

**Who Am I? A Modernist Somebody or a Postmodernist Nobody?**  
The Evolution of “Who Am I?” Through Modernist and Postmodernist Texts

“A calendar of dates is like a pond of koi. Each day is a colorful streak against a heavy blue. The month as a whole washes these streaks up into a hodgepodge of colors dripping from the memories each day amassed.

One of these koi, or one of these days, was the day I saw black bleed through the pond. It was sometime during World War II. Sometime in one of these ponds. I have drowned in the memory and cannot clarify which day, which month, or which year it was anymore. The sound of a gunshot slips from an air that has tried its best to keep the day silent. The drop of his body adds to the mass of sound until it gets to a weight that everything loses its silence and noise. I had never seen black in the pond until this day. I did not realize how cold the color was, how unafraid it was to creep across the terrain and rob it of innocence and naivety.

His death replays in my memory every night, every dream until I no longer dream, and that nightmare of black comes haunting back. Where had the humanity gone and why had it left me in this moment? It left in this infinite moment, and I do not know where the end of infinity lies. I would chase after its tail in my nightmares, searching, and yet, all I find is a ghastly version of myself hovering over that day, watching its events unfold for the two-hundredth and ninth time. The cold black has injected itself in the koi pond, and every date in my calendar is poisoned. My life has been poisoned but yet I still die at the same rate as everyone else. In my nightmares, I see death. In my life, I see faded colors. I crave for my innocence back. My naivety. I miss when the world was big.”

-“Fallen”, Chadwick Dunefsky

“Who am I?” That is a question that is asked by most people and it is difficult to answer.

In the vignette above, that veteran is plunged into this philosophical debate within himself. He is unable to escape this memory. It is difficult to live with that nightmare permanently stamped into his brain. These types of nightmares lurked in many of the modernist and postmodernist literature through the 20th century. Kurt Vonnegut for example, started using the postmodern technique to express his reaction to a post-war world in a new and experimental way.

Modernism in brevity, is a reactionary movement against the previous literary ages. Writers sought to challenge the old conventions and cope with a world quickly industrializing. Postmodernism continued this trend but lost the need to search for meaning. It stepped further than the radicalism of modernism and challenged the notion of ‘who am I’ through plurality of selves and deconstruction of self-identity. “Who am I” shifted from a modernist’s need to

explore human nature in a world displaced by industrialization to a postmodernist's lack of need to explore meaning. 'Who am I' in postmodern context is a meaningless endeavor to a life because there no longer was any meaning after the atrocities committed in World War II.

That question of "Who am I" shifted over the course of the twentieth century through the emergence of modernist and postmodernist thought due to varied explorations of how to address a world dipped in cruelty. In the vignette, the soldier struggled with figuring out who he was. His place in the world might be missing if a memory shadows everything he does. In a modernist perspective, the soldier depicts his memories in an attempt to demonstrate the fractured mosaic of his ruined world view after his experience in the war.

To further that point, the development of modernism addresses the context of the soldier's actions.

Modernism emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction to the nineteenth century way of thought. Peter Childs writes in Modernism, modernism was "determinedly self-destructive, it attempted to cut off its branch of the past, by proposing entirely new methods, a fresh 'syllabus' or canon of authors and a new register of allusions" (11). This new way of thinking fought to remain afloat in the early twentieth century without regard for past literary ages. The world before the twentieth century seemed rigid and unadjustable. Authors started to question with the advent of technology and industrialization toward the turn of the century, a person's new role in this rapidly changing world. The world was radically different from the previous ages. Machines stationed themselves in cities, and mankind drifted to the city center and began living in cramped quarters.

Brian McHale writes in Postmodern Fiction, that “the cognitive questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, til around 1958)” were “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” (20). For the postmodern, McHale writes that “the post cognitive questions (asked by most artists since then)” were “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (20). The same question of “who am I” lurks in both modes of thought. However, there is a detachment from meaning in the postmodern question.

In the modernist questions, “who am I” is used to figure out a person’s place in the world and what their responsibilities are. In this idea, the postmodern technique might be defined as a way of letting go of that idea of needing to figure out the world. In another way of stating postmodernism, it is a reaction to modernists technique and it is also, in a way, a calm outrage against what modernity did to the world. As McHale writes, modernity “resulted in the invention of new weapons.. and produced more than 33 million casualties and an additional 5 million civilian deaths, not counting the millions of war-related influenza deaths” (30). “Who am I” evolves from attempting to fix the world to attempting to figure out what should personally be done in order to carry out a decent life.

Modernism specifically spurred on the need to address a changing world, a shift from looking at the extraordinary to looking at the ordinary. James Joyce is one of these modernist figures and is known for *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, and *Dubliners*. Joyce addressed the ordinary in these texts. In “Joyce's Scissors Modernism and the Dissolution of the Event”, Sara Danius writes “for hundreds of years, even thousands, serious narrative fiction dealt with the

extraordinary. Why is it that the modernist novel decides to stick with the unexceptional?" (3). In the unexceptional and mundane moments of life, glimmers of introspection can be found. Introspection addressed the need of "who am I" in a world industrializing. Individuals began to lose their place, competing with machinery that made the world feel a little bit more cramped. There was an increasing need to find identity as people began to lose their sense of self in a world that was growing smaller.

Basic human nature can be found in everyday bits of life. That was a major focal point for several modernist authors as they searched for an answer to "who am I" and realized that the answer was somewhere in the everyday motions of life. When someone goes to the grocery store, a person might smile and thank the grocer. In modernist texts, authors explore these individuals and how they developed their traits. Examples of these developments in regards to the grocery store might be that those who are more polite also have worked retail themselves. In this trip, the basic idea of empathy, the ability to understand what another person is feeling is found. A thankless job is exhausting and a word of thankfulness might be enough to light someone's day up. Danus writes that Joyce's "basic feature is the conviction that there is nothing big in life, no big events, no big people, no big ideas; and the writer can give a picture of life by just taking any 'given hero on any given day' (5) Joyce took the mundane and used modernist techniques to explore human nature within his short story collection *Dubliners*.

In several of the short stories within *Dubliners*, Joyce uses a limited perspective to keep the focal point within the mind of one person. Shen Yuan in his article "The Modernistic Features in Joyce's *Dubliners*" writes that this use of perspective "breaks the situation where the process of narration is only arranged by omniscient narrators in traditional novels, and they show

readers different personalities and attitudes” (5). In “Eveline”, Joyce creates a limited frame where the reader only views the world through the main character, Eveline. She is preparing to leave home to join Frank, her lover. Joyce writes that Eveline “was about to explore another life with Frank, Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him” (31). The words Joyce uses to describe Frank sounds stilted and slightly prescribed. It almost sounds like someone fed Eveline those words and she is using them to persuade herself that everything will be okay if she goes with Frank. However, as the reader, these ideas are only left to assumptions because everything is left in the frame of Eveline’s perspective. It is unknown where she got these words from, but they fill her thoughts, and that is what Joyce portrays in that sentence. Her perception of the world is unreliable because it is information only received from one character. The omniscience of the previous literary ages is gone and in its wake, unreliable characters are created to allow for a deeper glance within the human conscience. In “Eveline”, “who am I” is a glance at someone’s intricate subconscious. Joyce dives straight in and uses the mundane to bounce off Eveline’s limited frame of view to reveal unease in what is seemingly supposed to be joyful and meaningful.

The introspection of Eveline differs from postmodern text because postmodern authors like Kurt Vonnegut wrote using an omniscient narrator. Vonnegut was a postmodern satirist and humorist, who published *Welcome to the Monkey House*, a collection of short stories in 1968. In *Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*, Todd F. Davis writes that “Vonnegut’s belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme.. That his books, at all times, comment upon the ‘futility of human endeavor, the

meaningless of human existence” (131-132). The idea of futility is best exemplified in the short story “All the King's Horses”. In “All the King's Horses”, a pilot and his team are taken hostage by a guerilla chief. In exchange for freedom, the pilot must use his team as chess pieces against the guerilla’s own team. For each piece that is taken out, the person is removed from the room and shot promptly. Each person related to the pilot is reduced to a game piece. In a collective whole, the team is worth losing its pieces if at least one person receives freedom.

The question of “who am I” differs between the two short stories “All the King’s Horses” and “Eveline”. In “All the King’s Horses”, there is no humanity behind these chess pieces, these humans. The reader is clueless of the man standing in the bishop’s place. His story is untold. He might get shot soon anyways so there is little point in sharing it. The man in the bishop’s place, for example, is without any identity or story. His purpose might be reduced to futility and uselessness. The idea of futility might be where postmodernists and modernists differ. For modernist authors, futility might be where introspection is found. For postmodernist authors, futility might be accepted at face value. There might not be a point in exploring it if there is no meaning.

In Joyce’s short story “Araby”, the narrator falls in love with his friend’s sister. The short story is a journey through this crush as it blooms until the point where the narrator realizes that this love is pointless because it has been built out of a pure physical desire. Using a limited perspective, the epiphany is built up. It is a journey through the narrator’s thoughts and the steps he takes to get to the point where he realizes he is flawed in his way of thought. The narrator originally presumed that the place he wanted to buy his lover a gift was foreign and wonderful. He spent time biding up to that point where he would finally be allowed to go. Joyce pinpoints

the epiphany when the narrator “remark[s] their English accents and listened vaguely to their conversation” (27). At the point of the remark, all charm of the market is lost, and the narrator is forced to rethink why he is there in the first place. Joyce takes the reader along this thought process by ending the short story with the narrator seeing “[himself] as a creature driven and derided by vanity” (28). Love exists because the narrator wants to prove he could offer exotic riches to his friend’s sister. Joyce’s use of limited frame takes the reader on a journey as the slow realization of greed slowly possesses Joyce’s language. This realization reveals two ideas about the main character within the short story, his identity and how he copes with the world. In terms of the question of “who am I”, the main character loses that sense because of the increasingly interconnectivity of the world. His ideas of the bazaar are romanticized beyond reality and when he sees it for the first time, his worldview is shattered. Within this worldview, Joyce reveals the greed and the desperation of the narrator. Through the perspective of the narrator, the reader is able to learn about a new personality. Joyce shows how someone like this narrator addresses the world he lives in. Through modernism, “who am I” is a question that individuals use to learn and cope with a world that seems to be increasing in its complexity.

The narrator of “Araby” and the characters of “All the King’s Horses” are participating in a futile effort to do something. In “Araby”, the narrator realizes the futility of love in an increasingly interconnected and industrialized world. It is isolated and self contained within his conscious. In “All the King’s Horses”, the futility in living is realized when the lives of men are reduced to a mere game, to chess pieces.

The omniscient narrator is returned to literary form with Vonnegut’s short story allowing the reader to view the characters within as a collective whole instead of individuals with an



intricate past. In both “Eveline” and “Araby”, the individual’s subconscious is pried open and the reader is allowed a glance within the mind of a complete stranger for a few pages. The question of “who am I” is developed with the narrator’s perspective of the world. Through his greed, an element of human nature is pinpointed and analyzed through his reactions to the world around him. When he visits the bazaar and is disappointed by its paper quality, his worldview falls apart. The narrator’s excitement was built up by greed and Joyce reveals how that greed can be self-destructive in a world that is quickly modernizing through industrialization. These individual characters seem to have a deeply individualistic way of coming to their epiphanies. In Vonnegut’s short story “All the King’s Horses”, “who am I” is placed onto a collective group. There is no meaning to the individual characters within the story, their lives are disposable. That might demean the individual. To compare that to “Eveline” and “Araby”, Vonnegut suggests that there is little point to a life that might soon end in death. In the struggles of Eveline and the narrator of “Araby”, their personalities are limited by an increasingly industrialized world. “Who am I” is lost within these short stories as the characters face a world that might not have a place for them.

Davis writes that “Vonnegut’s movement toward action through the writing of fiction appears to transcend the modernist paradigm, recognizing the pluralist nature of reality and the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives” (24). In *A Postmodern Reader*, Joseph Natoli has a section on excerpts from *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, written by Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard writes that postmodernism is “incredulity toward metanarratives...the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (87). According to Lyotard, Joyce’s narrative might have lost its

place in a postmodern world. The question of “who am I” of Joyce’s narrative evolves to the deconstruction of metanarratives in Vonnegut’s short story. The idea of the metanarrative, the need to find the answer to the universal truth is stripped in Vonnegut’s stories. Humans live on one page and die the next. There is no room for the individual between the pages. It all seems reactionary. It is a reaction against World War I, World War II, and modernity. Modernity forced the world to stretch its already cramped halls.

Joyce’s *Dubliners* is inherently Irish in its identity. Childs writes that “modernity is considered to describe a way..of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation” (25). Ireland seems to meet these checkpoints. The characters within *Dubliners* such as Eveline and the narrator of Araby face the struggle of living in a newly modernizing Ireland when coming to terms of their realizations. As Childs writes, modernism “focused on the micro-rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social” (28). The modernity and cramped space of Ireland allows Joyce to select characters to hone into and to allow for a deeper introspective glance of what it means to live in a new century.

This might differ from Vonnegut’s short stories. In “Who Am I This Time?” and “Epicac”, the individual is stripped of his conscious and left vapid. Harry Nash, an actor in “Who Am I This Time?” is suggested to have no personality. It is not until he is assigned a role that he comes to life. As Vonnegut writes “he was never Harry on stage” (17) and “once the show’s over, whatever [the team] thought Harry was just evaporates into thin air” (25). Harry Nash is simply who the theater tells him to be. He is a collection of personalities, a plurality of who’s living in one body. There is no one central who within Harry and instead, he is just a mold that is

readily available to take on any role he is offered. In “Epicac”, the narrator is friends with a smart computer that can compute any logical problem. When the narrator falls in love with a woman, he requests the computer to write him poetry. The computer does this and at the same time, falls in love with the woman. When the computer realizes love is not possible, it kills itself and leaves a thousand poems for the narrator to give to the woman. In both of these short stories, neither individual truly has a personality. Harry Nash in the first story is comprised of the personalities he represents in the theater. In the second story, the narrator relies on a machine to fall in love with a woman.

The plurality of selves within Harry Nash embodies the postmodern thought succinctly. On any given day in a week, “who am I” is addressed. Harry Nash switches his selves on any given day, but each self is somehow expected to have a different role in a post World War II world. When Harry Nash is acting, he is a completely different person acting in a different world, in a different mindset. He is acting to fulfill that personality’s role within the world. In the second story, romanticism is reduced to good poetry written by a computer. There is no self in that. The woman reciprocates the man’s interest because of the computer’s poetry. Ihab Hassan explains this deconstruction of identity in his essay “From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: the Local/Global context”, he writes “consider the sixties for a moment, all the openings and breaks that occurred in developed, consumer societies” (1). The invention of the computer and internet in this time period reflects the question of “who am I” within “Epicac”, mankind’s competition with a computer might be futile if the computer can perform better. However, the computer loses love in the end, it dies. The man and the woman love an empty love, there is nothing there aside from the poetry the computer left behind. It is vapid. There might not be any meaning left in a

postmodern world if it has entered the technology age. The question of “who am I” might be lost if computers can simply compute the answer with logic and coldness.

The shift within Joyce’s narratives to this seemingly hostile reaction to humanity offers a stark evolution in the question of “who am I”. Joyce’s Ireland serves as a hub of modernity and allows Joyce’s characters to figure out themselves in the bustling development of industrialization. Through the use of narrative and limited perspective, the reader is taken on a journey with these characters to come upon an epiphany of sorts. Vonnegut challenges this metanarrative, as do the postmodernist theorists Hassan and Lyotard. Individualism seems to be stripped bare within Vonnegut’s short stories allowing the question of “who am I” to evolve into a more global context. One person might not be any different from the billions of others living on Earth.

The same notion of “who am I” can be found in other modes of thought. In TS Eliot’s poems, he depicts a world gone awry. He attempts to collect the pieces into a fractured image of a war torn world. In Sylvia Plath’s poems, there is a sense of plurality and detachment from life. Plath disconnects from the idea of death and treats it as a step to the next life. The focal point of meaning disappears in her writing.

The comparison of “who am I” between these poets is found through the intent of their poetry. Eliot’s obsession with idleness in his poem “The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock” might reveal an inability to cope with a world that has fragmented and detached itself from its humanity.

In “The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot writes about a character that is unable to address his love for a woman. The poem idles on this thought and the words knot in indecision as the main character never is able to do what he wants. Eliot writes,

“And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”  
Time to turn back and descend the stair”  
(37-40).

The repetition of the phrase “do I dare” challenges this idea of time. Time is a concept that increasingly loses its meaning in a modernist and postmodernist world. Albert Gelpi writes in “The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry”, “time is the evil. Evil” (3). The world in the 20th century seems to have become increasingly fragmented. In the repetition and the fragments of Eliot’s poetry, there is a detachment to meaning. It might be interpreted as obsession over one idle thought, that idle thought of approaching this woman. In the question of “who am I”, the character within Eliot’s poem is unable to approach someone he likes. The words that Eliot chooses to reflect this situation seem to also reflect the lack of time and time is replaced with urgency. They might be misread as synonymous concepts but in a modernist world, that sense of urgency questions the same need for time. It is this analysis and this constant questioning of the world that might define the modernist thought.

Rebecca Beasley writes in *Theorists of Modernist Poetry*, that “the legacy of the nineteenth century is felt in modernism’s urge to question, analyse, and categorize” (25). The modernist world is industrialized and it is destroyed by the horrors found in World War I. That

causes poets like Eliot to question the fundamentals of living, like the idea of time and its place in a world that has become fragmented.

In comparison, Sylvia Plath and other postmodern poets lose a focal point of meaning. In the postmodern poetry, poets sometimes struggle with finding a baseline to write their thoughts on. The world has continued to host atrocities with the development of World War II and the horror found within that war. That same horror has shaken the fundamental beliefs of postmodernists. Poets like Plath continue the steps of modernists, but they go a step beyond and radicalize their writing. This is especially true in the case of Plath's depression as she might have used poetry as a platform to express her struggles. Dennis Brown furthers this suggestion in *The Poetry of Postmodernity* by stating that several of Plath's poems might serve as a "defense early warning system" of a postmodern ecstasy-in-hyperreality" (3).

To explore this point further, in Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus", she writes about the plurality of living. The character in "Lady Lazarus" lives, dies, and lives another life without any remark to the death that the character just experienced. Death loses its foothold and its grip on postmodernists. Gelpi writes that "the equally elitist sympathy for totalitarianism which helped make Fascism and Nazism and Stalinism possible" led to modernism being "immolated in the war it in part brought about" (2). Although modernism was not completely immolated in the wake of postmodernity, a lot of its fundamentals like the need to question was replaced by a lack of need to explore meaning. Plath writes that

"Dying Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well"

(43-45).

Death in her poem is translated into an art. In a postmodern world, where death might not have any meaning, Plath extends its concept and turns it into something she can slip in and out of. In this idea, the postmodern thought of “who am I” deals with both the absurd and the loss of meaning. In a world where death might not have its part, “who am I” becomes meaningless as life shifts into death and death shifts into the next life. As Brown writes in, “man is dead’ became the expression of twentieth century nihilism” (17). This concept translates into death being a constant in life. It might also be that death is equivalent to life, as Plath might suggest in her ability to switch between the two seamlessly.

The lack of questioning addresses “who am I”, because that question becomes meaningless in a world where man is proclaimed dead. In comparison to “The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot explores the meaning of time and its place in a world where time has slowly lost its meaning. He addresses this fundamental aspect of life and uses fragmented sentences and repetition to explore the answer to “who am I”. One answer, as found in that poem, might be that humankind is here to idle and that humankind is doomed to idle as emotions block the way to action. This might be more true in a post World War I world where the deaths amassed in a war like that stunt any emotional growth. The world might need to be fixed before it can progress, but as Eliot explores its problems, its issues might be too big for any solution.

To further develop that exploration, modernism in some ways is tied to the political atmosphere of the world during its peak. Gelpi writes that Eliot’s “ roles as specialists in the realm of culture required political statement” (15). This might be further developed as people figure out why World War I broke out. The same idea of “who am I” is buried under that development as that development seeks out how people could go to a war that resulted in many

lives lost. Gelpi adds onto this point by stating that the First World War turned the modernists from poet-aesthetes cultivating the objective correlative and the image into poet-critics concerned with the regeneration of society” (108). This issue is further addressed in Eliot’s poem “The Wasteland” as he paints a bleak image of war in his poetry. In Eliot’s “The Wasteland”, he writes,

“I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled”

(62-65).

There is a sense of weariness in these lines. That sense of weariness depicts the body loss in the war. Through Eliot’s words, an image of war is created and some sort of order is brought back to the world. It is a way of coping. Through this coping mechanism, the question of “who am I” evolves into a human need to comprehend exactly what happened in the war. Beasley writes that “the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (28). Eliot achieves this goal by bringing death to the center. Similar to Plath, death becomes a focal point as it is the fault of so many losses in both World Wars. However, the poets differ in how they each address death. In these differences, the question of “who am I” also differs. Through modernism, that question is a need to depict life as it is in order to find some sort of meaning in a bleak time. Through postmodernism, death becomes a step to detaching from any sense of meaning. “Who am I” becomes a meaningless question as life transitions into death with little thought to the transition.



Eliot's depiction of the war also becomes significant in the political sense as his image of war shows a world losing touch with its humanity. Poets became political as that same question of "who am I" also became political. The world delved into a need to answer that question as poets attempted to explore it through comprehensive writing like "The Wasteland".

In comparison to this international affair of exploration, Plath seemed to mostly pursue introspection through her poetry. She discussed and veiled the horrors of World War II through a sense of plurality and meaninglessness through her verse. In "Fever 103", Plath copes with a post-war world by depicting a world that can no longer exist through one form. She writes that,

"Darling, all night.

I have been flickering, off, on, off, on"

(28-29).

Her sense of self is not limited to just one self throughout a day. Brown further explains this sense of plurality by stating that Plath's "poems rehearse, with self-conscious fictive art, the possibilities of the split agent in the world after Hitler and Hiroshima, as felt in one young life" (56). Plath copes with the brutality found in war by detaching any meaning from it. The self she identifies with this world is a dichotomy to the self she identifies with in another world. It answers the postmodern question from earlier, that need to find responsibility for these multiple selves. "Who am I" is stripped away as the post war world no longer harbors any forgiveness for the individual human being. The focal point of meaning from modernism is gone as postmodernists shift to a more radical future where meaning no longer has its place.

Modernism and postmodernism are two philosophies that discussed similar ideas. However, they addressed those similar ideas differently.

Through Vonnegut and Plath's stripping of meaning, the question of "who am I" is lost in a world that no longer seems to need that question. Vonnegut's omniscient narrator discusses the potential of no longer needing individual personality for each individual human being. On one page, the character lives and on the next page, the character dies. There is little room there for any growth and development. In this sense, the postmodern idea of "who am I" dwindles in contrast to the modernist fervor for order and for exploration.

Joyce discusses fundamental human nature within his short stories, especially in "Araby" and "Eveline". In these two short stories, his characters look for meaning in a world that is increasingly industrializing and modernizing. Their sense of self is fading away in a world that no longer seems to have room for them. Joyce's work suggests a craving for identity as he depicts the day of an ordinary person. In these short stories, Joyce creates a displacement of identity within the world. Ireland in its modernization no longer has room for these individuals.

Eliot continues this idea of displacement in his poetry, especially in "The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock". The character cannot face his obsession and instead dawdles on time that might no longer exist in a modernist world. Urgency and time lose their synonymy as this character never fully comes to terms with his inability to approach this woman in the poem.

In these modernists literature and poems, the question of "who am I" is a struggle. The world is modernizing and the world has also been at war. There exists a new need to depict order or a need to depict the atrocities found in a world struck by pain.

To further that need to depict order, international affairs address the need to discuss the individual's place within the world. Poets become part of this discussion and that is prevalent through Eliot's "The Wasteland". There is a new world emerging out of the wasteland of the war

and in this wasteland, human character is dissected. This is also seen in “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” as Eliot dawdles on the idea of fragmentation. This fragmentation is a result of the events and atrocities created by World War I. Its effects leave a lingering emotion on the poets as they discover words to express where the world has gone.

As Joyce reveals through his literary techniques like the use of a limited-perspective narrator, the reader is given a glimpse into another life completely. Somehow, in these bits of introspection, a new way of living is created. There arises a need to cope with the war and a need to cope with a modernizing world.

These issues further complicate with the emergence of World War II as several postmodernists continue the trend of modernists writing styles. However, in these writings, there seems to be guilt over the deaths amassed in the previous two world wars. The modernism desperation for meaning and order is shaken off as postmodernists attempt to cope with a world capable of the horrors found within these wars.

Postmodernists shake away meaning in their writing as they slowly suggest a shift away from the need for wars and a need for meaning altogether. In the international scene of politics, postmodernists exist on the sideline slowly shifting the world into a place without any need for meaning. As Beasley states, “to the disillusioned Postmodernist the vaunted claims of Modernism were spurious and dangerous” (2). They might have been dangerous because of their need to fix a world when the postmodernists believed that the world no longer had any meaning. There is nothing to fix in a world without meaning.

“Who Am I” is lost in this continuum of modernity and postmodernity as authors began to discuss what it meant to be a human in a world like this. There arises a need to start anew after

World War II. This might suggest a need to let go of human history and to let go of the events that have occurred. “Who Am I” is left anchorless in a post war world as postmodernists struggle with figuring out the plurality and the split identity the war has left them with.

Through the modernist and postmodernist questions, poets and authors explore the fundamental truths of being. Poets like Eliot and Plath act as reactionary figures to the events that occurred before their writing. They delve into two sides of exploration. Eliot discusses the newly fragmented world in the literary styles he writes with. Plath steps further than that and writes in radicalization of the events prior to her poetry. Through her inability to find an answer, there might be a madness lurking in her words. The meaning of “who am I” is lost in a world that seemingly has no place for that question.

Vonnegut further analyzes this question as he uses certain literary forms like the omniscient narrator to strip away the individual. The individual within Vonnegut’s texts no longer bears meaning. This is in contrast to Joyce’s need to dissect how characters react to a newly industrialized world. There is a sense of displacement and desperation within Joyce’s character as they struggle to find an anchor.

The question of “who am I” weighs heavily on these literary figures as that question becomes fundamental to their texts. The modernists might feel the need to find meaning in a newly fragmented world industrialized and cramped with machinery. This develops further in the technology age found in a post World War II world. Vonnegut’s stories face that struggle alongside the struggle of living in a world where both world wars scar the postmodern way of thinking.

The need to address that question has become increasingly barren since the modernist and postmodernist writers. Its weight on society today is ambivalent as some think society is still living in a postmodern world. The value of this question in literary texts as many authors and poets explore the truths of what it mean to be human holds up to contemporary times as literary forms shift from one age to the next. Poets and authors become politically involved in global affairs as figures might turn to them for an answer. Political figures and citizens might ask that same question of “who am I” and these questions spur on the philosophical debates of contemporary literary figures in both modernist and postmodernist texts. It might be shifting to a future where the answer to “who am I” is that humankind and its existence is meaningless. It might return back to the modernist form where “who am I” is key to the individual and that the individual does matter.

These constant back and forth debates of “who am I” shift throughout the literary ages as they all seem to be unable to agree. Literary figures keep a few of the trends from the past ages as they attempt to radicalize and revolutionize the way of answering that same question of “who am I”. The question’s weight bears significant meaning to many of the literary ages through time but its prevalence in a world scarred by the world wars seems to provide revolutionary ways of answering the question.

This might be discussed further as the world wars spur on a need to look at the individual, whether that individual be meaningful is up to the modernist or the postmodernist way of thought. The 20th century brought the individual center-stage and these literary figures discuss the importance of living in a newly fragmented world that might not have any meaning in its fragments.

The question of “who am I” might be key to finding some sort of order in these fragments or it might be the key to letting go of that need to answer that question at all. The modernist and postmodernist way of thought radicalizes and revolutionizes the individual and how the world approaches the question of “who am I”.

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