

---

# Abstract

## The Modern Vision: A Quest for Truth and Meaning

Moira O'Brien

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate the continuing significance of literature, even in the modern era, in reflecting and establishing man's essential need and quest for truth and meaning, a role especially significant in light of the era's revolutionary hallmarks; loss of belief in the two centrally unifying principles which formerly bestowed life with order and meaning; the power of reason to reveal truth and religious explanations for the nature of the universe and man's place within the scheme of existence.

Manifestation of the distinguishing features of the modern outlook (innate subjectivity and expectation of change) in literature leads to embodiment of the most potentially affirmative aspects of modernism, evident in mainstream (modernist) literature's characteristic challenging of traditional values and reliance on the creative imagination as a path towards founding new truth. This dissertation seeks to illustrate that these features are present in a diverse array of authors (both "modernist" and "modern") from contrasting historical, cultural and literary backgrounds, as demonstrated by Protestant Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (as representative of the epitome of pessimistic, mainstream, Anglo modernist literature), Puritan American poet Wallace Stevens (embodying inherently "pioneering", New World American modernist literature), white West Indian novelist Jean Rhys (suggesting New World transitional, modern yet intuitively hopeful early West Indian literature) and mullato West Indian poet Laureate Derek Walcott (emblematic of the New World, strongly affirmative and questing, evolving modern West Indian literary tradition).

Therefore, despite almost irreconcilable characteristics displayed by these writers, all reinforce literature's well established significance to man's need and quest for truth and meaning, demonstrated anew by its modern function as intensification of reality; challenging the foundation of current values as a prerequisite to creation of a fresh, more relevant (and intuitive) perspective of reality, prior to founding a new vision of truth and the meaning of life.