

Modernist Vocabulary

Abstract

When engaged by literary critics, the modernist period is often characterized with a sense of a firm dichotomy between “low” and “high” modernism. However, there is very little agreement amongst these scholars in the formulation of this divide and, consequently, there is no authoritative directory establishing where individual modernists are organized. What critical work there is, such as Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide*, employs traditional aesthetic analysis that is inherently flawed due to the possibility of individual bias and false-consensus. This experiment will examine the contrast between the high and low modernist utilizing the contemporary techniques of distance reading developed by Franco Moretti in order to establish a non-aesthetically concerned rationale for the dichotomy. Utilizing a simple type-token ratio (TTR) of specific modernist writers, the total number of words in their texts were divided by the number of unique words in order to ascertain a quantitative representation of each author’s lexicon. Results from the novel of a noted high modernist, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, displayed a TTR of 11.44%, utilizing 30,244 unique words in the total 264,258. *Ulysses* is widely considered the definitive work of the period and, therefore, was used as the comparative basis for statistical analysis. The novel of the appointed low modernist, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, falls well below the precedent established by Joyce’s vernacular with a TTR of 5.34%. These results, amongst the others discussed in the research, do establish the legitimacy of the modernist dichotomy while showing agreement with theoretical predictions. The results of the experiment also display significant improvement over the aesthetically derived arguments of more traditional literary scholarship due to the utilization of quantitative analysis and the removal of individual bias. The work presented here has profound implications for further studies of modernism, as well as other literary periods with intrinsic separation such as transcendentalism/dark

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romanticism, and may eventually assist in establishing an authoritative means to conduct binary studies of literature.

Keywords: Modernism, Andreas Huyssen, Distance Reading, Franco Moretti