

Lecture 8. The Modernist Break: Gerard Manley Hopkins & H.G. Wells

Duration: 3 hours

Introduction

It is worth noting that the transition from the Victorian era to the modern period was marked by significant shifts in social, cultural, and intellectual life. Industrialization had reshaped cities and labor; Darwinian evolution challenged religious doctrine; and advances in science and technology transformed daily experience. In this turbulent context, writers sought new forms of expression to capture the complexity, dislocation, and possibilities of modern life. The modernist movement was not a unified break but a gradual response to the changing landscape, a search for alternative visions and structures in art and literature.

Modernism, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a literary and artistic response to rapid societal change. With industrialization, urbanization, war, and shifts in philosophical thought, writers felt compelled to break away from traditional forms and explore new ways of seeing the world. The "modernist break" refers to a dramatic departure from linear narratives, fixed meanings, and realist representation. Instead, modernists embraced experimentation, fragmentation, and ambiguity.

This lecture will explore the literary innovations of Gerard Manley Hopkins and H.G. Wells as exemplars of the modernist break, a radical shift in form and vision responding to industrialization, spiritual crisis, and the promises and perils of scientific advancement. Through the religious sonority of Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" and the dystopian futurism of Wells's *The Time Machine*, we will examine how each writer challenged established narrative modes to express the alienation, fragmentation, and ethical quandaries of modern life. The lesson will also trace how poetic form and speculative fiction became vehicles for social and philosophical commentary, interrogating the discontents of modernity through both divine transcendence and technological descent.

Hopkins and Wells exemplify this break. While Hopkins's religious verse strains against conventional forms to express divine energy in a desecrated world, Wells deploys science fiction to scrutinize technological advancement and social inequality. Both writers are visionary: one

turning inward toward spiritual transcendence, the other outward to examine future civilization's collapse.

Part I. Cultural and Biographical Contexts

8.1 Gerard Manley Hopkins & H.G. Wells on the Crisis of Modernity

The cultural context of late 19th-century Britain, marked by tensions between tradition and innovation, offers fertile ground for understanding both Hopkins and Wells. The world was witnessing rapid industrial and scientific advancements, which in turn provoked deep existential and moral questions. Writers and thinkers were increasingly called to respond not only with aesthetic invention but also with philosophical inquiry.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) was born into an Anglican family in England but later converted to Catholicism and joined the Jesuit order, a decision that deeply shaped his personal and poetic outlook. His vocation as a priest and his intense spiritual devotion are evident in his literary theories and works. His ideas are not merely theological musings but central to his poetics, reflecting a deeply incarnational view of the world. His formal innovation, particularly his creation of "sprung rhythm," challenged conventional metrical schemes and sought to capture the natural cadence of speech, anticipating the experiments of later modernist poets. Despite the innovation and depth of his poetry, much of Hopkins's work remained unpublished during his lifetime. It was only posthumously, with the efforts of his friend Robert Bridges, that his poetry gained the recognition it deserved, positioning him as a forerunner to modernism.

8.2 H.G. Wells and the Scientific Imagination

Herbert George Wells (1866–1946), by contrast, emerged from a working-class background in Kent and pursued scientific training under the famous Darwinian advocate Thomas Huxley. This scientific education grounded Wells's literary imagination in empirical inquiry and evolutionary theory. But unlike Hopkins, whose vision was metaphysical, Wells interrogated the social and political implications of scientific progress. His fiction articulates the disillusionment with Enlightenment rationalism, particularly the idea that technological advancement equates to human improvement. A pioneer of speculative fiction, Wells used science fiction not as escapism but as a critical lens on the present, highlighting the potential

dystopias embedded in modern capitalism, imperialism, and automation. Novels such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* dramatize the precarious future of a humanity devoid from ethical moorings. His literary voice blends empirical skepticism with moral urgency, making him a foundational figure in both modernist and speculative traditions.

By tracing the biographies and intellectual commitments of these two figures, we better appreciate how different epistemologies, spiritual transcendence and scientific empiricism, can be explored for similar modernist purposes: to confront and critique the crises of their time. Their works stand as complex aesthetic responses to the spiritual, ecological, and ethical fractures of a rapidly modernizing world.

Part II. Literary Analysis: Primary Texts

In this section, we closely examine one representative text from each author; Hopkins's sonnet *God's Grandeur* and Wells's novella *The Time Machine* to illustrate how their distinct literary approaches embody the broader modernist impulse. While Hopkins uses poetic innovation to express divine immanence and ecological awareness, Wells deploys speculative fiction to interrogate class, technology, and evolution. Through detailed textual analysis and classroom activities, students will gain an appreciation for the formal ingenuity and ethical urgency that characterize both works.

8.3 Gerard Manley Hopkins *God's Grandeur* (1877)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

8.3.1 Introducing the Work

This Petrarchan sonnet opens with a bold assertion of the divine presence that animates the world, using striking imagery to portray God's grandeur as a luminous, vital force. However, the poem swiftly transitions to a lament for the spiritual and ecological damage wrought by industrialization. The central tension of the poem; between divine immanence and human estrangement from nature, reflects Hopkins's broader concern with modern alienation and spiritual renewal.

8.3.2 Sprung Rhythm and Sonnet Form

Hopkins's innovation of sprung rhythm, designed to mimic the irregular but expressive patterns of natural speech, lends the poem both musicality and intensity. Unlike traditional metrical schemes, sprung rhythm emphasizes stressed syllables, creating a dynamic, almost breathless quality that matches the urgency of the poet's message. The sonnet's structure, divided into an octave and sestet, facilitates a dramatic volta or turn. The octave dwells on despair and degradation, while the sestet introduces the hopeful resilience of nature and the brooding care of the Holy Spirit.

8.3.3 Critical Analysis

Hopkins's sonnet is rich with sensory and theological imagery. The simile "flame out, like shining from shook foil" introduces a vivid, kinetic depiction of divine energy bursting forth from the natural world. This luminous image contrasts sharply with the mechanical repetition suggested by "have trod, have trod, have trod," which enacts the monotony and alienation of industrial labor. Such repetition not only reflects the industrial rhythm of modern life but also conveys humanity's deepening detachment from both the divine and the natural order. The volta

beginning with “And for all this...” marks a critical shift in tone and message, signaling spiritual and ecological renewal. The poem culminates in the maternal imagery of the Holy Ghost; “warm breast... bright wings”; suggesting divine nurturance and comfort amidst the environmental and moral decay caused by modern industry. This final vision affirms that despite humanity’s estrangement, the regenerative presence of the divine continues to dwell in nature’s depths.

8.4 H.G. Wells *The Time Machine* (1895)

H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* marks a foundational moment in modern speculative fiction and scientific romance. Written at the cusp of the 20th century, the novel captures the anxieties of the Victorian age concerning industrial capitalism, class division, and the future trajectory of human evolution. It also reflects the growing public fascination with scientific discovery and technological innovation. For students encountering literary modernism, the novel provides a bridge from 19th-century realism to the experimental narrative forms and sociopolitical critiques characteristic of modernist thought.

8.4.1 Narrative Chronology

The novel begins with a dinner party among upper-class Victorian gentlemen, where the Time Traveller recounts his invention of a machine capable of temporal displacement. His journey to the year 802,701 reveals a bifurcated humanity: the Eloi, a delicate and passive race that lives above ground, and the Morlocks, pale and brutish beings who dwell underground and sustain the Eloi in a parasitic, predatory relationship. As the narrative progresses, the Time Traveller leaps even further forward, witnessing the Earth’s terminal decline and eventual lifelessness. The story’s non-linear trajectory, skipping across epochs, calls into question the 19th-century notion of linear, inevitable progress, and instead presents a cyclical or even regressive model of historical development. Additionally, the frame narrative (a story within a story), where a group of dinner guests listens to the Time Traveller’s tale, creates epistemological uncertainty, aligning with Modernist suspicion of grand narratives. This framing does a few things:

- It creates distance between the story and the reader, reminding us it’s a tale being told.

- It adds skepticism: The other guests doubt the Time Traveller's story, prompting us to question what's "true."
- It draws attention to the idea of how stories are told, not just *what* they tell.

8.4.2 Key Themes and Quotations

Wells explores multiple interlocking themes throughout the novel:

- **Class Division and Social Decay:** One of the most significant themes in *The Time Machine* is Wells's critique of class stratification and the eventual decay it brings to both the privileged and the subjugated. The quotation, "The Eloi, like the Carolingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility," illustrates this deterioration with historical resonance. By likening the Eloi to the Carolingian dynasty; a once-powerful royal house that lost its vitality; Wells emphasizes the stagnation that arises when a class becomes overly reliant on inherited privilege. In the Eloi, Wells envisions a future aristocracy that has become passive, infantilized, and intellectually diminished. The phrase "beautiful futility" encapsulates the surface-level aestheticism of the Eloi and the lack of substance behind their existence. This serves as a satirical commentary on Wells's own society, where the upper classes enjoyed the fruits of industrial capitalism without engaging in the labor that sustained it. By portraying the consequences of such detachment projected into the distant future, Wells underscores the dangers of social complacency and warns against the illusion of permanence in class dominance.
- **Devolution and the Fragility of Human Advancement:** The statement "I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been" encapsulates the Time Traveller's profound disillusionment as he reflects on the apparent collapse of human potential. Rather than envisioning a linear or triumphant arc of progress, Wells presents a future in which humanity has not ascended but splintered into biologically and intellectually diminished forms. This vision serves as a direct challenge to the Victorian ideal of inevitable human improvement through science, education, and rational planning. Instead, Wells suggests that progress is neither guaranteed nor inherently virtuous; it is fragile, reversible, and subject to social, environmental, and moral decay. The dream of the human intellect; its innovations, aspirations, and cultural achievements; has proved ephemeral in the face of systemic inequality and overreliance on technology. In this way, Wells positions his novel as a

cautionary tale, warning that unchecked capitalism, exploitation, and complacency may ultimately lead not to enlightenment but to regression and extinction.

- **Empirical Uncertainty and Adaptive Intelligence:** With the claim “There is no intelligence where there is no change,” Wells articulates a central philosophical insight that underscores the novel’s scientific and epistemological framework. This statement challenges Enlightenment and Victorian notions of stable knowledge and inevitable progress, instead asserting that intelligence is inextricably tied to transformation and responsiveness. In the context of the Eloi and Morlocks; two species trapped in rigid ecological and social roles; this theme reflects the consequences of evolutionary stagnation and environmental determinism. The Eloi, having lost the need to adapt or innovate, exist in a state of mental and emotional atrophy, while the Morlocks have become biologically adapted but intellectually stunted laborers. Wells’s commentary anticipates 20th- and 21st-century discourses on adaptability, technological obsolescence, and the dangers of intellectual complacency. It also speaks to pedagogical questions about learning itself: knowledge without challenge or change becomes dogma. In this light, Wells's fiction advocates for dynamic inquiry, experimentation, and critical thinking as essential to both human survival and ethical progress.

8.4.3 Understanding Speculative Fiction

A more comprehensive understanding of *The Time Machine* requires situating the text within the broader literary tradition of speculative fiction; a genre that transcends the boundaries of empirical reality to envision possible worlds, technologies, and social formations. Speculative fiction functions not merely as imaginative escapism but as a critical mode through which writers interrogate dominant ideologies, challenge normative assumptions, and reflect on the ethical consequences of scientific and technological development. The genre enables a reconfiguration of temporality and history, providing a narrative space in which political, philosophical, and existential concerns can be explored through hypothetical constructs. Within this framework, speculative fiction operates as both a mirror and a critique of its originating context, inviting a dialectical engagement with the present through the lens of the imagined future or alternate realities.

Speculative fiction is a genre defined by its exploration of alternative realities, often imagining what-if scenarios that present different versions of history or entirely new dimensions. These imagined worlds allow writers to challenge our understanding of reality and consider how life might unfold under different circumstances. A key feature of the genre is its use of technological or supernatural elements. Whether it involves futuristic inventions like time machines and space travel, or magical powers and alien life forms, speculative fiction pushes the boundaries of what is scientifically or logically possible.

The genre frequently envisions futuristic or utopian and dystopian worlds. In utopian narratives, societies are depicted as ideal, while dystopian works highlight the darker consequences of societal flaws, often focusing on the misuse of technology or the abuse of power. These settings provide a rich backdrop for philosophical and ethical exploration. Speculative fiction often grapples with profound questions about humanity, morality, and society, encouraging readers to reflect on the implications of current decisions and the potential futures they might create.

This genre encompasses several sub-genres:

- **Science Fiction:** Often grounded in scientific possibility, it explores futuristic technologies, space exploration, time travel, and other phenomena within the bounds of rational inquiry. Wells's use of time travel aligns him with the early tradition of science fiction, which combines scientific plausibility with social extrapolation.
- **Dystopian Fiction:** Depicts societies in decline, governed by authoritarian regimes or facing environmental catastrophe. These narratives serve as warnings, projecting current fears into bleak futures to encourage reflection and resistance. George Orwell's *1984* is an example (imagines a totalitarian society with extreme government control).
- **Fantasy:** Constructs wholly imaginary worlds with their own rules, often drawing on myth, folklore, and magic. While less scientifically grounded, fantasy shares speculative fiction's commitment to world-building and moral inquiry. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is an example (imagines magical worlds and mythical creatures).

Wells's *The Time Machine* is a hybrid of science fiction and dystopia. The speculative premise of a machine capable of traversing time allows Wells not only to depict dramatic shifts in environment and biology but also to dramatize ethical and philosophical dilemmas. His future world divided between Eloi and Morlocks is not merely a flight of imagination but a symbolic projection of late-Victorian class conflict and technological anxiety.

Part IV. Comparative Perspectives

8.5 Comparative Study: Style & Vision

Though separated by genre, form, and religious disposition, Gerard Manley Hopkins and H.G. Wells offer remarkably parallel critiques of industrial modernity through their respective artistic visions. Hopkins's *God's Grandeur*, a Petrarchan sonnet composed in his characteristic sprung rhythm, manifests an intense lyrical compression and theological urgency. Its form echoes his belief in the musicality of divine order; an attempt to impose spiritual cadence upon a disordered world. Wells, by contrast, adopts the speculative novel form, using a frame narrative in *The Time Machine* to explore the possibilities and perils of scientific progress. While Hopkins writes in a register of sacred lamentation, Wells deploys narrative detachment and empirical inquiry to unsettle assumptions about civilization, history, and human agency.

8.6 Machines and Mysticism: Divergent Responses to the Industrial Age

Thematically, both authors confront the disjunction between nature and technology, though from divergent epistemological frameworks. Hopkins insists on the resilience of divine immanence even amidst the "smudge" and "smell" of industrial desecration. For him, nature bears the imprint of the divine, and its spoiling is not merely ecological but spiritual. His poem thus anticipates eco-theological readings that see environmental destruction as symptomatic of a deeper alienation from the sacred. Wells, meanwhile, portrays a future in which human regression masquerades as evolutionary advancement. His dystopian vision reframes progress as a dangerous illusion, revealing that unchecked capitalism and technological rationalism may in fact accelerate entropy rather than stave it off. In Wells's vision, the Eloi and Morlocks are the logical, if horrifying, conclusion of a world that separates intellect from labor, luxury from ethics.

Tone becomes another point of divergence and convergence. Hopkins's voice oscillates between lament and hope; his poem mourns humanity's estrangement from God but ends on a note of renewal: "the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." By contrast, Wells's tone is more austere and morally ambiguous. *The Time Traveller's* journey ends not with salvation, but with epistemological uncertainty and historical pessimism. If Hopkins offers redemptive potential through spiritual reawakening, Wells warns that there may be no return that the trajectory of modernity, once set, resists reversal.

Both writers critique modernity's foundations, though through distinct philosophical and stylistic avenues. Hopkins indicts the mechanization of life for stripping the world of spiritual vitality and aesthetic wonder; he invokes theological insight as a counter-narrative to the secular metrics of progress. Wells, in turn, dismantles the optimistic premises of Victorian science and imperial capitalism, positing that empirical knowledge itself may be limited, unstable, and ethically compromised. For Hopkins, truth resides in divine revelation; for Wells, it resides in empirical uncertainty and the recognition of knowledge's limits. Yet both authors converge in their understanding that modernity, untempered by ethical reflection or spiritual depth, risks reducing the human experience to mere functionality, productive but soulless, advanced but blind.

Conclusion

Modernism is not merely an aesthetic revolution but a mode of ethical inquiry, grappling with the dislocations of a world transformed by machinery, empire, and secularization. Hopkins and Wells exemplify two poles of this modernist spectrum, sacred introspection and secular speculation, but their shared commitment to interrogating the trajectory of "progress" invites readers to rethink the values that underwrite contemporary life. In particular, their critiques resonate currently as we confront global ecological crises and the dehumanizing effects of technological acceleration.

As we close our lecture on Hopkins and Wells, we now shift our focus inward, to the psychological and formal revolutions of modernism. If Hopkins and Wells critiqued the industrial age by exposing its ethical and ecological fractures, our next authors: James Joyce and

Virginia Woolf, take us deeper into the fractured self, exploring how consciousness itself is shaped by, and resists, the pressures of modern life.

In our next lecture, we will examine how Stream of Consciousness emerges not just as a narrative technique, but as a radical literary experiment in capturing the flow of inner life; unfiltered, nonlinear, and intensely subjective. Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* challenge us to consider: What does it mean to represent thought on the page? How does modernist literature reshape our understanding of time, memory, and identity? This inward turn of modernism continues the ethical inquiry we have seen, but now the battleground is consciousness that exposes the social and existential tensions of the modern world.

8.7 Evaluation Task

Imagine a short conversation between Hopkins and the Time Traveller. What would they say about the current world? What would they agree or disagree on about nature, machines, or the future of humanity?

- Write a short dialogue (150–200 words) between the two characters.
- Use one quote or idea from each text.
- End with a question or thought that connects to our next topic: How do we experience the modern world inside our minds?

8.8 Works Cited

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