

EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism is the opposite of Realism--subjective rather than objective.

“Because instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcefully.... I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is his nature. He'll be a fair man. I want to put into the picture my appreciation, the love that I have for him. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can, to begin with. But the picture is not finished yet. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I get to orange tones, chromes and pale lemon yellows. Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination the bright head illuminated against a rich blue background acquires a mysterious effect, like the star in the depths of an azure sky.”

Vincent van Gogh
Letters (August 1888) 277

“Expressionism meant expressing the inside of a phenomenon without depicting its outside in a way that could be recognized. That is to say, if you wanted to express an apple-tree you drew and coloured one vertical and three fairly horizontal lines, attached a small coloured circle to one of those, and wrote the word ‘Fruity’ in the catalogue.”

John Galsworthy
Presidential Address to the English Association (1924)
Castles in Spain (1927)

“Expressionism: A movement affecting painting and literature, which followed and went beyond Impressionism in its efforts to ‘objectify inner experience.’ Fundamentally it means the yielding up of the Realistic and Naturalistic method of verisimilitude in order to use external objects not as representational but as transmitters of the internal impressions and moods. In painting, for instance, ‘childhood’ might be shown, not through a conventional representational picture of children at play or at school, but by seemingly unarticulated and exaggerated physical details that suggest ‘childhood’ or convey the impression that the artist has of the concept ‘child.’

Expressionism was strongest in the theater in the 1920s, and its entry into other literary forms was probably through the stage. Expressionism has its origin in the German theater in the early years of the century. It was a response to several different forces: The growing mass and mechanism of society, with its tendency to depress the value of the arts, made artists seek new ways of making art forms valuable instruments; at the same time, scientists, notably Freud, laid bare the phantasms in the human unconscious and offered artists a challenge to record them accurately; meanwhile Marxism had instructed even non-Marxist artists that the individual was being lost in a mass society; to these pressures came the example of Strindberg, whose plays *The Dance of Death* (1901) and *A Dream Play* (1902) employ extensive nonrealistic devices. The German dramatists Frank Wedekind and Ernst Toller and the Czech Karel Capek (the author of the nightmarish fantasy of the future, *R.U.R.*—the source, by the way, of the coinage *robot*) were the major figures in European Expressionistic drama, which flourished in the 1920s. It was marked by unreal atmosphere, nightmarish action, distortion and oversimplification, the de-emphasis of the individual (characters were likely to be called the ‘Father’ or the ‘Bank Clerk’), antirealistic settings, and staccato, telegraphic dialogue. The Expressionistic drama strongly influenced Pirandello and Lorca.

For American students it is most important in its impact on Eugene O’Neill, whose *Emperor Jones* attempts to project by symbolic scenes and sound effects the racial memories of a modern African-American. Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, which uses moving stages and other nonrealistic devices to express the mechanical world seen by one cog named Mr. Zen, is almost equally noted. Elements of Expressionism can be seen in some plays of Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. In the novel the presentation of the objective outer world as it expresses itself in the impressions or moods of a character is a widely used device. The most famous extended example is Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*,

although the Expressionistic intent and method are often apparent in works using stream of consciousness, as witness the 'Circe' episodes in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Probably the most complete transfer of the quality of Expressionistic drama to the novel, however, is to be found in the works of Franz Kafka. The anti-realistic novel is also a genre in the Expressionistic tradition. More recent novelists, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, and Ken Kesey, can also be included in the Expressionistic tradition.

The revolt against Realism, the distortion of the objects of the outer world, and the violent dislocation of time sequence and spatial logic in an effort accurately but not representationally to show the world as it appears to a troubled mind can be found in modern poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot, whose 'The Waste Land' is the classic of the movement."

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

"Expressionism: aesthetic movement in which the artist expresses his inner experience through the free representation of objective facts. Since it emphasizes the creator's mood and attitude, the movement is a development of Impressionism, from which it differs by being more concerned with individual intellectual conceptions, and less with the structure of exterior facts. Both movements belong to the later phase of Romanticism. Expressionism originated in European painting, and was brought to the U. S. by painters. Although exemplified in literature by T. S. Eliot and other poets, it has been more influential in the theater, in the work of such stage designers as R. E. Jones and in the dramatic technique of such plays as *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Adding Machine*, and *Beggar on Horseback*."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-84)

"Expressionism: a movement in literature and painting, centering in Germany in the first quarter of the present century. It attempted to *express* the basic reality of its subjects rather than to reproduce the mere appearance of or surface—hence the name. In this respect it was a revolt not only against current art, but against current civilization, which was considered to be superficially prosperous and attractive, but rotten at the core. Strindberg and Dostoevski influenced the literary aspects of Expressionism, as did the philosopher Bergson and the psychologist Freud. An Expressionistic work relies heavily on distortion of salient features; it is exclamatory and dynamic, and sometimes so cryptic as to be baffling. The most widely known Expressionists are Kafka and Franz Werfel; other adherents of the movement include the dramatists Fritz von Unruh and Georg Kaiser and the Austrian poet Georg Trakl. The influence of Expressionism is visible in a good deal of the work of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(Dryden/Mentor 1956)

"The practice which Rimbaud recommended was not only in accordance with the ideal of artificiality, that all the decadents had in mind as their ultimate ideal, but already contained the new element, namely that of deformity and grimace as a means of expression, that was to become so important for modern Expressionistic art. It was based in essentials on the feeling that the normal, spontaneous spiritual attitudes are artistically sterile and that the poet must overcome the natural man within himself, in order to discover the hidden meaning of things....

All three main trends in the art of the new century have their predecessors in the foregoing period: cubism in Cézanne and the neo-classicists, Expressionism in Van Gogh and Strindberg, surrealism in Rimbaud and Lautreamont.... Post-Impressionist art is the first to renounce all illusion of reality on principle and to express its outlook on life by the deliberate deformation of natural objects. Cubism, constructivism, futurism, Expressionism, dadaism, and surrealism turn away with equal determination from nature-bound and reality-affirming Impressionism.... Post-Impressionist art can no longer be called in any sense a reproduction of Nature; its relationship to Nature is one of violation."

Arnold Hauser
The Social History of Art 4

(Random House/Vintage 1951) 196, 226, 229

“Expressionism: An artistic theory and mode of practice first developed by various European painters (mainly German) of the early 20th century. It was carried into literature by German dramatists and thence spread to the novel. Among its earliest literary exponents was James Joyce. In essence Expressionism seeks to convey import through the objects of feeling.... Distortion, as in a theater set, is justified as a means of realizing the affective or valuational aspects of reality. In practice the literary uses of Expressionism merged with symbolism, as in Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Eugene O’Neill, and many others [most notably Faulkner, Porter, and O’Connor].”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Expressionism in the drama began with certain scenes in Wedekind’s *Spring’s Awakening* (1891) and developed through the dream plays of Strindberg into a school of playwriting whose most famous representatives were Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. The aim was to ‘express,’ or ‘bring out,’ the inner life—as against Impressionism, which aimed at rendering impressions of the external world.... One result of all this thinking of O’Neill’s, and all this reading, was that he was able to re-invent Expressionism on his own. For I believe we can take him at his word when he tells us he knew very little of the German Expressionists. There is ironic justice in the fact that one of them considered *Lazarus Laughed* the best of all Expressionist plays.”

Eric Bentley
“Eugene O’Neill”
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 564

“Expressionism: In *Dictionary of Art Terms*, R. G. Haggart says: ‘This is a form of Romantic art in which emotion or emotive elements, expressed through violent distortion and exaggeration, are taken to the point of excess. It is a characteristic of art which emerges and becomes dominant in times of spiritual and social stress, arising from *Angst*, the anguish of the times.’ In modern literature any deliberate distortion of reality could be a form of Expressionism. Expressionism was inaugurated in German drama in 1912 by Reinhard Sorge’s play *Der Bettler*, and developed in the plays of Georg Kaiser (1878-1945) and Walter Hasenclever (1890-1940).” [Gertrude Stein’s “Picasso” (1909) is an earlier example.]

A. F. Scott
Current Literary Terms
(Macmillan/St. Martin’s 1965)

“In the history of painting, Expressionism refers to a movement begun in Germany shortly after 1900 in which some now-famous artists, including Kandinsky and Klee, strove to depict a personal inner vision, rejecting accordingly the imitation of publicly recognizable reality. As a movement, it was probably a reaction to Impressionism. The Impressionists, whose work was closer to generally accepted norms of visual reality, strove to depict not an inner vision but rather a vision of external objects at certain atypical moments. When taken over by the terminology of literary criticism, the terms *expressionism* and *impressionism*, like *Romanticism*, emerge more clearly as general concepts than as precise designations. Given the artificial nature of literature, by definition all literary works are more or less unrealistic; hence all literary works are more or less Expressionistic or Impressionistic. On the other hand, one can refer more specifically to an Impressionistic critic (Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*), who avowedly pays heed first to his reactions to a work rather than the work itself, or to an Impressionistic movement in art or literature, where the artist is called upon to join with his peers in depicting the sense of reality rather than reality itself.

A great deal of modern writing can be said to employ techniques covered by one or the other term. The work of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf, centering on man’s inner consciousness and endeavoring to render it, may be said to be Impressionistic, since it deals with common reality only through the filter of fictional minds seeing this reality in unusual ways. In the modern theater,

when the physical resources of the stage are employed to objectify an eccentric or ‘insane’ view of reality, the production may be called Expressionistic.”

M. M. Liberman & Edward E. Foster
A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms
(Scott, Foresman 1968)

“Literary Expressionism was not a movement in the strict sense of the word... It was, rather, a syndrome of thoughts and feelings—in short: a *Weltanschauung*—giving rise to certain techniques and engendering a preference for certain types of subject matter, such as the conflict of generations.... Historically, Expressionism in art and literature must be seen as one of many manifestations, in the arts, the sciences, philosophy, religion, and so forth, which were symptomatic of the revolt against positivism, a revolt which erupted shortly after 1900.... The Expressionists despised the Realistic-Naturalistic approach to art which, as a final, glorious offshoot, had recently produced the sensuous surface portrayals of Impressionism. Following Cézanne, the cubists aimed at stabilizing and eternalizing Impressionism by transforming it into an ‘art of the museums’ (Cézanne’s formulation) bordering on, but never actually resulting in, geometrical abstraction.... The Expressionists, finally, pitted their own brand of emotional but, characteristically, nonsensuous and nonerotic subjectivism against the imitative art of the nineteenth century.... The Expressionists in Platonic fashion believed that to reproduce an already existing reality was a waste of creative strength....

Herbert Read called Expressionism an art seeking to reproduce ‘not the objective reality of the world, but the subjective reality of the feeling which objects and events arouse in us’ (*The Philosophy of Modern Art*, p.51).... Trying to pierce the surface of things, the Expressionist intuitively grasped for essences.... The replacement of concrete particulars by quasi-abstractions bordering, at times, upon allegorical forms, is another distinct feature of literary Expressionism.... The most appropriate point of departure for a semantic history is the exhibition held in 1901 at the Salon des Independants in Paris, which included several canvases grouped together under the title ‘Expressionisme’ by the otherwise unknown painter Julien Auguste Herve.... In Germany, the term was first applied to painting in 1911, in connection with an exhibition staged by the Berlin *Sezession*. It was quickly popularized by influential critics...[and] came to the attention of T. E. Hulme, who transmitted some of the key notions to Wyndham Lewis and the group of vorticists gathered around Ezra Pound and the short-lived periodical *Blast*, which became the voice of English Expressionism—in reality, a blend of Expressionist, cubist, and futurist ideas).... American playwrights like Eugene O’Neill (*The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*) and Elmer Rice (*The Adding Machine*) were strongly influenced by Georg Kaiser.

Although ‘Expressionism’ had been applied to literature as early as 1911 (by Kurt Hiller), it did not gain currency until 1915... The first version of Bertolt Brecht’s *Baal* was...written in 1918. Thus Expressionism had run its course, covering a time span extending over the decade from 1910 to 1920.”

Philip P. Wiener, Editor in Chief
Dictionary of the History of Ideas II
(Scribner’s 1973) 206-09

“Expressionism: A manner of painting, drawing, sculpting, etc., in which forms derived from Nature are distorted or exaggerated and colors are intensified for emotive or expressive purposes.... A style of playwriting and stage presentation stressing the emotional content of a play, the subjective reactions of the characters, symbolic or abstract representations of reality, and non-Naturalistic techniques of scenic design.... A technique of distorting objects and events in order to represent them as they are perceived by a character in a literary work.... A phase in the development of early 20th-century music marked by the use of atonality and complex, unconventional rhythm, melody, and form, intended to express the composer’s psychological and emotional life.”

Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary
(Barnes & Noble Books 2003)

The first notable example of pure Expressionism in American literature is “Picasso” (1909) by Gertrude Stein, who influenced the styles of many other writers. Expressionism was first introduced to a large public

audience by Eugene O'Neill in his experimental plays, beginning with *Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922). "The Waste Land" (1922) by T. S. Eliot, with its diversity of original Expressionistic techniques, became the most influential poem of the 20th century. *The Enormous Room* (1923) is a highly regarded novel about incarceration in a French concentration camp during World War I, by e. e. cummings. Even more purely Expressionistic is his abstract play *Him* (1927). The greatest American achievements in Expressionistic fiction are *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) by William Faulkner; "Flowering Judas" (1930) and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) by Katherine Anne Porter; *Wise Blood* (1952), *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and "The Artificial Nigger" (1947) by Flannery O'Connor; and *Blood Meridian* (1985) by Cormac McCarthy.

Other significant Expressionistic plays include *The Adding Machine* (1923) by Elmer Rice, *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) by Thornton Wilder, and *Camino Real* (1953) by Tennessee Williams, an excellent play that failed commercially, discouraging the literary ambition of Williams. Expressionism is a risk for writers because people usually do not understand it and many dislike it. The fiction writer John Hawkes is radically Expressionistic, as in *Second Skin* (1964). The Vietnam War novel *Going After Cacciato* (1976) by Tim O'Brien is wonderful in structure and style but weak in vision. *Underworld* (1997) by Don DeLillo is an insufficiently coherent Postmodernist pastiche. The most prominent of the Postmodernist fantasy writers—Vonnegut, Pynchon, Barth, etc.—have entertaining styles but juvenile visions.

Michael Hollister (2015)