famous writer and critic, said that modernism began around December, 1910.
   2. The beginning of Modernism is probably much earlier.
   3. In the 13th Century society changed in several important ways.
      1. The rise of the middle class led to the weakening of the power of kings.
      2. The Reformation (Protestantism) led to the weakening of the power of religious authority.
      3. The rise of the city led to a new economy where people could rise economically.
      4. The invention of the printing press.
      5. All of these things led to the creation of Individualism. Every person could make choices for themselves and try to understand the world in their own way.
   4. Another important period was the Enlightenment in the 18th Century
      1. The Age of Reason. Modern scientific study. Gave the individual intellectual authority.
      2. The Romantic Revolution. Gave the individual emotional authority.
      3. Democracy. Gave the individual political authority.
4. Central Ideas
   1. Language. Writers begin to write differently. The focus of the writing is not about the story. It is about how language creates meaning. Ex. Human.
   2. Writers don’t tell the reader a truth. The modernist writings present an opportunity for the reader to discover truth on their own. (Opposite of realism, which tried to show the world to the reader and often contained a happy ending.)
   3. Literature becomes a kind of puzzle with no answer. The reader must read the story and decide for themselves what the meaning is.
   4. Symbolic language. In poetry especially, words and images are used symbolically to create many possible interpretations.
   5. The end of “meta-narratives” (stories that were thought to explain everything). Ex. Biblical literalism.
   6. Characters in the stories often see the events in very different ways. Ex. *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson.
   7. Apocalypse. “taking off the covering.”
   8. Isolation and the meaninglessness of life.
   9. The end of the literary “Hero.” Most characters are flawed and they think about their problems a lot. Walt Whitman vs. Ernest Hemingway. Self-confident vs. self-conscious.
5. Modernism and Art
   1. Visual Arts.
      1. Manet
      2. Picasso
   2. Music
      1. Stravinski’s “Rite of Spring.” The composer uses techniques to make the music sound very strange.
   3. Theater
      1. Becket and the destruction of the stage.
   4. Film
   5. Architecture
   6. Fashion
6. Movements
   1. The Age of Innocence (1880-1914) A transitional period.
      1. Henry James
      2. Upton Sinclair
   2. The Lost Generation (1914-1939) The main period of modernism.
      1. Sherwood Anderson
      2. Ernest Hemingway
      3. William Faulkner
      4. Sinclair Lewis
      5. F. Scott Fitzgerald
      6. Ezra Pound
      7. T.S. Eliot
   3. The Post-War Years (1939-1955) The beginnings of post-modernism.
   4. Counter-culture (1955-1970) A period where ‘outsider’ art becomes established.