

# A Genealogy of Modernism: Analyzing the Evolution of English Literary Doctrine (1908–1922)

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The period between 1908 and 1922 represents perhaps the most volatile and transformative era in the history of English letters. This span, often referred to as the 'heroic age' of Modernism, witnessed a radical deconstruction of Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic values, replaced by a rigorous, often contradictory set of doctrines that redefined the relationship between the individual artist, the external world, and the weight of history. Michael H. Levenson's seminal work, **A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine**, provides the critical architectural map for understanding these shifts. Rather than viewing Modernism as a monolithic movement, Levenson traces a complex lineage of intellectual transitions, moving from the subjective impressionism of the early 1900s to the objective, institutionalized classicism of T.S. Eliot in the early 1920s.

## The Theoretical Framework: From Subjectivity to Objectivity

To understand the genealogy of Modernism, one must first grasp the fundamental epistemological conflict that drove its evolution. The movement did not begin as a unified front; instead, it emerged from a series of local aesthetic rebellions against the 'softness' of late Romanticism. The primary technical challenge for the early Modernists was the reconciliation of **individual consciousness** with **external reality**. This transition can be broken down into three distinct phases of development:

- The Subjective Phase (1908–1911): Characterized by the 'School of Images' and a focus on the individual's momentary perception. Here, the 'Image' was seen as a vehicle for personal intuition.
- The Transitional Phase (1911–1914): The emergence of Imagism as a formal movement. This period saw a hardening of the aesthetic, moving toward 'dry, hardness' as advocated by T.E. Hulme.
- The Institutional Phase (1917–1922): The consolidation of Modernist doctrine into a new 'Classicism,' where tradition and order superseded the individual ego. This phase culminated in the publication of *The Waste Land* and Eliot's influential essays in *The Sacred Wood*.

### The Role of T.E. Hulme and the Neo-Classical Turn

At the heart of Levenson's genealogy is **T.E. Hulme**, the philosopher and critic who provided the intellectual scaffolding for the movement. Hulme's importance lies in his rejection of the 'Romantic' view of man as an infinite reservoir of possibility. Instead, Hulme proposed a 'Classical' view, seeing man as a limited, intrinsically flawed creature who requires the discipline of formal structures. This was not merely a political or moral stance but a technical aesthetic requirement. In his essay *'Romanticism and Classicism,'* Hulme argued that poetry must move away from the 'spilt religion' of Romantic sentiment and toward a precise, concrete, and 'dry' depiction of objects. This technical insistence on the **concrete over the abstract** became the foundational commandment of early Modernist doctrine.

## Technical Analysis of Modernist Evolution

The evolution of English literary doctrine during this period can be analyzed through the lens of specific technical shifts in poetic composition and critical theory. Below is a detailed breakdown of the core mechanics that defined the 'Modernist' style as it matured from 1908 to 1922.

**The Mechanics of the 'Image'**

In the early years (c. 1908), the 'Image' was theorized by Hulme and later Ezra Pound not as a mere pictorial representation, but as an intellectual and emotional 'complex' presented in an instant of time. The technical goal was **concentration**. By stripping away narrative connective tissue, adjectives, and rhetorical flourishes, the poet sought to achieve a direct 'presentation' of the object. This required a move from the *diachronic* (poetry as a sequence in time) to the *synchronic* (poetry as a simultaneous burst of perception).

**The Doctrine of Impersonality**

Perhaps the most significant technical shift occurred between 1914 and 1919, as the focus moved from the **artist's personality** to the **artistic medium**. T.S. Eliot's theory of 'Impersonality' argued that the poet's mind is merely a catalyst—a shred of platinum in a chemical reaction—that allows disparate experiences to fuse into a new whole without being 'colored' by the poet's own emotions. This led to the development of the **Objective Correlative**: a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

**Table 1: Comparison of Romantic vs. Modernist Aesthetic Doctrines**

| Feature             | Romanticism (Pre-1908)                       | Modernism (Post-1914)                                    |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| View of Man         | Infinite, naturally good, progressive.       | Finite, limited, dependent on tradition.                 |
| The Role of Emotion | Personal expression; 'overflow of feelings.' | Impersonal; emotion as a formal product.                 |
| Nature of the Image | Symbolic, vague, decorative.                 | Concrete, hard, structural.                              |
| Structure           | Organic, narrative, fluid.                   | Fragmented, spatial, architectural.                      |
| Historical Outlook  | Rejection of the past or nostalgia.          | 'The Mythical Method'; active engagement with tradition. |

## Chronological Development: A Procedural Workflow of Doctrine

To understand how Modernism reached its zenith in 1922, one must observe the sequential logic of its doctrinal development. This process was not accidental; it followed a clear intellectual trajectory from the fringe to the center of the literary establishment.

### Step 1: The Formalist Break (1908–1909)

The 'School of Images' meets in London. The technical focus is on **vers libre** (free verse) and the rejection of the iambic pentameter. The goal is to align poetic rhythm with the 'musical phrase' rather than the metronome. This is the stage of *technical liberation*.

### Step 2: The Hardening of the Image (1912–1914)

Ezra Pound codifies 'Imagisme.' The three famous tenets are established: 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. This is the stage of *technical discipline*.

### Step 3: The Vorticist Expansion (1914–1915)

Influenced by the visual arts (Wyndham Lewis), the doctrine shifts from the static image to the 'Vortex' — a point of maximum energy. The aesthetic becomes more aggressive, mechanical, and aligned with the energy of the urban/ industrial landscape. This is the stage of *technological integration*.

### Step 4: The Historical Synthesis (1917–1922)

Following the trauma of WWI, the focus shifts toward **order and tradition**. Eliot publishes 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' The doctrine now insists that the 'pastness of the past' and its 'presence' are essential to the modern poet. The technical focus is on **allusion and juxtaposition**. This is the stage of *institutional consolidation*.

## The Mathematical Model of Modernist Allusion

In his analysis, Levenson implies a functional relationship between the 'Modern' text and the 'Tradition.' We can express this relationship through a simplified model of **Modernist Density (D)**:

$$D = (A \times T) / P$$

Where:

- A = Number of specific allusions to the historical canon.
- T = Technical precision of the 'Objective Correlative.'
- P = Presence of the authorial personality (where P approaching 0 increases density).

This model illustrates why a work like *The Waste Land* (high A, high T, low P) achieved such profound critical mass compared to the 'softer' impressionist works of the early 1910s.

## Practical Implementation: How to Conduct a Genealogical Analysis

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For scholars and technical writers looking to apply Levenson's framework to other literary periods, the following field guide provides a step-by-step procedure for mapping a 'genealogy' of ideas.

### 1. Identification of the 'Aesthetic Crisis'

Locate the point where the existing technical vocabulary no longer suffices to describe the contemporary experience. In 1908, this was the failure of Victorian rhetoric to capture the speed and fragmentation of modern life.

### 2. Mapping the Network of Influence

Identify the 'nodes' of the movement. This involves looking beyond the primary authors to the critics, editors (such as Harriet Monroe or Margaret Anderson), and philosophers (such as Henri Bergson or T.E. Hulme) who provided the conceptual tools.

### 3. Analyzing the Shift in 'Keywords'

Trace how specific terms change meaning over time. For instance, notice how the term '**Classic**' shifts from being a pejorative term for 'stale' to a radical term for 'ordered and hard' during the 1908–1922 period.

### 4. Evaluating the Media of Distribution

Study the 'Little Magazines' (e.g., *The Egoist*, *The Little Review*, *Blast*). The technical constraints of these publications—their limited budgets and specific audiences—often dictated the length and density of the modernist doctrine being developed.

## Case Studies in Doctrinal Failure and Success

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The genealogy of modernism is also a history of trial and error. Not every doctrinal experiment succeeded. Examining these failure modes provides deeper insight into the 'correct' application of modernist principles.

### The Case of Amygism (Failure of Precision)

When Amy Lowell took over the Imagist movement, Ezra Pound famously dubbed it 'Amygism.' The technical failure here was a return to **diffuseness**. By prioritizing the 'pretty' image over the 'structurally necessary' image, the doctrine lost its edge, leading to a dilution of the movement's impact. The solution, found by Pound and Eliot, was a return to **rigorous intellectual scaffolding**.

### The Success of the 'Mythical Method' (Success of Structure)

As documented by Levenson, the 'Mythical Method' used by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot provided a solution to the problem of **fragmentation**. By using an ancient myth (like the Odyssey or the Grail Legend) as a continuous parallel to the modern scene, the writers could maintain a 'scientific' objectivity while achieving a massive, complex unity. This successfully bridged the gap between the 'Image' and the 'Epic.'

## Technical Challenges and Troubleshooting

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Modernist doctrine presents several operational challenges for the reader and the critic. Understanding these helps in navigating the 'Genealogy' without falling into common interpretative traps.

- The Paradox of the Personal: Even while preaching impersonality, many modernist works (like Pound's Cantos) are deeply idiosyncratic. Solution: View impersonality as a technical goal of the 'finished product' rather than a psychological state of the 'creator.'
- The Difficulty of Allusion: Modernist texts can become 'over-encoded,' making them inaccessible. Solution: Use the principle of 'affective resonance' — the allusions should function rhythmically and tonally even before they are decoded intellectually.
- The Problem of History: The 'Genealogy' suggests a linear progression, but in reality, many ideas co-existed or looped back. Solution: Use a non-linear, 'rhizomatic' map of influence when analyzing specific texts from 1914 to 1918.

The development of English literary doctrine from 1908 to 1922 was not a simple transition from 'old' to 'new.' It was a sophisticated, multi-layered process of **doctrinal evolution**. Michael Levenson's work demonstrates that Modernism was essentially an intellectual struggle to find a stable ground for art in an unstable world. By moving from the radical subjectivity of the individual image to the structural stability of tradition, the Modernists created a technical framework that would dominate Western literature for the remainder of the century.

This genealogy reveals that the 'modern' is always a construction of the 'ancient,' processed through a rigorous, often harsh, technical lens. The 'extraordinary ferment' described in the early years of the century resulted in a hardening of the aesthetic spirit, moving from the 'spilt religion' of the nineteenth century to the 'sacred wood' of the twentieth. For the technical writer or literary historian, the lesson is clear: aesthetic movements are built not just on inspiration, but on the precise, iterative refinement of **doctrine and method**. The legacy of this period remains embedded in our contemporary understanding of what it means to be 'modern'—a legacy defined by precision, impersonality, and a profound, if difficult, engagement with the weight of history.

## Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

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### [• The Intellectual Architecture of Susan Sontag: A Comprehensive Analysis of Modern Criticism and Literary Theory](http://alaskawriters.com/susan-sontag-intellectual-architecture-literary-theory-analysis.pdf)

URL: <http://alaskawriters.com/susan-sontag-intellectual-architecture-literary-theory-analysis.pdf>

### [• The Architecture of African Literary Theory: A Comprehensive Analysis of Olaniyan and Quayson's Critical Anthology](http://alaskawriters.com/african-literary-theory-criticism-anthology-analysis.pdf)

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