

The Metamorphosis

Modernism. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, major scientific, technological, and industrial developments occurred that dramatically altered the way people lived. Not only did this period involve such breakthroughs as the invention of the automobile, the airplane, the telephone, and the machine gun, but it also saw the emergence of a number of brilliant scientists and thinkers, including Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, and Friederich Nietzsche, who set forth revolutionary ideas that reshaped people's understanding of themselves and the world surrounding them. This period of rapid change culminated in World War I—a tragic and bloody conflict that wiped out almost an entire generation of European men. As a result of these events and developments, many people came to believe in the need to discard the ideas and values of the past and to find new ideas that seemed more applicable to twentieth-century life. Similarly, writers began turning away from the style, form, and content of nineteenth-century literature and began experimenting with new themes and techniques, and a new literary movement known as Modernism was born.

Modernism was an extremely broad and diverse movement that encompassed a vast number of smaller literary movements. Yet, although there were significant differences in their interests and approaches, all the Modernists shared the desire to create literature that was new and different. In addition they were united in their belief in the need to capture the reality of modern life in both the form and the content of their work. The Modernists generally felt that the rapid changes in the world had created an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, disjointedness, and alienation. This view is apparent in the themes of many Modernist works. Generally, however, the themes of Modernist works are subtly implied, rather than directly stated, to reflect a sense of uncertainty and to force readers to draw their own conclusions. For similar reasons fiction writers began abandoning the traditional plot structure, omitting the expositions and resolutions that in the past had clarified the work for the reader. Instead, stories and novels were structured to reflect the fragmentation and uncertainty of human experience. As a result, a typical modern story or novel seems to begin arbitrarily and to end without a resolution, leaving the reader with possibilities, not solutions.