

ENG 403 | Modern Novels | Summer 2021  
Lecture 1 | Introduction

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**Sources of Information:**

Matz, J. (2004). *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.  
Parsons, D. (2007). *Theorists of the Modern Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf*. Routledge.

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**Popular Statements:**

*[O]n or about 1910, human character changed.* — Virginia Woolf (Matz, 1)  
*The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.* — Willa Cather (Matz, 1)

**Key ideas:**

Modern, modernity, modernism, and the novel.

**Points to be noted:**

- What do you mean by ‘modern’?
- What is modernity?
- What is modernism?
- Are modern, modernity and modernism similar?
- What is your opinion about the concept of modern novels?
- What has the concept of modern novels “outdated or enhanced” (2)?

**Novel: Denotations and Connotations**

Something always ‘after the new thing’, ‘everything’ new, and all ‘changes’ (Matz, 1).

**Every novel is about the present written often in past tense:** “The novel has always been modern – always concerned mainly with contemporary life” (Matz, 1).

**Historical Records**

But some time around 1900 (or 1910, or 1922), the novels “became ‘the modern novel,’ breaking with the past, making itself new, to pursue modernity into the future.” (Matz, 1)

**For example**, “The Harlem Renaissance was a time both of excitement and of crisis, of opportunity and of regret, as centuries of pent-up creativity and anger together burst upon the cultural scene. The combination was particularly volatile” for the new authors who “express[ed] the fragmentation of modern life – the way new freedoms and opportunities were breaking old rules, the way modern chaos was shattering traditional institutions and customs.” (Matz, 4)

In the early twentieth century the modernist novel exploded literary conventions and expectations, challenging **representations of reality, consciousness and identity**. These

novels were not simply creative masterpieces but also crucial articulations of revolutionary developments in critical thought. (Parsons, i)

The early twentieth century marks a significant moment in the history of the English novel, its status and future becoming a matter of constant literary debate as both writers and reviewers questioned how the form // and **subject matter of modern fiction should respond to the shape and experience of modern life**. To the contemporary reader the novel may seem one of the most resilient and mutable of literary forms, expansive (or vague) enough in definition to include a vast range of styles and sub-genres. In the early 1900s, however, it seemed to many young writers, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson among them, that the best-selling novels of the day had become stuck within fixed and limiting rules for the representation of character and reality. For a generation born into the last decades of the Victorian era, yet whose maturity coincided with technological innovation, scientific revolution and the destructive rupture of world war, the sense of living in a new age was acute, and what had become the conventional forms of fiction seemed inappropriate, even hostile, to the depiction of their contemporary moment. (Parsons, 1-2)

Parsons (2007) pays particular attention to the thought and writings of James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf in the light of:

- forms of realism
- the representation of character and consciousness
- gender and the novel
- concepts of time and history (1)

### **The Rise of the Modern Novel: The “New Novel,” circa 1914**

The modern novel developed new ways to dramatize thought, to pattern out slippery sequences of feeling, to get behind eyes limited by moral blindness or keen with insight; it developed the new styles and tactics necessary to do justice to the mind’s “dissolving” complexity. (Matz, 17)

Joseph Conrad also widened the scope of the novel in these opposite directions, but for him the result was a kind of fiction more aesthetically vivid and more actively political. Conrad took the novel to Africa, to Malaysia, to South America, and used it as a way of reporting back on imperialism’s corruption of western ideals. Most famously in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Conrad revealed the evils of imperial exploitation and aggression, showing how principles that seemed fine “at home” were annihilating forces for corruption in the imperial powers’ “outposts of progress.” (Matz, 19)

### **Modern Novels**

While Joyce and Richardson arguably pioneered the new psychological realism, it is Virginia Woolf’s formulation of this focus and technique in her essay ‘Modern Novels’ (1919) and its revised version ‘Modern Fiction’ (1925) that has most influenced subsequent summaries of modernist fictional method. (Parsons, 46-48)

### **What made novels ‘modern’:**

- Questions, fragments, “automatic” sentences, and “subjective” voices (Matz, 6)
- Experiment, innovation, and improvisation are its hallmarks. (Matz, 6)

- The story of a life (Parsons, 72)
- Multiple selves (Parsons, 77)
- **Rethinking traditional ‘novel’ narrative, i.e., no more “once upon a time”** “[f]or the sake of the truth, the vitality, and the new eloquence”: the words seem to be said and heard directly from life itself, without planning or purpose; they let silly baby-talk cheapen the language of literature; they make a joke of storytelling customs, and they plunge us directly into an unfamiliar world, without the kind of preparation (scene-setting, introductory explanations) that might normally ease us in. (Matz, 2)
- The **quintessentially modern novel** tends to have some redemptive hope within it, some wish to restore meaning or wholeness or beauty to the modern world. Spender called this tendency a **“pattern of hope,”** an “idea that modern art might transform the contemporary environment, and hence, by pacifying and ennobling its inhabitants, revolutionize the world.” The hope was that new forms might become new public powers of seeing, new strong ways of feeling despite modernity’s technological coldness, or new critical abilities, through which people might see through modernity’s lies. Or the hope was that the novel’s fine new forms might be a retreat or refuge from modernity – shelter from its destruction. Or perhaps that the novel’s new linguistic vigor would give people the words to describe their modern predicaments, or ask for needed changes. What many modern novelists have in // common is a tendency to write as if lives depended upon it – as if truthful, meaningful life needed the novelist’s imagination, as if true insight into the human mind depended upon the depths into which it can reach, and as if modern freedom could only fully emerge in the rushed and fragmented sentences through which fiction enacts it. Such a “pattern of hope” is behind what D. H. Lawrence said about the “help” the novel gives:
 

The novel is the one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation *can* make the whole man-alive tremble . . . To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point. And at its best, the novel, and the novel supremely, can help you. It can help you not to be dead man in life. (Matz, 9-10)
- This redemptive conviction is typical. Not universal: many modern novelists do not necessarily put the “pattern of hope” into their fiction. But for the most part to write modern novels meant to face modernity with a sense that literary form could redeem it – that it could make a supreme difference to the very life of human culture. (Matz,10)

## Prehistory and Cultural Memory

While its first decade was dominated by the cultural and psychological trauma of the First World War and its impact on the processes of memory and representation (Hynes, 1990; Tate, 1998; Sherry, 2003), its second, darkened by the threat of German invasion and another war, turned to the more extended past of national and cultural heritage. In *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*, as we have seen, contemporary Dublin and London provide ‘to the moment’ settings for the exploration of the private consciousness and memories of the individual mind. (Parsons, 122)

## Pioneers

While sharing an aim to convey aspects of human existence typically unrepresented by conventional prose, along with certain formal stylistic similarities in the ways that they did so, the material social and cultural contexts from which **Joyce, Woolf and Richardson** thought and wrote were very different: Joyce an Irishman self-exiled to Europe,

singlemindedly pursuing his extraordinary craft while supported and feted by the most forward-thinking patrons of the cosmopolitan art world; Woolf the product of Victorian upper-middle-class liberalism, her work nurtured within the context of high-brow Bloomsbury aesthetics; Richardson a staunchly independent 'new woman', pioneering her revolutionary // 'feminine' prose on far less than the five hundred pounds a year that Woolf would famously declare necessary for a woman to be able to write. (Parsons, 3-4)

## The New Key Ideas

### Realism and Reality

From the very start of its relatively recent history the purpose of the English novel has arguably been the representation of everyday life – as // direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value', James had asserted in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' in 1884 (1956: 9). 'It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality,' he continued, 'but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms' (12). While the representation of reality remained paramount within James' theory of the novel, his argument was yet that // this could only be achieved through careful attention to artistic technique. James wanted to raise the status of the novel by encouraging a more theoretical understanding of its technical craft. '[I]t must take itself seriously for the public to take it so', he declared, and to do it needed 'a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it' (44-5). (Parsons, 22-24)

### "What is Reality?": The New Questions

Modernity exposed this "conventionality": it became clear to writers like Woolf, Cather, and Lawrence that "realism" was arbitrary – not some sure, timeless, perfect way to describe life in action, but odd techniques dependent on the priorities and preferences of the moment. Moreover, modernity put the priorities and preferences of the modern moment into a perpetual state of change. In the past, traditional social, religious, and scientific frameworks might have given reality a certain backing – enough consensus to make "human experience" seem regular and knowable. But modernity had replaced them with change, and replaced consensus with questions. (Matz, 32)

Questioning reality transformed realism in the modern novel, producing a *new* realism based strangely on doubt about reality itself. Three fundamental attitudes follow from this fundamental questioning: *skepticism*, *relativism*, and *irony*. (Matz, 33)

### Dream and Life

'I think there is a new phase in the works of Mr. Joyce', declared the American poet Ezra Pound in 1914, reviewing *Dubliners* (Deming, 1970). 'Mr. Joyce writes a clear hard prose', he continued, 'He deals with subjective things, but he presents them with such clarity of outline that he might be dealing with locomotives or with builders' specifications.' (Parsons, 34)

Joyce's supposed modernist formalism, as argued by Pound, is often supported by quotation from Stephen Daedalus' famous declaration of aesthetic impersonality at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published later in the same year in *The Egoist*, at

Pound's invitation. It is important not to take the novel as a straightforward articulation of Joyce's own aesthetic theories however. The novel is a gently satiric portrait of the artist as a *young man*, and is as revealing of attitudes that Joyce abandoned as much as aims he refined. (Parsons, 35)

### **Myth and the Modern**

Following the thoughts and perceptions of first Stephen Dedalus and then Leopold Bloom through one day in Dublin, what most struck early readers of *Ulysses* was its encyclopaedic but prosaic realism. 'It is the realistic novel par excellence' (266), Pound declared, continuing that 'Ulysses is not a book that everybody is going to admire . . . but it is a book that every serious writer needs to read . . . in order to have a clear idea of the point of development of our art' (Deming, 1970: 266). (Parsons, 41)

### **The Stream of Consciousness**

A focus on the subjective consciousness of the individual mind has become one of the defining features of the modernist novel, identified as both its principal theme and dominant technique. The term is derived from William James' description of the way in which thoughts, perceptions, memories, associations and sensations in all their multitude are experienced by the mind. (Parsons, 56)

### **A Modern Hero**

Although Joyce and Richardson were regularly cited alongside each other as purveyors of the new 'stream-of-consciousness' novel, no single character or consciousness dominates *Ulysses* in the way that Miriam Henderson does throughout *Pilgrimage*. For while the first half of the novel uses the recognisable technique of interior monologue to present the thoughts and impressions of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the diverse styles and idioms with which he became preoccupied in the later sections by contrast reduce Stephen and Bloom as individual characters to the wider mechanics of the novel as a whole. If any single consciousness dominates *Ulysses* it becomes that of Joyce himself, who far from effacing his authorial control behind the thoughts and perceptions of his characters, demonstrated it with every change of style, repetition of phrase or image, or symbolic parallel or juxtaposition. (Parsons, 61)

### **Gender and the Novel**

In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920, Virginia Woolf quoted the words of Bathsheba Everdene in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* as exemplifying the position of women as both subjects and writers of the English novel: 'I have the feelings of a woman, but I have only the language of men' (*E II*: 67). Even with the growing emancipation of women in the twentieth century, Woolf notes, the difficulty for a woman of speaking in her own voice remains: From that dilemma arise infinite confusions and complications. Energy has been liberated, but into what forms is it to flow? To try the accepted forms, to discard the unfit, to create others which are more fitting, is a task that must be accomplished before there is freedom or achievement. (Parsons, 67)

## A Female Literary Heritage

Woolf herself, however, warned against the assumption that a woman's financial independence was *all* that was needed for her to write. It may seem that once a woman had achieved a room of her own and refused the cultural expectations of her domestic role, she 'had only to be herself', she notes in 'Professions for Women', 'but what is "herself"?' I mean, what is a woman?' (WW: 60). Writing as a woman, Woolf tells her audience, 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body' (62), was something she did not think she or any other writer had yet achieved. One of the reasons for the difficulty women writers have in speaking truthfully of their own experiences and developing their own forms of expression, Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own*, is the lack of a tradition of female literature to draw on for example. In her own reviews she frequently argued for the importance of a female literary heritage in influencing the work of subsequent women writers, and set out to recover a legacy of female creative expression from the exclusionary male-focussed narratives of canonical literary history. The most significant moment in the history of women's fiction, Woolf declares, came with the eighteenth century when middle-class women first began to write as a profession. Before this time, she notes, only a few aristocratic women had been able to indulge a passion for writing, their wealth and position allowing them to learn both to read and write and, in some cases, to ignore the ridicule of society. (Parsons, 87)

## Feminine Sentences

The consideration of a 'female' literary style dominates Woolf's discussion of contemporary women's fiction in *A Room of One's Own*. Previously, she argues, women writers have only had available to them the language of men. Only in the twentieth century, she suggests, has the woman writer begun to mould 'a prose style completely expressive of her mind' (AROO: 124). Far from making a new argument, however, Woolf was here summarizing a broad and vigorous debate over the concept and practice of 'feminine' prose within which she had participated almost a decade earlier. (Parsons, 91)

## The Eternal Feminine and the Womanly Woman

The representation of femininity in Joyce's writings is notoriously ambiguous, capable of supporting both those critics who accuse him of misogynistically perpetuating the social stereotypes of Mother, Virgin and Whore that reduce women to the body (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985), and those who celebrate him for identifying femininity with a textual and linguistic errancy that undercuts the patriarchal social order (see also Lawrence, 1990). (Parsons, 96)

## Time and History

One of the key characteristics of Joyce, Woolf and Richardson's 'new realism' was their preoccupation with the representation of time. Narrative in the modernist novel typically follows the passage of time as it is experienced within the minds of its characters, rather than the straightforwardly forward-moving plot of standard realism. As a result **it might take hundreds of pages to cover the period of only one day**, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or, as in Woolf's *Orlando*, far less to move across four hundred years.

The idea that **the experience of time** is relative to the individual consciousness was not itself new. What marks the representation of the subjective perception of time at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, is the collective nature of this fascination. (Parsons, 109)

## The Relation of Time and Space

The idea that time is experienced by the mind as an all-encompassing flux rather than a linear sequence of events has become one of the defining principles of the modernist novel, epitomised in Woolf's description of life in 'Modern Novels' (Parsons, 110)

## Debate on 'Modern' Authority: Reality vs. Reliability... the Author vs. the Authored

For example, "Arnold Bennett (a best-selling novelist of the day) accused Woolf of creating characters so elusive they seemed nothing like real people ... To Bennett, Woolf's characters lacked 'reality.' But she answered back by saying that what 'reality' itself meant had changed. Bennett's ideas about character were outdated, she wrote, because modern reality itself had become a question: 'He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?'" (Matz, 5)

## Objections against the pre-modern novels

The "formal" difference ... were meant to differ from the norm. To the modern novelist, most of the fiction written around 1900 or 1910 had become stale and pointless, for many reasons. It seemed to take things at the slow and steady pace of a bygone way of life; it seemed to stay on the surface, never going into psychological depth; it seemed inefficient, larded over with verbiage that kept reality away; it told its stories from on high, // from the point of view of some impossible, all-knowing, godlike observer; it pretended to tell a seamless story from start to finish; and it always put a positive last spin on things, in neat and tidy endings. Modern novelists wanted to break with these **stale traditions**. (Matz, 8-9)

## Respects towards the Classics

They did not think that *all* novels of the past were pointless: "our quarrel is not with the classics," Virginia Woolf noted, but with the played-out novel of the recent past, since it had failed to keep up with real life. The general consensus among the younger novelists around 1910 was that fiction had to give up on its false coherence, its conventional complacency, its unmodern outlook, if it were to regain meaning and relevance. (Matz, 8-9)

## Concluding Remarks:

The **modern novel** "does not just refer to any and all fiction written in modern times, or to fiction that is recent or new." It refers to:

- fiction that experiments with ways to contend with modernity.
- fiction that tries for new techniques, new theories, new languages – for the kind of radical "formal" innovation in the sentences and structures of 'modern' authors like Joyce, Toomer, Woolf, and Stein.
- fiction that tries for these innovations out // of a sense that modernity demands them.
- fiction that does so gladly, radically, and even with the hope of making a difference.
- fiction that tries for something new, in the face of modernity, to reflect, to fathom, or even to redeem modern life. (Matz, 6-7)

**Modernity** is the world of the present, adrift from tradition and bound for the future, traumatized by conflict and wracked by doubt; but it is above all a world of change. It is, as the poet Charles Baudelaire put it, “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent.” It puts life into perpetual flux, moving it ever onward to new inventions, new ideas, new ways of living, making any moment seem potentially critical. Science and technology every day create new ways to see, work, and think; shifting global politics creates ever new cultures and new conflicts; new generations gladly leave traditions behind. Stable forces are gone: God has died long ago, it seems, and aristocracies have vanished – leaving in place of their traditions only faith in change. (Matz, 7)

### **The Puzzling Question**

- **The Future of the Modern Novel: A wrong name/approach/tendency?**