Modern Novels and Novelists

One way to understand the[modern](https://literariness.org/tag/modernism/)novel is to show its development in the work of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and [William Faulkner](https://literariness.org/2018/06/02/analysis-of-william-faulkners-novels/). This list is by no means exclusive, but it represents those authors who are essential figures of the modernist literary canon.

Along with their modernist contemporaries, Conrad, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, and Faulkner are “modern” because they share certain literary preoccupations with an unstable modern world, have a diminishing belief in the idea of progress, are concerned with the radical subjectivity of the self, and, consequently, are preoccupied with the novelist’s need to present “reality” from multiple perspectives. Of paramount concern to modernists is the question of how the world is perceived—or, rather, their concern is the difficulty of perceiving the world as an agreed upon or objective reality. Thus, the modern novel relies on stream-of-consciousness narrators and even unreliable witnesses to the present and the past, underscoring the strenuous effort by novelist and reader alike to arrive at a semblance of the truth. The modern novel, in other words, has an epistemological thrust, a dynamic questioning of what its characters know and how they think they know it.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

Many commentators on the[modern](https://literariness.org/tag/modernism/)novel date its inception to World War I—and its aftermath—because its horrors led to skepticism about moral values, religious principles, and political convictions that nineteenth century writers and readers believed were universal and enduring. The basic elements of modernism, however, evolved earlier; they appeared in Joseph Conrad’s early work, completed before World War I.

Conrad experienced the sort of displacement and disorientation that are the hallmarks of high modernism, that is, of novels that inquire into the foundations of civilization, the core beliefs and modes of perception that nineteenth century novelists took for granted or only fitfully questioned. This was a time when Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud first began to undermine the Victorian confidence in a coherent universe.

Conrad grew up in Russian-occupied Poland, the son of an impoverished Polish nobleman who wrote political plays and was persecuted by the Russians. Early on, Conrad absorbed the devastating history of Poland, an enlightened country that had been partitioned by Russia, Prussia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had risen against its oppressors in several futile rebellions. Conrad left his native land and went to sea, deciding several years later to reestablish himself in England and pursue writing as a career.

Conrad doubted the Victorian notion of progress. His novels, such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899 serial, 1902 book), reminded the British that their island nation had once been a part of the Roman Empire and that the British “moment” in history—its pride in the achievements of imperialism—might be just that: a moment. Conrad ridiculed the European notion that its economy and political structures would prevail in history. He exposed the futile blindness of such pretensions in *Nostromo* (1904), a novel that prophetically described the repetitive round of revolution and counterrevolution and reaction that would pervade much of twentieth century South and Central America, even as Europeans and Americans invested in undeveloped countries and deluded themselves into believing their presence would result in a socially, economically, and politically improved world.

Charlie Marlow, Conrad’s narrator in *Heart of Darkness, Victory* (1915), and other works, is a quintessential modernist because he cannot complacently accept civilization like his contemporaries. His views are antiheroic and anti-Romantic; he questions nineteenth century hero worship, which led Romantic and Victorian writers such as Thomas Carlyle and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](https://literariness.org/2017/11/30/literary-criticism-of-ralph-waldo-emerson/) to argue that history is made by “great men” and that history itself is just the sum of innumerable biographies of great men. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* sets out to become one of these great men, and it is Marlow’s task to discover why Kurtz fails—not merely as a person but as a representative of a Western civilization attempting to bring its values to the so-called savages in Africa.

Marlow meditates on Kurtz’s intentions. Is Kurtz’s corruption, his assumption of absolute power over the indigenous peoples, the logical if unforeseen result of his arrogant quest to save them? Marlow questions and doubts his ability to understand not only Kurtz’s story but also history itself. Does history, in fact, have a meaning? Even more troubling is Marlow’s inability to tell the truth about Kurtz to Kurtz’s fiancé, a proper Victorian woman who cannot begin to understand how Kurtz succumbed to evil, the heart of darkness that humans, the novel implies, are all too inclined to perpetuate.

Conrad’s contribution to the modern novel is enormous. He brought a brooding, musing sensibility to narrative and an awareness of the way human consciousness feeds on itself and elaborates whole worlds rather than just describing them. The great tradition of nineteenth century was realism: The novelist attempted to accurately convey the world and render its complexity. The focal point, in other words, was the world, not human consciousness, although certain late nineteenth century writers such as Henry James began to demonstrate that it was the narrator—as much as or more than the story he or she had to tell—who was the cynosure of fiction. Thus, [James](https://literariness.org/2018/12/24/analysis-of-henry-jamess-novels/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)’s narrators, such as Lambert Strether in *[The Ambassadors](https://literariness.org/2018/12/24/analysis-of-henry-jamess-novels/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*(1903), anticipate the next major development in the modern novel, which occurs in the work of Marcel Proust.

Marcel Proust (1871-1922)

Like Conrad, Marcel Proust grew up in an atmosphere of societal upheaval. The Commune of Paris, a popular uprising for a more democratic government, had failed in the year of the novelist’s birth, and France had been defeated in war by Prussia. In this demoralized and uncertain environment, with a declining aristocracy and dynamic middle class, the sensitive Proust was exposed to an era of rapid change. Like Conrad, Proust relied on the supple and subtle perception of his narrator to convey a conception of society and history as a construct, an extension of the human ego filtered through the sensibility of the artist. Proust could describe a town, a group of people, a country setting in the manner of a realist, yet it was his attention to language that made the descriptions stand out. Unlike the realist, in other words, Proust was not merely imitating nature to render an accurate picture of it; rather, he heightened sense through an exquisite attention to style (diction, imagery, and the rhythm of his prose).

Proust’s masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913) is a standard modernist work, focusing on time and history as subjects in themselves. Proust’s narrator is concerned not solely with his memories but with the way he remembers and with how others formulate their sense of the past and present. In Proust, human identity itself becomes a product of language, and thus the artist becomes not merely a reporter (as in the realist tradition) but also a symbolist; that is, the writer fastens on those objects, scenes, and anecdotes that are shaped to define the way his or her characters live and think of their lives.

James Joyce (1882-1941)

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914- 1915, serial; 1916, book), [James Joyce](https://literariness.org/2018/03/02/key-theories-of-james-joyce/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)extended the Proustian effort to render reality as it appeared to human consciousness by resorting to different linguistic registers with their own vocabulary and grammar. Thus, the child Stephen Dedalus emerges with his own language in the opening passage about a “moocow.” Joyce is not merely describing a child’s world, or picturing that world from the child’s point of view—as Charles Dickens does in *Great Expectations* (1860-1861, serial; 1861, book), for example. On the contrary, Joyce inhabits a child’s world using the child’s words and phrases to create a sense of immediacy, of what critics have called a stream of consciousness. Reality is not there to be observed but rather to be created in the child’s mind. Stephen is the artist already making up stories in his unusual style. The modern novelist captures the fluid nature of perception as it is enacted in the mind.

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of Joycean stream of consciousness is Molly Bloom’s famous soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce daringly delves into Molly’s private thoughts and feelings as she lies in bed dwelling on her lover’s and her husband’s behavior as well as on her own cravings for sex. Her constant repetition of the word “yes” to convey her obsessive desire shocked many of Joyce’s contemporaries. He was breaking new ground in fiction, announcing, in effect, that what made the novel modern was the novelist’s willingness to deal explicitly with subjects that heretofore had been deemed illicit and the province of pornographers. Joyce, however, believed that the novelist should not shy away from any feeling or desire expressed by his or her characters, even if this meant—as it did—that his or her work would be censored. Ulysses could not be legally published in the United States until 1933, when a court lifted the ban on the novel.

Joyce’s modernism is defined then, not only by his method of narration but also his subject matter: women as fully active and demanding sexual creatures and who tell stories from their own point of view and with their own words. Similarly, the hero of Ulysses, Leopold Bloom, a Dublin Jew, is hardly a conventional male protagonist. He is, rather, what some critics have called an antihero because he engages in no daring actions and is not a leader of society or a military figure. He is, outwardly, unremarkable. What makes him noteworthy is the attention Joyce devotes to Bloom, including to his lively inner life, which is, in its own way, adventurous and absorbing. In other words, the modern hero or antihero acquires his or her status through the energy and imagination the novelist invests in him or her and not as the result of a record of accomplishment (namely in men) that society admires. Bloom is the common man as hero, making up the story of his own life as he lives it.

Like Proust, Joyce exercised a sort of sovereignty over his material, a superiority over the requirements of both classical literature—in the form of epics such as Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 800 b.c.e.)—and nineteenth century realism, which took society as a given, a template on which to place characters. Joyce’s characters are alluring not because of what they do but because of the way Joyce invents them, endowing them with an interior language rather than just with certain mannerisms and tics, the externals of the characters that Dickens, for instance, was so adept at creating.

Joyce focused his novels on contemporary society and, it could be argued, from a male point of view, notwithstanding his sensitive creation of characters like Molly Bloom and Gerty MacDowell in *Ulysses*. One of Joyce’s contemporaries, Virginia Woolf, wished to remake the modern novel so that it more fully reflected women’s creativity in narratives that questioned the conventional ordering of history and traditional gender relationships.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Virginia Woolf sought to bring the full weight of women’s concerns and talents to the development of the modern novel. She rejected the rigid hierarchies of a male-dominated society and sought in her own fiction to portray women as proactive, as makers of the world. She admired women writers and artists such as her contemporaries Rebecca West and Vanessa Bell (her sister) and based her eponymous heroine, Orlando, on Bell. *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is a quintessential modernist novel that violates the standards of realistic fiction even as it mimics and burlesques biography, one of the most conventional literary genres that depends on linear development and chronological storytelling. Orlando, born in the Elizabethan period and still alive at the time of the novel, exemplified the development of civilization and gender. West was especially intrigued by the passages in which Orlando undergoes gender reassignment from a man to a woman. West maintained in her 1928 essay on Woolf, “High Fountain of Genius,” that these passages made up the heart of the novel because Woolf was

debating . . . how far one’s sex is like a pair of faulty glasses on one’s nose; where one looks at the universe, how true it is that to be a woman is to have a blind spot on the North Northwest, to be a man is to see light as darkness East by South.

In other words, Woolf was incorporating in her exploration of gender a typically modern concern with perception— that is, with the vantage point from which individuals view their world. That Orlando’s gender itself transcended time was Woolf’s way of exploring human identity in a context far larger than was available in the nineteenth century novel.

Virginia Woolf

West, too, had been writing a novel—*Harriet Hume: London Fantasy* (1929)—exploring the differences between genders. She examined what would happen to a woman who could enter a man’s mind and think his thoughts. Like Woolf, West employed the radical experimentation of the modern novel to challenge the social and political conventions of a patriarchal society. Woolf, West, and others, including Djuna Barnes (in *Nightwood*, 1936), added a vital element to modern fiction, developing the Joycean notion of how human identity develops from the creation of language and the artist’s unique point of view.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

The phantasmagorical aspects of modernism take on even greater political dimensions in [Franz Kafka](https://literariness.org/2018/02/25/franz-kafka-and-postmodernity/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)’s novels, especially *The Trial* (1937). One of the most influential modernists (his fiction gave rise to the term “Kafkaesque”), Kafka explored the terror of twentieth century society, in which an individual could be accused of a nameless crime (as in *The Trial*) and succumb to the bureaucratic maze of figures and institutions that prosecute him (or her). To many critics, the arbitrary nature of the trial, the arcane procedures used to determine the victim’s guilt, and the constant pressing of a case against the individual until he begins to believe himself guilty of the charges, presaged the regime of the totalitarian state later dramatized in the novels of Arthur Koestler and George Orwell. The very idea of a rational world is under attack in *The Trial*, and society seems like a modernist hell because there can be no standard of judgment, no principle of justice, no ethical code by which everyone is measured openly and fairly. Only the interests of the state are important, and the sole criterion for the individual’s existence is whether he or she is deemed to have acted in conformity with the current line the authorities avow. In such an absurd world, the definition of reality keeps changing. Thus, Kafka elaborated the modernist attack on universal truths and obliterated the basis on which society had been organized since the Enlightenment. Kafka’s novels verge on nihilism, the conviction that there is no meaning in the universe. While he was certainly not the first writer to broach this notion of meaninglessness— after all, William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* decries a world that is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing—Kafka was an original because his work reflects this nihilistic tendency in a logical and nonlinear structures. In other words K, the protagonist of *The Trial*, lives in a world that does not make sense to him and that cannot be explained in terms of his own failings or ignorance. [William Faulkner](https://literariness.org/2018/06/02/analysis-of-william-faulkners-novels/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (1897-1962) [William Faulkner](https://literariness.org/2018/06/02/analysis-of-william-faulkners-novels/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)’s classic modernist novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) would seem to be a gloss on Kafka’s nihilism. The novel is narrated both by an idiot named Benjy and by his highly intelligent brother, Quentin, a Harvard student who commits suicide after being tormented by a world that will not conform to his heroic expectations. The third part of the novel is narrated by Jason, the crass and cynical brother who survives on sarcasm.

The language of the novel is brilliant not only because Faulkner finds such distinctive voices for his narrators but also because each narrator represents a different way of looking at the world: Benjy focuses on images and the sense experience of the moment while Quentin intellectualizes and broods on his conflicted attitudes toward his family and society. Jason, the realist, simply accepts the status quo and looks for ways to profit from the weakness of others.

Set against these three troubling witnesses to a world gone awry is Dilsey, the faithful family servant who has brought up the brothers. While the novel does not endorse her simple Christian faith, it suggests that the reserves of strength in her character are an abiding aspect of civilization, an enduring sensibility that counters— even if it does not triumph over—the anarchic forces that envelop the brothers.

In Faulkner’s novels, the search for meaning is heroic, and failure—while it is frequent—nevertheless conveys a certainly nobility in human efforts to comprehend the world. This is especially true in another of his masterpieces, *[Absalom, Absalom!](https://literariness.org/2018/06/02/analysis-of-william-faulkners-novels/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)* (1936), an intense, multilayered historical work involving several generations of one family. The narrators piece together and argue over the story of Thomas Sutpen and his sons, a story that ultimately deals with the history of the South and the efforts of the narrators to construct a coherent interpretation of a man and his progeny.

The Postmodern

After Faulkner, a new generation of writers emerging from World War II sought to define themselves in what came to be called a [postmodern](https://literariness.org/2019/03/21/postmodern-novels-and-novelists/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)world, one that would have to find new ways of dealing with the radical subjectivity, nihilism, and the search for meaning that are the hallmarks of modernism. For this new postwar generation, Gertrude Stein became an inspiration. She was an uncompromising writer and poet who crafted several untraditional narratives that refused to rely on novelistic conventions such as plot and well-developed characters.

Stein’s [self-reflexive](https://literariness.org/2019/03/19/self-reflexive-novels-and-novelists/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) language, which suggests the writer creates his or her own reality rather than mirrors the reality outside that creation, elevated the notion of the novel’s language as self-sustaining, that is, language did not have to refer to an outside world. Language itself, in other words, became the subject matter of novels. Attention to the power of words themselves, which was a key focus of Stein’s work, was a defining feature of the modern and postmodern novelist. In this sense, modernism was not rejected but took a new shape in the [postmodern novel](https://literariness.org/2019/03/21/postmodern-novels-and-novelists/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

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