Some brief notes on modernism

Modernism as a movement has its main period of influence in art, literature and other cultural forms at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is influenced by modernism without being part of its initial, highly experimental phase. Waugh, in particular, would go on to mock much modernist experimentation. Aspects of modernism that both novels reflect, however, are:

- that a world of objective, moral certainty and shared values has been shattered, especially in the aftermath of World War 1. Things tend towards fragmentation and in modernist novels this contrasts with the nicely rounded off plots of the nineteenth-century novels with their romantic dénouements and sense of moral justice. Images of ash and dust, degraded landscapes and damaged, exploited people in the novel echo poems like ‘The Hollow Men’ and *The Waste Land* by the most famous modernist poet, T.S. Eliot.

- that we can no longer trust in a shared, objective truth and that subjective truth becomes more important. Thus, Fitzgerald presents a range of characters who are presented as overwhelmingly selfish and committed to self-gratification, unable or unwilling to communicate honestly communicate with each other or to show real empathy. He also reflects this turn to subjectivity by employing a single, highly manipulative and unreliable first-person narrator through whom the whole action of the novel is conveyed.

- that in modernist novels the form and structure of the work is as important as the subject matter in conveying a sense of fragmentation and disintegration. Fitzgerald deploys a technique of ‘cutting’ from one chapter so that the narrative continuity is disrupted. Both will often present dialogue without any narrative intervention at all, as if to suggest that the characters are cast adrift in their own self-absorbed worlds without any communal anchoring. Instead of bringing together a plot in a satisfying, unifying way like in the nineteenth-century novel (eg. The good, decent Elizabeth Bennett ends up marrying rich Mr Darcy at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*), modernist writers often impose other structural devices such as different types of repetition or other types of deep patterning as if to suggest that characters are subject to forces outside of their own control.

- that modernist works will also incorporate experimental features that draw upon the strange, surreal quality of dreams; again showing how a subjective viewpoint has become more predominant in a world of shattered values and showing the influence of thinkers like Freud and his emphasis on dreams as a gateway to what he called ‘the unconscious’ – part of our mind to which we don’t have access but which still exerts an influence on our behaviour.

- that the new technologies of cinema and the work of experimental visual artists like Picasso also exert an influence.