Modernism And The Significance Of The Twentieth Century Writing

Introduction

This study examines the Modernism and the Significance of Twentieth Century writing.

Modernism is a period in literary history that began around the late 19th century and continued until the early 20th century and it followed the Victorian Age. Modernism was considered a turning point in the world of literary studies particularly for its subjective perception of the characters and how it changed narrative techniques from descriptive to rather an intuitive approach. Many people started to apply modernistic characteristics, for example Rolfe Arnold Scott-James who was a journalist, editor and literary critic often cited as one of the first peoples to use the word 'modernism' in his 1908 book Modernism and Romance. . He further viewed that the

‘Term was used not only to designate something new and fashionable, but also the new literary trend of the early twentieth century.’ (Stevenson, 1992: 3)

It was a movement of reaction against the old convention and theories of realism, art, literature, architecture and those people who have a traditional religious faith and social organization, and it was led by the new thinkers and those who have a modern personality, thought and practice like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and T. S. Eliot. Although modernist critics are agreed about the main features that define modernism, they are considered the term describes much of the visual, dance, architecture, art, literature and music. The above-mentioned writers have rejected the distinction way of narrating the stories and the traditional formulaic verse. Instead, many of the modernist writers expressed fragmented stories, because at that time the western society was divided during and after World War I.

Twentieth-century has a lot of significance to literary writing and it had its affection from western cultures and societies. Modernism had a great affection to breakdown all of the traditional rules, which there are highlighted some of the important works which are achieved in this era. Modern writers did something new, they tried to show creativity in their writings by borrowing words from other languages and including many countries and cultures. Even they were using numerous points of view, such as; “stream-of-consciousness” and other styles.

James Joyce was one of the famous modern writers at that time, who used and expanded the technique of interior monologue to ‘’stream of consciousness“, especially in his first novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Joyce by using ‘stream of consciousness’ tell us much about the modern man and his philosophy in society through the main character of the novel Stephen Dedalus. Joyce used the third person point of view to describe Stephen’s ideas and experiences in order to show the modern man that has new idea about society, religion, church and culture. Joyce through Stephen’s represents the affection of modernism in his literature, he broke the traditional rules of how narrative should be. (Eric Bulson 17-21)

Modern vs. Traditional narrative techniques

In order to address the twentieth-century of great changes about literary narrative techniques, there is a famous work that represent the theories and fundamental ideas of modernism, which is A Portrait by James Joyce. (Ida 8) explained the significance of Joyce's writings to modernism as:

'His writings tore down the literary paradigms of the Victorian period and created entirely new ones, and the English novel was introduced to a new aesthetic that rejected the concept of realism as literature's foremost feature.'

The characteristics of modernist aesthetics were included stream-of-consciousness, fragmented narrative, irony, and satire, and Joyce identified them in literature. Joyce was the one that concretize the fundamental linguistic and narrative experiments which allow him to transform fiction by breaking rules of realism and history of the Victorian period, and also Joyce rewrote the novel to the modernists.

Biography is essentially one of the Victorian genres, and it contains a more or less full account of a particular person's life and experiences. What happened in the real life of the biography's subject should be strikingly told with truth.

'I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile, and cunning.' (309)

Joyce here used the first person in the fifth chapter which shows the connection between the writer Joyce and the narrator Stephen. In particular he used a real-life person as a model for the protagonist, and also Joyce used his own real life story as an inspiration for Stephen. In these lines above Joyce is trying to show his real life through Stephen's mind. The genre of biography is used by Joyce but not as the primary genre, but more as a narrative technique to tell his story, and in his narrative style Joyce introduced his own life-story that is why it is impossible to decide where Stephen Dedalus ends and Joyce begins. (Ida 11)

Bildungsroman is one of the sub-genres to the novel that nineteenth-century Victorian writers, such as Dickens, used when writing autobiographical fiction. The term used to refer to those novels that concentrate on the protagonist character, in order to show the psychological, moral or social development of the protagonist from childhood into adulthood and maturity. In the early twentieth century, Joyce used this genre as a narrative technique to represent his biographical life. In A Portrait when Stephen as the main protagonist is perceived as having many experiments and challenges from his childhood to manhood. Especially in the first chapters when the novel concentrates on Stephen's progress while he builds his personality and the focus is on his religious, social and sexual experiences in his personal growing. (Ida 17)

The modernist Narrative Technique in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Joyce's writings were affected by modernism including the text selected here, in which its writing

style has modernist features as interior dialogue and use of ellipses. In his semi-autobiographical novel, the modernist techniques link the character of Stephen to Joyce; the artist himself. Both directly and indirectly

“Did you believe in religion when you were at school? I bet you did... I did, Stephen answered. I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become”. (Joyce 300)

From this quote clearly see that Stephen represents life of Joyce. Though conveyed in the third person (with a bit of first-person near the end, in Stephen's diary entries) There are many characteristics of modernism techniques within the novel but the most common ones are the use of “stream of consciousness” style and individual yet subjective theme

The novel concluded the focus on the subjective consciousness. Stream of consciousness derived from William James's explanation of mind's experiencing of thoughts, perceptions, memories, associations, and sensations. In Principles of Psychology (1890) the viewpoint of James about conscious experience has been explained the full extent of thoughts that one can be aware of which is non-stoppable thoughts, perceptions and feelings. In A Portrait Joyce's style is free style of Stephen's unrestrained conscious thought. That was an important part of modernism since it shows a psychic reality which is far from true reality “stream of consciousness” Like how it is shown from this text:

“What did that mean, to kiss? You put your face up like that to say goodnight and then his mother put her face down. That was to kiss. His mother put her lips on his cheek; her lips were soft and they wetted his cheek; and they made a tiny little noise: kiss. Why did people do that with their two faces? ”. (Joyce 13)

The style of this passage certainly has features of an interior monologue as Stephen considers what a kiss is, freely indicates his innocent eagerness. It puts a question mark above reality and creating individual reality, by combining second and third person narration. This technique was amply used by Modernist writers, particularly by Joyce who preferred to write about individuality rather than society. By using the interior monologue and the stream of consciousness, by his concern with the individual rather than the external reality, the stream of consciousness is showing the hidden and private life of the character in an uninterrupted of thoughts and feelings. The writer doesn’t rearrange this flow of thoughts in a coherent way.

The common themes like: humanity, freedom, individualism developed in this novel, Joyce like the other modern authors concentrated on developing individual rather than problems of society as he explains in this extract :

“I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps as long as eternity too”. (Joyce 309)

Here Stephen separates himself as an individual from everything. He defines himself as an artist who requires isolation to create. As he becomes an artist he shares his connections to the reality of the past life. (Jswander)

Works cited

1. Bulson, Eric. The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce. New York, 2006. Print.
2. Engholt, B, Ida. Tales of Truth and Imagination: Generic Ambiguity in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Virginia Woolf's Orlando. University of Oslo, 2010. Print.
3. Jswander, "Elements of modernism in the portrait of the artist as a young man."The twenties century English novel.22 June. 2013. Web. 26 Dec 2018