

Modernist Literature: A Rose for **Emily**

American History and Society

Modernist Literature

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Modernist literature was a radical change from traditional literary forms. It emerged in response to the social forces and new intellectual ideas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Modernist writers sought to explore new narrative structures and themes, often focusing on the psychological and subjective experiences of characters. Writers like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot were important members of this movement.

We will be looking at a story by one of the most important American Modernist writers: William Faulkner.



Methods and Themes of Modernist Literature

Modernist Literature was all about **experimentation**: trying new methods to describe and comment on human experience. We will look at a few ways authors are playing with language:

- Fragmentation
- Stream of Consciousness
- Unreliable narrators
- Complex and multi-layered symbolism
- Emphasis on Subjective Experience
- Moral Ambiguity



Fragmentation

Fragmentation involves breaking the narrative into pieces and rearranging them in the wrong order, reflecting the Modernist perception of life and reality as fragmented and discontinuous.

Nonlinear narrative disrupts the chronological order of events, often through flashbacks and foreshadowing, to emphasize the subjective experience of time.



Stream of Consciousness

Stream of Consciousness is a narrative technique that captures the continuous, chaotic flow of thought, often ignoring conventional grammar and punctuation.

Stream of consciousness is a narrative technique that attempts to describe reality AS WE THINK IT:

- Nonlinear: not in the right order, moving from subject to subject without clear focus
- Fragmented: Missing pieces and connected in ways that aren't systematic or logical
- Associative: The way we connect ideas in a seemingly random way. (perfume > grandmother > cookies > gym)



Unreliable Narrators

Unreliable narrators are characters who tell the story but who are obviously, for some reason, not telling what actually happened. This challenges the reader's perception of truth and reality.

All narrators are unreliable. Whoever is telling a story is telling it from their own perspective and the reader has to remember that what they see or say about it may not be what really happened.

Modernist writers take this one step further by making the narrators of their stories deeply flawed and untrustworthy. They may lie about an event, add or omit information, or intentionally mislead the reader about why something happened.



Complex and Multilayered **Symbolism**

Complex symbolism allows authors to fill their writing with deeper meanings beyond the literal interpretation of words. This literary device became a signature of the modernist movement, as it was **very intellectual and difficult**, requiring a deep knowledge of Western art, history, science, philosophy, and literature, and often used multiple languages.

Symbolism in modernist literature is not merely there to make the writer look intelligent: it serves as a tool for exploring the depths of human consciousness because **it invites readers to engage actively with the text**, constructing their own meanings based on personal experiences and perspectives.



Emphasis on **Subjective** Experience

Prior to the rise of Modernism, stories were often lessons, with a “moral,” or social truth that the reader is expected to “learn” from (think of folktales like Cinderella or fables like those written by Aesop, or even the plays of Shakespeare).

Modernism is more interested in describing the situations that people find themselves in and how they react to it, leaving the reader free to decide what they would do in a similar situation. Rather than TELL the reader what to think, the text allows a reader to feel the emotions of a character and participate in the story, imagining what they would do.



Moral Ambiguity

Moral ambiguity refers to a state of uncertainty or confusion about what is right or wrong, good or bad. Often in Modernist story it is unclear whether an action is right or wrong. Traditional values are often questioned, undermined, or found to be unacceptable.

In Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," moral ambiguity is evident in the behavior and attitudes of the characters, most of whom are disillusioned expatriates drifting aimlessly in the aftermath of World War I. The traditional ideals they once held—about honor, patriotism, love, and success—have been shattered by the war, leaving them morally adrift.

They engage in hedonistic behaviors, such as excessive drinking and casual sex (sometimes with strangers), seemingly without a clear moral compass or a sense of purpose.



William Faulkner

Survey: Deference, Conformity, Social Pressure, and Happiness

Please complete this short and completely anonymous survey.



“The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” T. S. Eliot

American Modernist literature contributed significantly to the global literary landscape, influencing writers worldwide and reshaping literary conventions.

Let us read a poem that exemplifies many of the methods and themes we have just discuss: T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"



Early Years

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897 and later moved to Oxford, Mississippi. He was the eldest son in a family of four boys.

His upbringing in one of the poorest states in the U.S. deeply influenced his perspectives and literary themes.

Faulkner aspired to emulate his great-grandfather, who was also a writer.



Ambition and Disappointment

Faulkner's early life was marked by a mix of ambition and setbacks.

Despite being the quarterback on his high school football team, he never graduated.

His dream of becoming a pilot in the army was thwarted by his height, leading him to join the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he served through World War I without seeing combat.



His Path to Writing

Before fully committing to writing, Faulkner explored various professions. He worked as a scoutmaster for the Oxford Boy Scout troop and as a bank clerk.

His tenure as a postmaster at the University of Mississippi ended when he was fired for reading on the job.

These experiences, though diverse, were steps toward his true passion for writing.



Personal Life

Faulkner married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham. Their marriage was troubled by Estelle's drug addiction and Faulkner's own heavy drinking.

Professionally, Faulkner spent two decades in Hollywood trying to earn money writing screenplays for movies like "Today We Live" (1933) and "Land of the Pharaohs" (1955), collaborating with director Howard Hawks.



Rowan Oak

Purchased by Faulkner in 1930, he lived there until his death in 1962. The property, originally named "The Bailey Place," consists of over 29 acres and features a Greek Revival house built in the 1840s. Faulkner personally renovated the home, adding his unique touch while preserving its antebellum architecture.

Today, Rowan Oak is owned by the University of Mississippi and serves as a museum, offering insights into Faulkner's life and work through preserved living spaces and personal artifacts. The site attracts scholars, writers, and tourists interested in Faulkner's legacy.



Literary Influences

Faulkner's writing was profoundly influenced by his life in Mississippi. He delved into the Southern social dynamics, particularly the inequalities faced by African Americans.

His obsession with restoring his own house and his detailed depictions of architecture in his books reflect his interest in the physical and moral landscapes of the South.



Yoknapatawpha County

Faulkner created the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, a detailed representation of Mississippi, as the setting for many of his stories.

This imaginary place, modeled after the real Lafayette County, served as a canvas for Faulkner to explore the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South.



Narrative Techniques

Faulkner was known for his innovative narrative techniques, including the distortion of time through inner monologue and **the use of long, hypnotic sentences.**

His storytelling varied from traditional narratives to more experimental forms, such as stream of consciousness and multiple viewpoints, to capture the essence of his characters and settings.

Shown here is the longest of many long sentences in Faulkner's writing, a 1288-word masterpiece from his novel *Absalom, Absalom!*

Just exactly like Father had known as much about it the night before I went out there as he did the day after I came back thinking Mad impotent old man who realized at last that there must be some limit even to the capabilities of a demon for doing harm, who must have seen his situation as that of the show girl, the pony, who realizes that the principal tune she prances to comes not from horn and fiddle and drum but from a clock and calendar, must have seen himself as the old wornout cannon which realizes that it can deliver just one more fierce shot and crumble to dust in its own furious blast and recoil, who looked about upon the scene which was still within his scope and compass and saw son gone, vanished, more insuperable to him now than if the son were dead since now (if the son still lived) his name would be different and those to call him by it strangers and whatever dragon's outcropping of Sutpen blood the son might sow on the body of whatever strange woman would therefore carry on the tradition, accomplish the hereditary evil and harm under another name and upon and among people who will never have heard the right one; daughter doomed to spinsterhood who had chosen spinsterhood already before there was anyone named Charles Bon since the aunt who came to succor her in bereavement and sorrow found neither but instead that calm absolutely impenetrable face between a homespun dress and sunbonnet seen before a closed door and again in a cloudy swirl of chickens while Jones was building the coffin and which she wore during the next year while the aunt lived there and the three women wove their own garments and raised their own food and cut the wood they cooked it with (excusing what help they had from Jones who lived with his granddaughter in the abandoned fishing camp with its collapsing roof and rotting porch against which the rusty scythe which Sutpen was to lend him, make him borrow to cut away the weeds from the door-and at last forced him to use though not to cut weeds, at least not vegetable weeds -would lean for two years) and wore still after the aunt's indignation had swept her back to town to live on stolen garden truck and out of anonymous baskets left on her front steps at night, the three of them, the two daughters negro and white and the aunt twelve miles away watching from her distance as the two daughters watched from theirs the old demon, the ancient varicose and despairing Faustus fling his final main now with the Creditor's hand already on his shoulder, running his little country store now for his bread and meat, haggling tediously over nickels and dimes with rapacious and poverty-stricken whites and negroes, who at one time could have galloped for ten miles in any direction without crossing his own boundary, using out of his meagre stock the cheap ribbons and beads and the stale violently-colored candy with which even an old man can seduce a fifteen-year-old country girl, to ruin the granddaughter of his partner, this Jones-this gangling malaria-ridden white man whom he had given permission fourteen years ago to squat in the abandoned fishing camp with the year-old grandchild-Jones, partner porter and clerk who at the demon's command removed with his own hand (and maybe delivered too) from the showcase the candy beads and ribbons, measured the very cloth from which Judith (who had not been bereaved and did not mourn) helped the granddaughter to fashion a dress to walk past the lounging men in, the side-looking and the tongues, until her increasing belly taught her embarrassment-or perhaps fear,-Jones who before '61 had not even been allowed to approach the front of the house and who during the next four years got no nearer than the kitchen door and that only when he brought the game and fish and vegetables on which the seducer-to-be's wife and daughter (and Clytie too, the one remaining servant, negro, the one who would forbid him to pass the kitchen door with what he brought) depended on to keep life in them, but who now entered the house itself on the (quite frequent now) afternoons when the demon would suddenly curse the store empty of customers and lock the door and repair to the rear and in the same tone in which he used to address his orderly or even his house servants when he had them (and in which he doubtless ordered Jones to fetch from the showcase the ribbons and beads and candy) direct Jones to fetch the jug, the two of them (and Jones even sitting now who in the old days, the old dead Sunday afternoons of monotonous peace which they spent beneath the scuppernon arbor in the back yard, the demon lying in the hammock while Jones squatted against a post, rising from time to time to pour for the demon from the demijohn and the bucket of spring water which he had fetched from the spring more than a mile away then squatting again, chortling and chuckling and saying 'Sho, Mister Tawm' each time the demon paused)-the two of them drinking turn and turn about from the jug and the demon not lying down now nor even sitting but reaching after the third or second drink that old man's state of impotent and furious undefeat in which he would rise, swaying and plunging and shouting for his horse and pistols to ride single-handed into Washington and shoot Lincoln (a year or so too late here) and Sherman both, shouting, 'Kill them! Shoot them down like the dogs they are!' and Jones: 'Sho, Kernel; sho now' and catching him as he fell and commandeering the first passing wagon to take him to the house and carry him up the front steps and through the painless formal door beneath its fanlight imported pane by pane from Europe which Judith held open for him to enter with no change, no alteration in that calm frozen face which she had worn for four years now, and on up the stairs and into the bedroom and put him to bed like a baby and then lie down herself on the floor beside the bed though not to sleep since before dawn the man on the bed would stir and groan and Jones would say, 'flyer I am, Kernel. Hit's all right. They aint whupped us yit, air they?' this Jones who after the demon rode away with the regiment when the granddaughter was only eight years old would tell people that he 'was lookin after Major's place and niggers' even before they had time to ask him why he was not with the troops and perhaps in time came to believe the lie himself, who was among the first to greet the demon when he returned, to meet him at the gate and say, 'Well, Kernel, they kill us but they aint whupped us yit, air they?' who even worked, labored, sweat at the demon's behest during that first furious period while the demon believed he could restore by sheer indomitable willing the Sutpen's Hundred, which he remembered and had lost, labored with no hope of pay or reward who must have seen long before the demon did (or would admit it) that the task was hopeless-blind Jones who apparently saw still in that furious lecherous wreck the old fine figure of the man who once galloped on the black thoroughbred about that domain two boundaries of which the eye could not see from any point.

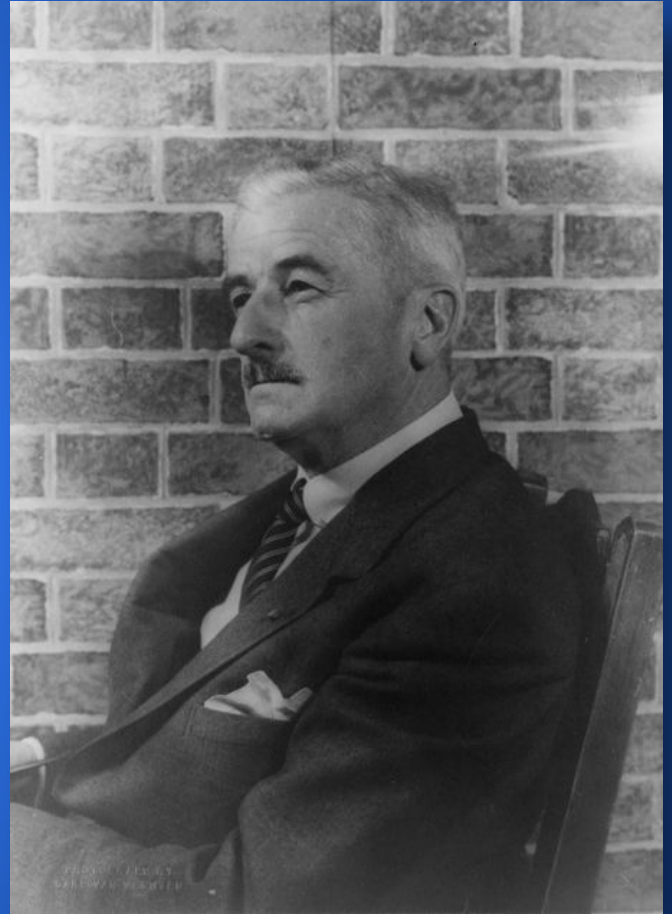
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Themes

Faulkner's work is characterized by its exploration of racial prejudice, class division, and the complexities of family dynamics.

He was unafraid to tackle difficult subjects such as rape, incest, suicide, and greed, often drawing from his own life experiences and moral evaluations of the South's societal issues.

Faulkner himself said that his writing was all about “endurance,” that he meant to show the terrible experiences that humans can endure.



Incredible Productivity

William Faulkner's most prolific period spanned roughly from the early 1920s to the outbreak of World War II, during which he published 13 novels and numerous short stories, including celebrated works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), all set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, a microcosm of the American South.

This 12-year span is widely regarded as the zenith of Faulkner's literary career, showcasing his unparalleled contribution to modern American literature.



Literary Prizes

Faulkner's literary contributions were recognized with numerous awards, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. He also received two Pulitzer Prizes for "A Fable" and "The Reivers" and was posthumously awarded a National Book Award for his "Collected Stories."



Nobel Prize Speech

In his beautiful acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Faulkner talked about the responsibility he felt as a writer:

“I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking.

I refuse to accept this. **I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.** He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.”

Legacy and Death

- Faulkner died on July 6, 1962, after suffering from a coronary occlusion.
- Up until his death, he served as a Writer-In-Residence at the University of Virginia.
- The United States Postal Service honored his legacy with a first-class 22-cent stamp.
- Faulkner's extensive body of work, including novels, short stories, screenplays, and poems, continues to influence writers and readers worldwide.

