



UNIVERSITY OF
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Paris, Modernism & Artificial Light (1900-1939)

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1. Introduction

“La Ville Lumière” a name deserved for material as well as intellectual reasons.* Paris was the undisputed magnet for modernist writers and painters at the very same time that the splendour and elegance of its public lighting systems were unrivalled. By realising more clearly the relationship of modernist texts by writers who lived in or visited Paris to electric lighting – how the evocation of light in the work becomes a unique formal, and occasionally thematic, element – we attain a richer appreciation of the complex role of that technology in the expression of the modernist aesthetic, as well as a greater understanding of how all writers embrace technological change.

2. Authors/Poets

T. S. Eliot
F. Scott Fitzgerald
Henry James
James Joyce
Henry Miller
Ezra Pound
Gertrude Stein
Edith Wharton

3. Method

Four chapters interrogating the following:

- Representations of gas light in modernist novels to establish a diachronic study of lighting
- Representations of electric light in modernist novels
- The role of electric light in modernist poetry
- Artificial light in modern literary epiphany

4. Conclusion

Whether the novels and poems I consider make clear reference to Paris' manufactured light, silently assume its presence, or were inspired by it, they each support the argument that lighting technology, above all late 19th century innovations, was a symbol for and constituent part of modernist literary innovation.

*R. Boutteville,
L'éclairage Public
à Paris

(Paris: Librairie
de l'enseignement,
1925)

PARIS

— The City of Light —



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