

The Shift from Objectivity to Subjectivity: Movement, Intellect, and Art in Nineteenth-Century Realism and Twentieth-Century Modernism

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview of the major social, political, economic, and artistic changes that led to two significant movements in history: the shift from Romanticism to Realism and the shift from Realism to Modernism. A qualitative analysis is conducted of a thinker, an artist, and a socio-political ideology of each historical movement in order to reflect the changes that ultimately became the impetus for the establishment of a new historical period. These analyses will reveal that one of the most drastic thematic shifts between the Realism period and the Modernism period concerns cultural point of view; while Realists were intensely loyal to objectivity, Modernists began to fervently invest in the subjectivity of the individual.

During any period in history, the social, economic, political, and religious climate fundamentally impacts the organized movements, intellectual focuses, and artistic expressions of the era. Oftentimes, the cessation of one period stems from a gradual crescendo of rejection to the cultural milieu that has been in place for a considerable length of time; out of this rejection, new ideas form, some in direct reaction to the current standards and some entirely innovative. The period of Realism staunchly rejected Romanticism's idealization of life, nature, and art. Realists were interested in presenting the world authentically—without any embellishment or aggrandizement.

Following Realism, the period of Modernism grew out of the Realist's brazen confrontation of real life, which resulted in a distinct disillusionment with life and the human experience. Modernists were particularly interested in experimenting with new ways of expressing the cultural moment. They were skeptical, even of themselves, but constantly searched for meaning, even in a chaotic and uncertain world. Ultimately, one of the most drastic thematic shifts between Realism and Modernism concerned the cultural point of view; while Realists were intensely loyal to objectivity, Modernists began to fervently invest in the subjectivity of the individual.

The historical atmospheres of the Realism and Modernism periods significantly impacted nearly every arena of society. Mid to late nineteenth-century Realism was fueled by industrialization, nationalism, capitalism, materialism, imperialism, and colonialism (Fiero, 2011c, pp. 71-78). All of these development and expansion efforts fed into "popular demands for greater access to material wealth and well-being" (Fiero, 2011c, p. 71). Advances in technology—particularly those that enhanced transportation—made possible an international exchange of goods. The newly erected "23,000 miles of railway track" that spanned across Europe by 1850 revolutionized the distribution of resources (Fiero, 2011c, p. 71). Therefore, it became more likely that middle-class European citizens could gain access to products and services that had previously been reserved only for the higher class. Still, the working classes remained under economic, social, and political duress.

Industrialization also created solid divisions between industrialized and unindustrialized nations across the globe. In regions where industrialization was not nearly as prevalent (or not prevalent at all), the economically and politically powerful Britain and America took over with sheer imperialistic fervor. Fiero (2011c) explains that "European imperialists defended the economic exploitation of weaker countries" with the Darwinian view that only the strongest nations survive (p. 71).

This imperialist impulse of “economic exploitation” ultimately propagated the materialistic focus of the Realism period. With the new industrialized means of production and distribution came the juxtaposing reality of the common laborers who were still poor and struggling. The working class acted as the hands and feet of industrialized capitalism, but the upper class still enjoyed the fruits of their labor. This tension between classes ultimately sparked the social movement called Marxism.

Marxism, a more radical form of socialism, grew out of a vast dissatisfaction in the lower classes of nineteenth-century society. Marxism stood in ardent opposition to the other social movements of the time. Unlike proponents of conservatism, which sought to continue “traditional power structures,” and liberalism, which supported “gradual reform” but argued that the state must “regulate the economy,” Karl Marx, the father of Marxism, supported socialism’s rejection of capitalism, but called for more drastic—even “violent”—measures than other socialist movements to initiate change (Fiero, 2011c, pp. 76-77). The doctrines of the nineteenth-century Marxism movement are outlined in Marx and Engels’¹ *Communist Manifesto*.

Marxism specifically opposed the injustices caused by the unequal distribution of wealth and power between the bourgeoisie and the working class. One particularly dynamic passage of *Communist Manifesto* reveals the intensity with which Marxism operated: “In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (lines 90-92²). The Marxist movement proved to be such an influential call for social reform that its precepts would extend far beyond the nineteenth century and apply to other realms (i.e. contemporary literary theory). In addition to initiating reform movements, the social and economic turbulence of the nineteenth century also found expression in visual art.

Realist art was focused on presenting nature and its inhabitants with supreme accuracy, without Romantic idealization. Therefore, the grave images of the Civil War, the economic depression, and the hard labor of industrialized capitalism took the forefront of the visual spectrum. The birth of photography and lithography were especially influential in moving visual art away from the glorified images of the Romantic period (Fiero, 2011c, pp. 92-99). Fiero (2011c) describes Realist artists as having “a preference for concrete, matter-of-fact depictions of everyday life,” which “provided a sober alternative to both the remote, exotic, and heroic imagery of the Romantics” (p. 94).

The premier period painter, Gustave Courbet, subscribed to the Realist notion that life should be portrayed exactly as it is: not with anything added, nor with anything withheld. His work demonstrates an extreme loyalty to objectivity. Especially in his painting titled *The Stone Breakers*³, Courbet depicts the scene of two rural laborers with a meticulous devotion to authenticity. From far away, the painting could be mistaken for a photograph, since the accuracy of Courbet’s strokes and rendering of the two men and the countryside is so realistic. Upon closer examination, one notices the impeccable detail of every shadow, every crease in the laborers’ clothing, every piece of dried wood woven into the laborer’s basket, and every crack in the rocks; all of these minute details serve to legitimize the scene.

Courbet’s artistic Realism is also achieved through his careful attention to the accurate dimensions of the male figures set on a level plane. The light in the painting falls like natural sunlight would, both in the foreground that features the laborers and in the background of the hilly countryside; nothing is purposefully disproportionate or enhanced, and light has not been manipulated for effect like it often is in Romantic art.⁴ In contrast to painting the idealized heroes and “nostalgic landscapes” characteristic of Romantic art, painters of the Realism period “depict[ed] the consequences of industrialization and the lives of ordinary men and women” (Fiero, 2011c, p. 94). Along with his stylistic choices, the subject matter of Courbet’s painting is also significant. The two male laborers are left unnamed, their identities remain unknown, and even their countenances are hidden from view; they are not famous or heroic. They represent the common man, but they are also representative of the social, political, and economic mindset of the time.

With industrialization serving as the engine of progress and the imperialistic impulse to conquer undeveloped territories and to transform them into perpetuating sites of European and American materialism, the ordinary laborers in Courbet’s painting symbolize progress and colonization. With every strike of their stone-splitting hammers, they make way for further industrialization—for further economic exploitation.

Their arduous task is not glorified, but in a way, it is a celebration of the laborers themselves as well as human progress. Perhaps they are removing large rocks to make way for more railroad track; perhaps they are breaking the stones into manageable pieces for later use in the production of commercial goods for the masses. Whatever the intension of their task, the stone laborers in Courbet's painting are engaged in the genuine, dirty, back-breaking work that enabled industrialization on a daily basis. The authenticity of the scene evokes pity for the laborers' torn clothes and straining muscles, but also for the imminent exploitation of the inhabitants and resources of unindustrialized lands.

The rejection of idealization and the adoption of a new, objective view of life in the Realism period led to a re-examination of society's belief systems (i.e. patriarchy) and social institutions (i.e. marriage). Issues related to class, gender, and race started to become more and more important as the masses had—through advancing technology, increased opportunities for quicker transportation, and the effects of industrialization—more access to information and goods than ever before. There was more opportunity for commoners to mobilize and communicate, which was a marked contrast from centuries of aristocratic and elitist control. While the elite still enjoyed power and wealth during the Realism period, the everyday laborer and minority cultures did have a relatively louder voice in society. Coupled with the social changes of the times and the new privileging of objectivity, equality—particularly between genders—became a topic that was no longer silenced completely.

Realist thinker, John Stuart Mills, was one of the primary advocates of women's rights in the mid-nineteenth century. His support of social liberalism extended to gender equity, and he spent much of his political career rejecting the legal subordination of women (Fiero 2011c, pp. 76-78). While contemporary feminist authors did address the issue of women's rights, Fiero hails Mill's 1869 treatise, *The Subjection of Women*, as the best representation of gender inequality at the time: ". . . nowhere was the plight of women more eloquently treated than in Mill's essay. Mill compared the subjection of women to that of other subject classes in the history of culture. But his most original contribution was his analysis of the male/female relationship and his explanation of how that relationship differed from that of a master and slave" (2011c, p. 80). Mill's treatise is indeed effective, not only in giving voice to the sexism inherent in society, but also in providing a powerful and revolutionary explanation of exactly how men perpetuated the unequal treatment of women.

While other Realist thinkers were also examining the inequities of class and gender, Mill's blunt approach in *The Subjection of Women* was certainly seen as a radical disruption to the former patriarchal ideal at the time. The aggressive and straightforward language Mill uses to accuse men of "enslav[ing]" the minds of women (line 10⁵) is also exemplary of the Realist value of denouncing sentimentality and unnecessary embellishment. Mill launches a candid, forthright, and direct argument that systematically explains how men unfairly control women:

The masters of all other slaves rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear, either fear of themselves, or religious fears. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to their purpose. All are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others. (lines 10-18⁶)

By likening the power relationship between men and women to that of a master and slave, Mill is able to draw a vivid and tangible connection between gender discrimination and slavery in order to demonstrate its immorality. Essentially, the Realism period began a re-examination of conventions that would be adamantly pursued, and often end in rejection, during the Modernism period.

The re-examination of convention that took place during the Realism period (and into the early Modernism period) grew into an adamant denunciation of convention during the Modernism period. This incessant resistance to convention was no doubt the result of the continuing changes brought on by industrialization, the confusion and anxiety brought on by the new theories in physics and psychology that replaced the old, and the tumultuous and uncertain global environment brought on by the two world wars (Fiero, 2011b, chaps. 32-34). Modernists turned away from relying on the objective viewpoint and looked toward their own subjective perspectives for meaning.

While Realism artists portrayed the world clearly, accurately, and without the artist's interpretation, Modernism encouraged artists to provide their individual, subjective view of the world. Modernist artists were not obligated to follow the conventions of form, perspective, color, or genre. Instead, they were encouraged to experiment and reject "former cultural values and conventions in favor of innovation" (Fiero, 2011b, p. 2). However, this tireless exploration for meaning also gave way to cultural and spiritual exhaustion during the Modernism period.

To a large degree, the physicists of the twentieth century led to significant and reverberating changes that reached far beyond the scientific realm. Before the Modernism period, Isaac Newton's theories had been widely accepted and provided people with a general comfort in knowing that the laws of the universe operated much like how they perceived the world through the senses. Knowing that, according to Newton, the "universe operated according to smoothly functioning laws that generally corresponded with the world of sense perception"⁷ gave humanity a feeling of certainty and absolutism about nature. However, the theories of Werner Heisenberg, among other twentieth-century thinkers, ultimately caused the nullification of former certainties and absolutes.

Heisenberg's theories especially fueled the Modernist impulse to be skeptical of all former universal truths. He theorized that "since the very act of measuring subatomic phenomena altered them, the position and the velocity of a subatomic particle could not be measured simultaneously with absolute accuracy" (Fiero, 2011b, p. 2). His theoretical revelations shocked a culture that had formerly been certain about its ability to accurately conceive of the universe for decades. The fruits of Heisenberg's intellect, however, proved otherwise. Even the title of his theoretical document is particularly characteristic of the cultural wariness of the Modernism period: "Principle of Uncertainty." Ultimately, Heisenberg "replaced the absolute and rationalist model of the universe with one whose exact mechanisms at the subatomic level are indeterminate" (Fiero, 2011b, p. 2). This proven indeterminacy, particularly because it manifested in the scientific field where society usually looks for irrefutable verification, was certainly an impetus of the cultural agitation that pervaded Modernism. The anxieties caused by the rejection of convention and subsequent death of former social truths are especially represented in Modernist poetry.

Poetry during the Modernism period gave expression to the inherent skepticism, cynicism, desire for meaning, and spiritual exhaustion of the times. T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is one of the Modernist masterpieces. In the poem, Eliot explores several Modern themes, including the grapple with time and triviality, the inevitability of death, and the quest for meaning, and he experiments with unconventional forms of expression. Eliot's character, J. Alfred Prufrock, is truly a literary figure of Modernism. Eliot writes the entire poem from Prufrock's first-person point of view, a vivid employment of the Modernist preference for subjectivity. In the fifth stanza, Prufrock's repetition of the phrase "there will be time"⁸ echoes the Modernist notion that time, in view of new scientific theories, is not static or fixed.

Prufrock knows that his end is inevitable because time is continuous and unending; he laments the "bald spot in the middle of [his] hair"⁹ and how others comment that "his arms and legs are thin,"¹⁰ which serves as an acknowledgment of his older age and the unavoidability of his death in the future. Prufrock also makes a clear reference to his inevitable mortality when he claims to have "seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and/snicker" (lines 84-85¹¹). Moreover, the innovative presentation of the passage of time in the poem is representative of the Modernist spirit to reject convention. Prufrock does not measure the passage of time by any of the conventional means like calendars, clocks, or sunsets; instead, Prufrock says, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (line 51¹²). Eliot is purposeful in his presentation of Prufrock's unique measurement of time. A true Modernist, he experiments with styles of expression profusely.

Eliot also uses the techniques of abstraction and metaphor in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In the beginning stanzas, Prufrock describes yellow fog that behaves like a stray animal and repeats the mysterious stanzas that reference the room where women "come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" (lines 13-14¹³). Here, Prufrock grapples for meaning—to make sense of his experiences—but he resorts almost entirely to abstraction. Prufrock's search for meaning is especially noticeable in the lines, "When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,/Then how should I begin/To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?/And how should I presume?" (lines 58-61¹⁴). Although the lines present a concrete image of Prufrock "pinned and wriggling on the wall," the idea that he attempts to express is, again, abstract.

Readers remain unaware of *exactly* why Prufrock feels helplessly fastened in place, though we can assume from the general sentiment of the poem that he feels “pinned and wriggling” by a certain spiritual unrest—the same dissatisfaction with life that society at large is experiencing from the shockwaves of war, political changes, and intellectual shifts of the Modernism period. Prufrock asks, “And would it have been worth it, after all,/Would it have been worth while,/ After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,/After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that/trail along the floor—/And this, and so much more!/It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (lines 99-103¹⁵). Ultimately, Prufrock questions the meaning of life, or rather, what has meaning at all.

Between the trivialities of everyday existence, “teacups” and all, he wonders if his endeavors have been utterly pointless, which is an emotion so keenly felt that he is certain that there are no words to express it. Fiero’s explanation of the poem is quite accurate: “[Eliot’s poem] captures the waning idealism that pervaded the years leading up to World War I . . . Prufrock’s cynicism anticipated the disillusion and the sense of impotence that marked the postwar generation” (2011b, p. 4). The kind of general disillusionment that Eliot calls attention to in his poetry sparked the beginning of several movements during the Modernism period. Particularly disillusioned with the conventional explanations of existence, the proponents of the philosophic movement of existentialism were born.

The existentialism movement was an extremely influential part of the Modernist period. According to Fiero (2011b), the principles of existentialism include a focus on “human freedom, choice, and responsibility” and the examination of “the unique nature of individual experience within an indifferent universe” (p. 7). Although other intellectuals made significant contributions to the movement, Jean-Paul Sartre is known as the premier existentialist. During the same year that World War II ended, Sartre gave a lecture appropriately titled “Existentialism.” In the lecture, Sartre identifies the first principle of existentialism as, “Man is nothing else but what he makes himself” (line 15¹⁶), which upholds the Modernism value of individualization. The second principle of existentialism is the belief that “it is impossible for man to transcend human/subjectivity” (lines 42-43¹⁷). Clearly, the existentialism movement is a firm defender of the Modernists’ adamant preference for individual perception over objectivity.

The Modernism characteristic of religious skepticism is also perpetuated by existentialism because, while there is both atheistic existentialism and Christian existentialism, both claim that proving or disproving the existence of God is not of any great concern to the movement itself (Fiero, 2011b, p. 80). In other words, whether or not God exists changes nothing about the core existentialist notion of human subjectivity; as Sartre says in his lecture, “A man is involved in life,/leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing” (lines 140-141¹⁸). This arguably cynical view of life and the world were direct effects of the two world wars of the Modernism period. The religious, social, economic, and political upheaval of the early to middle twentieth century and the resultant distrust in former established truths ultimately gave rise to the existentialism movement.

The intense subjectivity privileged during the Modernism period stood in marked contrast to the valued objectivity of Realism. In essence, the divergent values and themes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are testaments to the fact that point of view is a fundamental part of any time period. Evident in Realism and Modernism, perspective significantly impacts the conceptual frameworks and attitudes functioning in the political, economic, and religious realms of society at any given moment. Movement supporters, intellectuals, and artists must all concern themselves with viewpoint; ultimately, the decisions that they make tell us the most about any period in history.

References

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Footnotes

¹ According to Fiero (2011c), Friedrich Engels was a “lifelong friend” to Marx who “shared a similar critical attitude in respect to the effects of European industrial capitalism” (p. 77).

² Written by Marx and Engels, as cited in Fiero, 2011c, p. 79

³ The copy of Courbet’s painting that I analyze can be found on page 95 of Fiero (2011c).

⁴ Compare Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers* to, for example, Jacques-Louis David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Great Saint Bernard Pass* (found on Fiero 2011c, p. 31). In David’s painting, Napoleon and his horse, poised on a dynamic diagonal plane, fill nearly the entire picture, awkwardly dwarfing the background; even the horse’s head and the tip of Napoleon’s cape stretch slightly higher than the mountains (which do not even appear to be very distant) in the background. Fiero assures us that Napoleon “actually crossed the Saint Bernard Pass on a mule” instead of a horse (2011a, p. 31), which further demonstrates the romantic idealization of the scene. David manipulates the light to showcase Napoleon’s strong facial expression, his pointed finger, and the girth of his enormous horse, while the daylight (if there is any) is completely muted in the background, making it appear that the only light that peaks through the clouds falls only on Napoleon—an entirely fabricated rendition of real life and nature.

⁵ (as cited in Fiero, 2011c, p. 80)

⁶ (as cited in Fiero, 2011c, p. 31)

⁷ (Fiero, 2011b, p. 2)

⁸ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4, lines 23, 26, and 28); note that “There will be time” is repeated twice in line 26.

⁹ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4, line 40)

¹⁰ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4, line 44)

¹¹ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4)

¹² (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4)

¹³ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 4)

¹⁴ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 5)

¹⁵ (Eliot as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 5)

¹⁶ (as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 78)

¹⁷ (Sartre as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 79)

¹⁸ (Sartre as cited in Fiero, 2011b, p. 79)