

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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Introduction.

course goals

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- ▶ Engage critically with a range of fiction in English from the first half of the last century.
- ▶ Understand how early twentieth-century texts participate in history:
 - ▶ in terms of their literary horizons;
 - ▶ in terms of their more-than-literary horizons.

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- ▶ aesthetic reason: good reads!
- ▶ historical reason: it was the best of times, it was the worst of times
- ▶ sociological reason: major transformation of writing and reading
- ▶ instrumental reason: reading these books seriously will make you smart...or at least a more versatile reader and writer

one question, many answers

- ▶ How is the period 1890 to 1950 distinctive in English-language fiction?

fiction in 1871

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense. Nevertheless, Celia wore scarcely more trimmings; and it was only to close observers that her dress differed from her sister's, and had a shade of coquetry in its arrangements; for Miss Brooke's plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–72; Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1878), 7–9.

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fiction in 1927

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine to-morrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” she added.

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch. Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator as his mother spoke with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy.

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Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth, 1927), 11.

modernism in fiction

I. self-conscious break with traditions

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2. aesthetic disruption

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Discussion: which are modern?

The handout has five passages from fiction written in English at some point in history. Thinking about the features we just discussed, which passages do you want to call modern? What do you notice that makes you say so?

“answer” key

1. Amenia Rosehill, “When Is a Woman ‘Too Old?’” (1926)
2. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930)
3. Georgette Heyer, “Lady, Your Pardon” (1937)
4. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)
5. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

literary modernity

- ▶ not just a single transformation in form or content (modernism is only part of the story)
- ▶ *structural transformation* of writing and reading:
 - ▶ sheer quantitative increase
 - ▶ breadth of circulation (many kinds)
 - ▶ diversity of production (many kinds)

quantity: new fiction titles

Table: new fiction/juvenile book titles (includes reprints). Print runs are small (1000 typical, 10000 max.) until the 1890s, when 100,000- and then 1,000,000-sellers emerge in both markets.

year	UK	US
1800	81	3
1880	1299	562
1900	2109	1805
1910	2833	2549
1920	2874	1653

breadth

- ▶ books (and periodicals) get much cheaper

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- ▶ “reading culture” (1890–1960 ca.)

Reading for entertainment by the general population is something very rare and very recent. Reading has always been associated with education and with urban social elites. Although contemporary commentators deplore the decline of “the reading habit” or “literary reading,” historically the era of mass reading, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century in northwestern Europe, Japan, and North America, was the anomaly. Today reading is returning to its former, narrower social base: a self-perpetuating minority that I have called the reading class.

Wendy Griswold, *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 66.

diversity of readership in English

- ▶ classes
- ▶ national, racial, ethnic groups
- ▶ books and publishing industries exported by the British Empire

parallel transformations in literary modernity

1. fiction as elevated art (“modernism”)
 - ▶ Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner
2. emergence of genre fiction (case study: “romance”)
 - ▶ people you’ve never heard of
3. new groups access literariness (case studies: African-American, Anglophone Indian)
 - ▶ Larsen, Hurston...Anand

requirements

- ▶ 20% paper 1 (5–7 pp.)
- ▶ 15% midterm (11/3)
- ▶ 30% paper 2 (6–8 pp.)
- ▶ 25% final (12/17)
- ▶ 10% participation
 - ▶ 0–2 unexcused absences, up to 4.0
 - ▶ 3 unexcused absences, up to 3.0
 - ▶ 4 unexcused absences, up to 2.0
 - ▶ 5 unexcused or more: can't pass

required reading

- ▶ books at Barnes & Noble
- ▶ check with me about alternate editions
- ▶ you have to have these in print

next

- ▶ Henry James, “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896)
 - ▶ how to read: not all at once!
 - ▶ you’re supposed to be confused: pay attention to how
 - ▶ “pop” quiz Monday (participation!)

