

Prompted by fundamental and far-reaching historical, social, cultural, and economic changes in the early 1900s, art and literature took a drastic leap in a different direction from any other time period. These changes transformed the world from one that seemed ordered and stable to one that felt futile and chaotic.

Modernist art and poetry often is difficult for students to analyze and understand. A primary reason students feel a bit disoriented when reading a modernist poem or viewing a modernist piece is that the speaker or artist himself is uncertain about his own existence.

Indeed, the speaker of modernist poems characteristically wrestles with the fundamental question of “self,” often feeling fragmented and alienated from the world around him. In other words, a coherent speaker with a clear sense of himself/herself is hard to find in modernist poetry.

ACTIVITY 1. MODERNIST ART

An effective way to think about the modernist subject and corresponding individual feelings of fragmentation and alienation is to examine avant-garde paintings from the same period. We are going to look at a 1913 art exhibition and a 1915 poem.

1. Look at the following chart to review your understanding of the Modernist period:

Pre-Modern World (e.g., Romantic, Victorian Periods)	Modern World (early 20th century)
Order	Chaos
Meaningful	Futile
Optimistic	Pessimistic
Stable	Unstable
Faith	Loss of Faith
Morality/Values	Collapse of Morality/Values
Clear Sense of Identity	Confused Sense of Identity and Place in World

2. Digest the information on each of the following links:

- <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~museum/armory/entrance.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnszPHMiwwA>

If you need more information about The Armory Show, see these links:

- <http://armoryshow.si.edu/>
- http://www.academia.edu/5079501/Beyond_the_Shingle_Factory_The_Armory_Show_in_the_Popular_Press_after_1913_Journal_of_Curatorial_Studies_2_no.3_2013

3. Look at Marcel Duchamp’s painting “Nude Descending a Staircase.”

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MUSEUM/Armory/galleryI/duchamp.nude.html>

4. Answer the following questions:

- What is the subject of Duchamp's painting? Do you have problems identifying the subject? Why or why not?
- What adjectives can be used to describe the subject of the painting?
- How are time, space, and movement depicted in this painting?
- Does the point of view in the painting more resemble a Romantic or Modern sensibility? Why?
- Compose a brief DAIJ for "Nude Descending a Staircase." See this link to help you write it:
<http://thevirtualinstructor.com/blog/the-steps-to-art-criticism>

ACTIVITY 2. MODERNIST POETRY

The poetic term "stanza" also means a "room" or "habitation." While reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," you should spend some time in each "room" to gain your footing before attempting to analyze the poem as a whole.

5. Read the bio of poet T.S. Eliot.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/t-s-eliot>

6. Read a summary of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot.

<http://www.shmoop.com/love-song-alfred-prufrock/summary.html>

7. Read the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot.

<http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html>

If you'd like to listen to the poem while you read, click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLNsPhKlucY>

8. Answer the following questions:

- In lines 1-15, who is the speaker of the poem and to whom is he speaking? Where is the speaker? Describe the time of day, place, etc. What parts of the poem support your answer?
- Identify two SIMILES in the opening stanza. What do these similes suggest about the speaker's attitude?
- Identify the primary METAPHOR in lines 15-23. In other words, to what does the poet indirectly liken the yellow fog? Note specific elements/words from the poem to support your answer.
- What is the primary argument of lines 23-33? Sum up the argument in one sentence.
- What is the speaker's emotional state in lines 37-48? What are his primary concerns?
- What is the speaker's TONE in lines 49-69?
- What is the primary argument of lines 75-86?
- Review lines 90-98. Describe the speaker's relationship to speaking. Is he effective at expressing himself and/or telling a story? Why or why not?
- What is the primary argument of lines 111-119?
- Re-read line 125. Why does the speaker think this?
- In the last stanza, what is the speaker's final tone?

ACTIVITY 3. COMPARING MODERNIST ART AND POETRY

9. Review Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" and lines 24-34 from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

10. Answer the following question in a brief paragraph. Cite evidence from both Duchamp and Eliot.

How are the subjects of "Nude Descending a Staircase" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" similar in their effect on the viewer? Consider the adjectives you used to describe the subject of Duchamp's painting. In other words, how is your experience viewing the painting (and others from the Armory Show) similar to your experience reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?