

THE POST WORLD WAR I ERA—Why was it an Age of Anxiety?

“You are all a Lost Generation” - Gertrude Stein

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

- **Nihilism**: A philosophical position that argues that the world and human existence is without meaning—no purpose, no meaning, no hope—no action is preferable to any other

Example: Friedrich Nietzsche “God is Dead”

- **Existentialism**: The search for moral values in a world of terror and uncertainty—trying to derive a meaning of life or “existence” - reflected in literature as a theme of people being alone, in despair, with no God to help them—people are responsible for their own behavior—man must act and be defined by his own actions and choices—this gives meaning to life.

Examples: Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre

ART

- What impact did photography have on the art of the later 19th century?
- What effect did Asian, Pacific and African societies have on art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
- What were the main features of the artistic styles that become collectively known as modern, contemporary art? (Expressionism, Cubists, Abstractionists, Dadaists, Surrealists, etc)
- What specific features of society during the Age of Anxiety were reflected in the art of that time?

HISTORY

- A re-examination of the “progress of the 19th century? Where has it taken society?
- What role should “democracy” have? Was it a “weak” and “decaying” political system

Oswald Spengler—What was the message of his Decline of the West?

POST WORLD WAR I ERA AGE OF ANXIETY How Reflected in Society?

SCIENCE

1920's = “The Heroic Age of Physics”

- The scientific theories of this age challenged previous scientific notions
 - The unchanging nature of natural laws—the era of Newtonian physics—was good, predictable and comforting! BUT in the “new physics” everything was RELATIVE = much less rational with no easy predictable answers
- Werner Heisenberg—“Uncertainty Principle”
What significance did this theory have?

PACIFISM

- A reaction to the horrors of the Great War and the malaise and disillusionment that followed the death and destruction

Examples:

Eric Maria Remarque—“All Quiet on the Western Front”

Ernest Hemingway—“A Farewell to Arms”

PSYCHOLOGY

- Sigmund Freud = psychoanalysis—theory of understanding human behavior by understanding the manifestations of the repressed conscious mind—there were psychological rather than physiological explanations for mental disorders!
- Before Freud people believed that “thinking” was done by a conscious mind where behavior was based on rational calculation BUT now behavior is just one more thing that becomes irrational—based on the unconscious interaction between parts of the mind and driven by repression and sexual drives.
- Dreams hold the key to understanding the human psyche!

All Quiet on the Western Front—Eric Maria Remarque

“While they continued to write and talk, we saw the wounded and dying. While they taught that duty to one’s country is the greatest thing, we already knew that death-throes are stronger. But for all that we were no mutineers, no deserters, no cowards—they were very free with all those expressions. We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but also we distinguished the false from true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left. We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must see it through.”

From the writings of Sigmund Freud (1930)

During the last few generations mankind has made an extraordinary advance in the natural sciences and in their technical application and has established his control over nature in a way never before imagined. ... But ... this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier. ... Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, and their mood of anxiety.

“The Second Coming” (1921) - William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tidies loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

The Stranger—Albert Camus

The opening lines of The Stranger sets the tone for the main character’s detachment and lack of emotion even toward his own mother,

“Maman died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.”

Setting for the quote. In prison, while awaiting the execution of his death sentence by decapitation, Meursault (who had shot a man he met four times) meets with a chaplain, but rejects his proffered opportunity of turning to God. Yet, Meursault grasps the universe's indifference towards mankind:

“As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself — so like a brother, really — I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.”