

Modernist Experimentation

In the last few chapters, we learned that throughout the 19th century, certain authors began to stray from traditional themes, forms and language. Authors like Poe and Bierce wrote macabre poems and short stories, Emerson and Thoreau wrote in essay forms, and Twain incorporated everyday language and dialect. But it was not until the early 20th century that American writers began to break away from traditional Romantic forms and concepts en masse. At the same time, the literature was in tune with the cultural transformations taking place during the time period. For these reasons, this genre of American literature became known as Modernism, aptly suggesting that all previous writings were the products of a distant past.

In the decades following the Civil War, the nation witnessed a boom in urban populations, as well as increased political activism by women and minorities. In the 1910s, Modernist literature reflected these new themes, as authors began writing about more urban experiences and the plight of minorities. Additionally, African American activists W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington wrote at length about racism and civil rights, and the “Harlem Renaissance” witnessed an substantial increase in the output of African American literature from the 1910s – 1930s.

Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner: Two Sides of an Innovative Coin

Modernist authors also broke away from predictable structures and plots, none more so than Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway suffered from bipolar disorder and depression throughout his life, yet he managed to expertly express negativity in his work. In *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, Hemingway brutally depicted the harsh reality of the Spanish Civil War, which he covered as a journalist.

However, it was Hemingway’s most famous novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, which revolutionized literature. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway masterfully concealed the main premise of the novel, leaving readers to finish the novel and then attempt to figure out the purpose of the work. This literary device came to be known as the “iceberg theory,” with Hemingway explaining, “If you leave out important things or events that you

know about, the story is strengthened.” The practice of leaving out critical details for the reader to fill in is a common practice in film and literature today.

Conversely, William Faulkner, a contemporary of Hemingway’s, experimented with a writing style that would expound at length in a “stream of consciousness” style, weaving long sentences full of emotions and thoughts. Faulkner used his home town in Mississippi as the setting for many of his novels and short stories, incorporating Realist concepts to go along with his unique writing style.

The Great Gatsby and Jazz Age Literature

During the 1920s, America experienced an economic boom, only to be followed by a stock market crash and the Great Depression. Nobody captured the opulent lifestyle of the 1920s as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who not only coined the term “Jazz Age” for the 1920s and wrote *The Great Gatsby*, possibly the most famous American novel of the 20th century. *The Great Gatsby* offers a detailed look at the chase for riches, love, and glory. Although Fitzgerald was living a lavish lifestyle during the 1920s, *The Great Gatsby* depicts a sense of hollowness in the lives of its characters (and Fitzgerald’s lifestyle by extension), and the end of the novel drives home the notion that the story is tragedy.

PORTRAIT

Robert Frost

Although Robert Frost thrived during the Modernist era, his poetry was a throwback to 19th century literature. Frost used traditional forms of narrative and poetic structures and rhyme schemes, while using plain speech. Frost wrote most frequently about nature.

Frost’s best poem, and probably the most famous American poem of the 20th century, was “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The poem is a simple but elegant story about a weary traveler on his horse making their way through a snow covered forest. Frost’s depiction of the stillness of the night makes it seem like the traveler and horse are the only life on Earth, and readers can almost hear the sound of the horse

shaking the harness bells in their head while reading it.

Similarly, Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is a simple but thought provoking poem about a traveler walking through woods and coming across a fork in the road. The divergent paths are a metaphor for the different choices people have to make at certain crossroads in life, and the poem's narrator hints at the feeling of indecision he feels, realizing that he can only choose one road.

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