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American Modernism
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Literary beauty born from the Violence of War

In our course we cover 9 works of literature, seven novels, one poem and a collection of short stories. The literature we studied and will study were all published between 1880 and 1937 and they were all written by Americans. Although these works are primarily by white men, two were written by women and three by persons of color. While it's hard to know definitively, I am also certain that more than one sexual orientation is represented on our syllabus. With so much variety, what do these works have in common? What makes them unique in the canon of American literature? Beginning in the late 19th century, figures like Henry James were reimagining the definition and purpose of literature. The novel was beginning to be seen as an art form and the definition of poetry was more fluid. Therefore authors sought to be more original, leading to literary experimentation, changes in narrative authority and formalism.

Wars against the Native population like the Battle of Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee and later against the Axis forces with World War I brought about advancements in technology and affected social change. I propose that these wars laid the foundation of change that created American Modernist literature. Moreover, these wars were more than a catalyst for significant change, they served to focus writers on the common themes of violence and destruction, cultural fragmentation, cycles of life, loss and exile, individualism and social evils. These themes not only characterize but define American Modernism. I will demonstrate my thesis by highlighting

these common themes of subject matter and evolving literary style that were brought about by the wars, connecting them to select American Modernist works that we've studied in class.

In the end of the 19th century, America saw the culmination of the many wars against our Indiginous population. The Sioux War, Apache Wars and others were horribly one-sided and resulted in hundreds of thousands of Native deaths and the near eradication of a people and their way of life. These Wars made an indelible mark on both the Tribal lands and America at large (Cozzens, 5-30). The cost to purchase this great country was paid in blood and destruction and this made its mark in Modernist literature.

In 1917, the United States joined the Allied forces, officially entering WWI. The world had never seen a war of this scale or the widespread implementation of modern tools of warfare and the changes in tactics, like trench warfare, that are inherent to this. Furthermore since this was the first major conflict that employed modern weaponry they did not immediately adapt to modern warfare techniques or even goals. Fighting in the open with new weapons like planes, tanks, submarines, machine guns, flamethrowers and even chemicals resulted in huge casualty counts. Even after moving to Trench Warfare WWI saw more death and destruction than any other conflict the world had ever seen (Gary, 1-15).

Since American Modernist literature was produced in this time, we can hear echoes of themes like chaos and destruction. Although Heminway rarely mentions WWI in The Sun Also Rises, it's spector hangs over the characters. For Hemingway's characters the destruction and chaos of trench warfare not only killed soldiers but also the traditional male ideals of courage, honor and stoicism. Like many things in this novel these ideals are somehow hollow, painted in shades of grey. Jake and his friends don't seem to hold on to many traditional values, their world is broken and ready to be rebuilt.

As Cohn and Jake discuss plans to travel in South America, Cohn says, “I can’t stand it to think my life is going so fast and I’m not really living it” (Hemingway 18). As a veteran of WWI Jake understands Cohn’s feeling of directionlessness but has had too much life experience to share his feeling that time is moving too fast. Jake’s experiences in the war lead him to believe that life is fundamentally empty, no matter where you are.

Hemingway also introduces the metaphor of bull fighting which represents Jake’s and in a larger sense America’s ideal of war. Jake tells us that, “nobody ever lives life all the way up except bull-fighters” (Hemingway 18). World War I didn’t live up to Jake's ideal whereas the bull-fight epitomizes it. In a bull-fight there are rules, violence is controlled and with a purpose and there is a reason to celebrate your victory. In World War I however, the rules were shattered, violence was uncontrolled and omnipresent, your reason for fighting is lost in your struggle and victory only brings you a shattered sense of self. Bullfighters have all the glory and romance that should be Jake’s right to claim as a warrior but they never have to face the PTSD and lasting traumas many of us face.

Apart from affecting subject matter, WWI also served to eradicate literary norms and social conventions. For instance, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” some gender roles are inverted. Nick takes on several traditionally femine roles and attributes. He begins by relating his story in a sensitive manner, sharing personal feelings, desires, weaknesses, fear and affections. In the common Western archetype, women are seen as moral and centered whereas men break rules and are given more allowance to so. However in the Great Gatsby it is Nick who always weighs the ethical implications and moral correctness of his actions.

On the other hand, the novel teems with examples of women assuming the traditionally negative male characteristics including loose morals, drunkenness, deceit, abrasive natures and

shallowness. Fitzgerald paints a picture of attention seeking women who “dumps down a cocktail for courage” then “dances out alone on the canvass” (Fitzgerald 45). Another girl is described as “a rowdy little girl who gave way upon the slightest provocation to uncontrollable laughter” (Fitzgerald 51). The pre-modernist vision of a proper and morally correct woman has been lost to the war and replaced with a woman who drinks and acts like a rowdy man.

Nick isn’t the only male character that gains feminine traits. At first glance, Gatsby is the epitome of traditional masculinity; a soldier, self-made millionaire and even a hardened criminal. Gatsby, however, is all of these things because he spent the last five years pining over a woman that he barely knew, doing everything in his power to get her attention and persuade her to marry him. On the other hand Daisy is much more practical, instead of waiting forlornly for Gatsby she married Tom, she’s able to cheat on Tom with Gatsby and when Gatsby dies she doesn’t skip a beat, just continues life with Tom and forgets it all.

A final effect of the violence, destruction and chaos of America’s War on Natives and WWI is the modernist writer's habit of routinely and deliberately breaking rules of language. Modernist works are exemplified by the invention of words, experimentation with narrative voice and the ashewing of traditional patterns of syntax and structure. Faulkner was famous for inventing words and habitually broke with tradition writing norms by placing the emphasis on nouns and verbs rather than adjectives and adverbs. For example, in The Sun Also Rises, Faulkner begins with a focus on the names of cafes and streets and pays absolutely no attention to describing them. Similarly, Jake describes Brett saying, “She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey"

(Faulkner 30). This sentence grabs your attention not because of its beautiful and detailed description but because it is almost jaring in its unique structure.

The Wars not only focused writers on the theme of destruction but relatedly highlighted the theme of fragmentation. Modernist literature both deals with the subject of fragmentation as plot and also incorporates fragmentation in the structure of it's narrative, imagery and even in the construction of the piece itself. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," exemplifies this because the poem itself is fragmented and has choppy sentences and broken stanzas. The Fragmented nature of it's prose almost reflects back it's vision of crumbling cities in a modern waste land. Fragmentation is a recurring theme in Modernist Literature because it is a direct reflection of the actual fragmentation that is the reality of a post-war America.

The modern world that was born after WWI is an upside down, fragmented and broken but it is also new, exciting and young. After every war there is a resurgence of life with soldiers returning home and the inevitable baby boom. In Modernist literature this is thematically addressed by the cycle of life. By coming into being, the modern world replaces and thereby destroys the past. But the Modern world is born out of the past and therefore not only represents the death and destruction of that past, its norms and conventions but also represents new life, a new world with new possibilities and new rules.

American Modernist literature addresses this paradox often. Eliot's "The Waste Land" was largely centered on this theme as can be seen when the speaker pronounces, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot line 430). The speaker is implying that meaning can be restored by putting the broken shards of the past back together. There is life in death and rebirth in ruin; the cycle of life represented in Modernist literature ultimately means

that the loss of past rules, make room for the birth of new ideas, new literary styles and new ways of imagining literature and its creation.

The loss and exile felt by America's war on its own Indiginous population undoubtedly reverberated through the country and became a fixture and defining feature of the American Modernist writings. Modernism rejects conventional wisdom and moves away from religion placing the individual's sense of morality center stage. Individualism, another pillar of American Modernism, serves as an anchor for one's sense of self but ultimately results in isolation and feelings of loss.

Themes of individualism leading to loss and isolation are found in Henry James' "The Portrait of a Lady." Isabel is wholly unique as an American in Europe, because of her independent nature she shuns all but her own council and marries a charming man who turns out to be an opportunistic and controlling generally awful person. As Isabel realizes that her husband Osmond isn't a good person she reflects on how her individualism exposed the cracks in their marriage, "The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would take the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the best and gather an occasional nosegay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching" (James 427).

Isabel realizes that her individualism is offensive to Osmond and her engagement is based on lies. Osmond never desired a strong, independent and free thinking woman rather he was only after her wealth. Isabel knows that Osmond treats his daughter like a possession and that he will treat her the same way. Isabel will be an object, like the flower his daughter's name "Pansy" alludes to. In this marriage, Isabel loses her independence and her voluntary move to

Europe becomes an exile from home and she becomes yet another flower to be owned, tended and kept.

These concepts of loss and exile are not necessarily associated with travel or exile outside the physical boundaries of the United States. In Willa Cather's, "My Antonia" you could argue that Jake experiences the loss of Antonia and is exiled from the prairie he loves so much or even exiled from his own past where hope and possibility still lived. W.E.B. Du Bois takes the concept of exile a step further in, "The Souls of Black Folk" instead of being exiled from a country or even an area within a country, Black Folk are exiled from equality through the mechanism of "the veil".

Du Bois explains that, "one can see in the Negro church today, reproduced in microcosm, all the world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition" (Du Bois 165). This boils down to the idea that through segregation and exclusion "Black Folk" are effectively exiled, from participating in American society causing them to lose opportunities, dignity, access to goods and services and more. Du Bois also touches upon the Modernist concepts of resilience and rebirth, by explaining that because they have been unfairly segregated from society they work together to create a new world within the borders of the old, demonstrating strength and creative energy.

Loss and exile are often associated with the final concept of Modernist literature we will discuss today, social evils. In, "The Souls of Black Folk," Du Bois delves deeply into the concept of social evils. Du Bois describes the reality of Black people in America, the pain and limiting nature of both legal segregation and "the veil" which represents the social barrier whites put up, excluding Blacks from participating in society. These hardships are contrasted with the idyllic representations of life lived by White Americans.

"The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people" (Du Bois 11). Du Bois is explaining that at one time, slaves believed that they would be saved by God through divine intervention. Directly after the Emancipation, for a brief moment, Blacks thought everything would be alright, that the evils of society had lost and justice prevailed. Social Evils are more deeply entrenched than and although they were no longer slaves they were still far from freedom. Du Bois believed that inorder to address this continuing societal evil, America must address the root of the original sin and provide restorative justice to heal the damage.

The sin of slavery as a social evil is also central to William Faulkner's novel, "Absalom, Absalom!" Sutpen, a young and ruthless war veteran, appears one day with almost nothing to his name. He acquires a one hundred mile plot of land from the Indians several miles from the town and by brutally abusing and mistreating ten enslaved people, Sutpen builds a huge mansion and grows his wealth. The story of this character represents how White American introduced the ultimate social evil, slavery and beat, abused and mistreated thier way to be one of the richest nations on Earth. Faulkner next links how slavery built the American South to another social evil, the unfair treatment of women when Mr. Compson narrates, "He [came] to town to find a wife ... as he would have [gone] to market to buy livestock or slaves" (Faulkner 31). Compson is highlighting how Sutpen only acts out of self interest. Women and Blacks are treated like property here, without consideration for their feelings or consent. In his abusive and self-serving treatment of others, Sutpen comes to represent the worst of the antebellum South's culture.

The American Wars against our own Indigenous people and later World War I, left an indelible mark upon the American psyche forcing us to reexamine traditional American values

like individualism and work to fit them into their new world that on one hand was haunted by violence, destruction, loss and social evils but also held the promise of change represented by the cycles of life. So while modernism addresses death this means, by necessity, that it also examines life and with new life comes new opportunities, new beginnings and the chance to break the mold experiment and create.

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