Modernism describes a series of reforming cultural movements in art and architecture, music, literature and the applied arts which emerged in the three decades before 1914.

Embracing change and the present, modernism encompasses the works of thinkers who rebelled against nineteenth century academic traditions, believing the "traditional" forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life were becoming outdated;

they directly confronted the new economic, social and political aspects of an emerging fully industrialized world.
Darwin and Marx:

- Two of the most disruptive thinkers of the period were, in biology, Charles Darwin and, in political science, Karl Marx.
- Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection undermined religious certainty of the general public. The notion that human beings were driven by the same impulses as "lower animals" proved to be difficult to reconcile with the idea of an ennobling spirituality.
- Karl Marx seemed to present a political version of the same proposition: that problems with the economic order were not transient, the result of specific wrong doers or temporary conditions, but were fundamentally contradictions within the "capitalist" system.
Impressionism:

- Two important art movements originating in France that had an impact on modernist thought were impressionism and symbolism.
- Characteristics of Impressionist painting include visible brushstrokes, open composition, emphasis on light in its changing qualities (often accentuating the effects of the passage of time), ordinary subject matter, the inclusion of movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience, and unusual visual angles.
- Some famous impressionist painters are Claude Monet, Eduard Manet, Pierre Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas.
Symbolism:

- Symbolism was largely a reaction against Naturalism and Realism, movements which attempted to objectively capture reality.
- Symbolism was marked by a belief that language is expressly symbolic in its nature and that poetry and writing should follow connections that the sound and texture of the words create.
Examples of Impressionist and Symbolist painting:
Examples contd.

- The first is a composite of three images of Monet's Paintings.

- *The second painting is called* La mort du fossoyeur (*"The death of the gravedigger"*) *by Carlos Schwabe* and shows many Symbolist motifs.

- Death and angels, pure snow, and the dramatic poses of the characters, all express Symbolist motifs.
Social and economic changes:

- During this period many social, political, and economic forces were at work that would become the basis to argue for a radically different kind of art and thinking.
- Chief among these was industrialization, which produced buildings like the Eiffel Tower (constructed in 1889), which broke all previous limitations on how tall man-made objects could be.
- Industrial urbanisation brought with it many problems and changes in the ways in which people lived their lives.
- With the invention of the telegraph offering instant communication at a distance, the experience of time itself was altered.
The Explosion of Modernism: 1910-1930

- On the eve of World War I, a growing tension and unease with the social order, manifested itself in artistic works in every medium which radically simplified or rejected previous practice.

- These developments began to give a new meaning to what was termed 'Modernism': it embraced disruption, rejecting or moving beyond simple Realism in literature and art.
Modernism’s difference with 19c writers

- This set modernists apart from 19th century artists, who had tended to believe in 'progress'.
- Writers like Charles Dickens and Tolstoy, painters like Turner, and musicians like Brahms were not 'radicals' or 'Bohemians', but were instead valued members of society who produced art that added to society, even if it were, at times, critiquing less desirable aspects of it.
- Modernism, while it was still "progressive" increasingly saw traditional forms and traditional social arrangements as hindering progress, and therefore the artist was recast as a revolutionary, overthrowing rather than enlightening.
Rejection of traditional perspectives in painting:

- *Le Guitariste* (1910) by Pablo Picasso
World War I and its consequences:

- World War I and its subsequent events were the cataclysmic upheavals that shaped much of modernism.
- First, the failure of the previous status quo became obvious; prior to the war, it had been argued that no one would fight such a war, since the cost was too high.
- Second, the birth of a machine age changed the conditions of life—mechanized warfare created new horrors to be dealt with – massive injuries, large numbers of dead, etc.
- Finally, the immensely traumatic nature of the experience dashed basic assumptions: Realism seemed to be bankrupt when faced with the fundamentally fantastic nature of trench warfare.
- Moreover, the view that mankind was making slow and steady moral progress came to seem ridiculous in the face of the senseless slaughter of the Great War.
Modernism’s second generation: 1930-1945

- By 1930, Modernism had entered popular culture.
- With the increasing urbanization of populations, it was beginning to be looked to as the source for ideas to deal with the challenges of the day.
- Popular culture, which was not derived from high culture but instead from its own realities (particularly mass production) fueled much modernist innovation.
Amenities of Modern Life:

- One of the most visible changes of this period is the adoption of objects of modern production into daily life.
- Electricity, the telephone, the automobile—and the need to work with them, repair them and live with them—created the need for new forms of manners, and social life.
- The speed of communication became part of family life.

Themes of modernist literature

- Modernist literature is marked by the appearance of various typical themes, such as: questioning the reality of experience itself; the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced.
Use of interior landscape and time:

- The use of interior or symbolic landscape: the world is moved 'inside', -- as opposed to Realist representations of the exterior world as a physical, historical, site of experience.

- Time is moved into the interior as well: time becomes psychological time (time as inwardly experienced) or symbolic time (time or measures of time as symbols), not the 'historical' time of realism.

- Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards and forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth.
Form in literature:

- Experimentation in **form** in order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life. Also to create a sense of art as 'other' than daily reality (art is seen as 'high', as opposed to popular).

- The tightening of form which is accomplished in part through the use of various devices such as motif, juxtaposition, significant parallels, different voices, shifts and overlays in time and place and perspective.
A different representation of reality:

- Modernism is marked by a re-structuring of literature and the experience of reality it represents.
- Art always attempts to 'imitate' or represent reality; what changes is our understanding of what constitutes reality, and how that reality can best be represented.
- Modernist literature is marked by a break with the sequential, developmental, cause-and-effect presentation of the 'reality' of realist fiction, toward a presentation of experience as layered and discontinuous.
- To achieve this writers use devices such as fragmentation and juxtaposition, motif, symbol, allusion.
Use of language:

- Language is no longer seen as transparent; rather language is seen as a complex. Language is 'thick', its multiple meanings are essential to our multiple, complex sense of reality.

Source: Some attributes of modernism, Professor John Lye

http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/2F55/modernism.html