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Part I  
Genres, Traditions, and Subject  
Areas

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# 1

## U.S. Modernism

*Susan Hegeman*

From the 1910s to the end of World War I, modernism in the United States was synonymous with experimentation, creative ambition, and an aggressive disregard for social, moral, political, and aesthetic conventions. For those who welcomed such innovation, such as the literary critic Alfred Kazin, the emergence of modernism in the U.S. represented a “joyous season,” an efflorescence of youthful energy and fresh ideas that seemed to renovate both aesthetic traditions and daily life (Kazin: 165). For others, modernism’s aggressive flouting of artistic forms and conventions of behavior and belief was nothing less than shocking or nothing more than trickery and pretension. Yet the great works of modernist art remain some of the most lasting and inarguable monuments of twentieth-century culture, and modernist thought still in many respects defines current debates about life and art in the twenty-first century.

### Modernism and its Contexts

Some of the most celebrated modernist fiction writers – Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos, among them – were Americans. Yet it is difficult for a number of reasons to talk about “American modernist fiction” as a discrete entity. First, the spirit of modernism was in no way confined to fiction as a medium. Modernism encompassed all genres and formats in literature, the plastic arts, painting, film, photography, music, dance, theater, and architecture, and modernist artists frequently combined media and genres in surprising ways. While Gertrude Stein, a famous art collector, wrote short prose “portraits” of friends and acquaintances, other literary modernists were interested in the visual elements of literature, including typography and illustration, or found inspiration in art forms such as jazz, photography, and the cinema. Moreover, certain radically innovative projects in the intellectual history of the early twentieth century are also often characterized as modernist, among them the uncertainty principle and the theory

of relativity in physics; Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung's psychoanalysis; the participant-observer anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas; the language philosophy of Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford's techniques of labor management; and the economics of John Maynard Keynes. All of these thinkers may be said to have imbibed some of the spirit of modernism, even while they influenced their artistic contemporaries in important ways.

If it is hard to define a discrete modernist fiction, then it is equally difficult to imagine a specifically American modernist tradition in isolation from other national contexts. Though there were important issues distinctive to modernism in the United States, which I will elaborate below, modernism was fundamentally an international movement. Modernism would not have existed in the U.S. without the influence of new ideas and events arriving from Paris, London, and other locales. Modernist writers were attracted to, and often traveled between, the various bohemian communities of Europe and the Americas. Important artists' enclaves existed not only in cosmopolitan centers like Paris, London, Berlin, and New York, but also in more regional locales including Chicago, Mexico City, Davenport, Iowa, and Taos, New Mexico. These became bohemian hot spots for a variety of reasons: the cheap cost of living, relaxed social attitudes, the stimulation of like-minded artists and intellectuals, and the excitement of picturesque surroundings and cultural diversity. As the radical journalist John Reed said of his Greenwich Village enclave in New York City, "Within a block of my house was all the adventure in the world; within a mile was every foreign country" (quoted in Kazin: 170).

The spirit of innovation that swept into the United States beginning in the 1910s must thus be understood in the context of the global movement in modernist art that began in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. What unites the diversity of modernist projects is a profound self-consciousness of the experience of modernity – of being "modern" – and a concomitant sense that the comprehension and expression of modern experience required new artistic approaches and techniques. The older conceptions of "proper" aesthetic forms, styles, and subjects were aggressively discarded in the pursuit of new topics, ideas, and expressive modes.

All this radical innovation took place in the context of a rapidly and often violently transforming world. Two unprecedentedly bloody world wars would effectively end the nineteenth-century imperial order centered in Europe, and begin the slow process of decolonization that would continue through much of the rest of the twentieth century. As Europe and North America became increasingly industrialized, workers from the rural peripheries were lured into ever more densely crowded and culturally diverse cities. Labor activism and radical political movements were common in this period, as workers sought to assert their power in industrialized societies. The 1917 Russian Revolution was but the most dramatic example of the profound importance and success of radical politics in this period, but the Great Depression of the 1930s, a global crisis in the capitalist system, also inspired the proliferation of radical political views. For many, modern life was synonymous with crisis, violence, displacement,

and destruction. But the palpable proximity to revolutionary change also brought with it a sense of radical hope for a dramatically transformed future.

For some, this hope took on explicitly political dimensions, whether in a commitment to socialist or communist party politics, or in a more romantic attachment to the working class. The I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World, a.k.a. “the Wobblies”) was particularly attractive to many American modernists, including Hutchins Hapgood, John Reed, Floyd Dell, and John Dos Passos, for its syndicalist politics and confrontational tactics, a romantic image associated with immigrants and hoboes, and its strong tradition of political art, especially poetry and folk songs. In the image of the folk-singing Wobbly vagabond, modernists could imagine a way not only to meld art and politics, but to escape what they saw as the repressive society of post-Victorian middle-class America. For indeed, another central element of the modernist spirit of revolution was a desire to renovate conventional middle-class mores and prejudices.

Thus, the modernists were often proponents of feminism and sex radicalism and a thoroughgoing critique of social convention. The horror of bourgeois marriage was a favorite theme of writers including Floyd Dell (*Moon Calf*, 1920; *Love in the Machine Age*, 1930), Sherwood Anderson (*Many Marriages*, 1923), Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*, 1936), and Ernest Hemingway (*In Our Time*, 1925). In a much more complex way, xenophobia and the rigid racism of the turn-of-the-century color line was also challenged, largely through a celebration of the folk traditions of immigrants, native peoples, and African Americans. Via an embrace of these seemingly more authentic cultures, middle-class and urban writers strove to challenge the entrenched aesthetic and cultural attitudes of the bourgeoisie. For many American modernists, both black and white, blues and jazz represented a significant site of anti-bourgeois freedom, and a connection between life and art, that other modernists found in the folk songs of the Wobblies.

In addition to political and economic upheaval, this period witnessed significant changes of other kinds. In this general moment, such quintessential modern technologies as electric lighting, the automobile, the airplane, radio, telephone, sound recording, typewriting, photography, and film all came into widespread use. These technologies, in turn, radically transformed the way in which people lived, perceived their surroundings, and created art. Electric lights alone enabled the development of new urban public entertainment centers, such as amusement parks and dance halls, while automobiles profoundly altered not only where and how people lived but suggested all kinds of new freedoms. Youth culture, with its own tastes in music and dress and its own values and styles of socializing – epitomized by the “flappers” and “flaming youth” of the 1920s – emerged in this context of new technologies and new urban spaces. Mass culture also flourished in this moment. Industrial printing and communication technologies enabled the proliferation of “dime novels” and the similarly cheap and available “pulp” magazines and novels of the 1920s and onward. Here, all the familiar conventions of genre fiction and film – detective stories, horror, Westerns, romances, and science fiction – were developed, often by stables of anonymous writers.

It has often been said that modernism – difficult, idiosyncratic, and self-consciously dedicated to art and creative genius – was antithetical to formulaic mass-market fiction, or to the middlebrow fiction of the wide-circulation magazines and the book clubs. But, in fact, the picture is more complex. The dividing line between genre and pulp fiction and “high” modernism is frequently blurred by such writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Kenneth Fearing, and Horace McCoy, on the one hand, and by Faulkner (especially his “pot-boiler,” *Sanctuary*, 1931) and Hemingway, on the other. Though modernist fiction was largely excluded from the book-of-the-month club selections, readers of publications such as *Vanity Fair* could sample the work of Stein, Anderson, and Djuna Barnes (see Leick; Rubin: 147). Moreover, even though modernist literature was often circulated by small presses and non-commercial “little magazines” for a presumably rarified audience, modernist literature and its important authors were frequently discussed in the mainstream press. While modernism, with its difficulty, was often greeted with bafflement or even derision in these mainstream contexts, and though modernist works may not have been widely read or understood, the modernists nevertheless benefited from the nascent culture of celebrity, becoming recognizable public figures.

Technology affected the practice of fiction writing in both subtle and profound ways. With the widespread use of the typewriter, even the mechanical act of writing changed. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan would later explain, the legibility of typewriting and its visual similarity to published literature gave writers the feeling of being able to simultaneously compose and publish their work: “Seated at the typewriter, the poet, much in the manner of the jazz musician, has the experience of performance as composition” (McLuhan: 283–4). Arguably, the very rhythms of written prose changed with this new technology; speed, sketchiness, and immediacy could now, for some, take precedence over polish, durability, and revision. But in a more conceptual sense, technologies such as these also had the effect of radically disorienting older ways of apprehending the world: just as perspective was dramatically altered once it was possible to see the world from the air, so everything simply looked different after it had been photographed or filmed, and sounded different once it was possible to hear a familiar voice from afar. These changes were potentially liberating to artists in a number of respects. It was not just that new perspectives and techniques were now available for use and exploration; more profoundly, the fact that “real life” could be mechanically captured on film, photo, or phonograph freed artists from the traditional obligation to mimetically represent reality. The new art for a new time was unmoored from these conventional requirements of verisimilitude.

### Modernist Forms

Modernist fiction writers shared with artists of other genres both the view that new forms were needed to express the experience of the modern world and the sense of liberation from the requirements of realistic representation. For fiction writers, this departure from verisimilitude entailed the abandonment of several conventions of

realist fiction, including an unobtrusive and omniscient narrative perspective and an emphasis on the complexities of character, social context, and ethical situations. But, in a larger sense, it broke as well from what one might see as the social premise behind literary realism: the idea that one could represent a character's social environment as a coherent and complex totality. Modernist fiction, then, would be characterized not only by experiments in narrative mode and perspective, genre, characterization, and plot, but also by a sense of the larger fragmentation of fiction's social vision: for the modernists, the complex and chaotic world of the twentieth century was no longer understood as fully representable in the confident and complete way of the nineteenth-century realists.

We see the beginnings of this transition in the later work of Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, two of the most important practitioners of literary realism. For James, signs of this transition – for example, in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) – include an increasingly subtle and complex emphasis on the interior thoughts and feelings of his characters. At the same time, his already complex prose becomes increasingly laden with deliberate ambiguities and nuance, resulting in what has come to be seen as the signature James style. The very idea of a signature authorial style is itself a modernist departure from realism's emphasis on verisimilitude: the reader's attention is now directed both to a strong authorial presence and to issues of language and narration. The idea of a signature style would be important for a number of significant American writers who may be considered modernist, including Willa Cather and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Another important transitional figure is Stephen Crane. Though Crane's first novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), is centrally a naturalist case study of a fallen woman and of the brutal effects of poverty and alcohol, it anticipates modernism in a number of ways. The narrative perspective oscillates between a number of characters, including the weak and romantic Maggie, her violent and hypocritical brother Jimmie, and her arrogant lover Pete. The use of these very different perspectives leads not to a realist or naturalist vision of their social environment, but to a fragmented and highly ironized depiction of how, from their different points of view, these characters ultimately misperceive their brutal underclass world. Crane's recognition that different individuals can apprehend the world in dramatically different ways begins to explain why his work has been likened to that of the French impressionist painters, who similarly emphasized the idiosyncrasy and evanescence of perception. But he is also a startlingly visual writer, whose signature style is associated with dramatic and even shocking color imagery ("Over on the Island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank," Crane: 7). Crane refined both this play with perspective and his highly stylized visual imagery in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), whose unflinchingly unheroic portrayal of the Civil War also anticipated the modern novels about World War I.

James Weldon Johnson, a poet and important anthologizer of African American literature, also anticipated modernism in his picaresque tour of turn-of-the-century African American life, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). This

pseudo-confessional story of a mixed-race ragtime musician's travels through black America not only demonstrated the diversity of experiences across classes and regions, but it was premised on the assertion that white America simply did not know how those on the other side of the "color line" lived. Moreover, when the anonymous narrator finally crosses over that line to live as a white man, readers are confronted with the basic instability of social categories such as race and the ultimate unknowability of others. In Johnson's work, the social stability and surety of the realist text has been demolished, to be replaced by a jazz-like improvisation on social identity.

Abraham Cahan, a Jewish immigrant and prominent socialist journalist, was another significant realist with proto-modernist tendencies. Like Crane, he was interested in rendering characters' idiosyncratic and even flawed perspectives; like Johnson, he participated in the picaresque destabilization of social coherence (especially in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 1917). In *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), his first literary work in English, Cahan upended the conventions of dialect, typical of nineteenth-century local color fiction, by representing his characters' spoken Yiddish in plain English, while their accented and broken English was laboriously rendered – with explanatory footnotes – as dialect. The English reader comprehended the "Yiddish" speech with ease, whereas the immigrant characters' English was painfully foreign. The effect not only puts the reader in the immigrant's position of linguistic outsider, but forces a very modernist self-consciousness upon the reader about the nature and use of language itself.

All of these challenges to the conventions of literary realism – the fragmentation of narrative point of view; the attempt to render unique psychologies and perspectives; the self-conscious estrangement of language and imagery – were explored and extended by the properly modernist writers. Gertrude Stein, an early modernist innovator in several respects, can be seen as offering one of the clearest early examples of such innovation. *Three Lives* (1909) is composed of three discrete sections, each portraying a socially marginal female figure, the German-American servant-class women "The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena," and, in the longest and most artistically adventurous section, "Melanctha," a young woman of mixed race. Though Stein's representation of black life in "Melanctha" is marred by her participation in racial stereotypes typical of her moment – a characteristic shared by other white modernist writers, including Sherwood Anderson (*Dark Laughter*, 1925) and Carl Van Vechten (*Nigger Heaven*, 1926) – the very attempt by white writers to grapple with African American vernacular culture represented both a departure from the rigid racial separation that defined conventional social behavior in early twentieth-century America and a desire to imagine alternatives to white bourgeois society. Indeed, critics have long noticed that the character of Melanctha served for Stein as a kind of racial mask that allowed her to address with some protective cover the personally implicating topic of lesbian desire (North: 70–6).

With "Melanctha," Stein also broke important formal and conceptual ground. Both narration and dialogue progress by a style that is at once simple and repetitious and deeply complex:

Every day now, Jeff seemed to be coming nearer, to be really loving. Every day now, Melanctha poured it all out to him, with more freedom. Every day now, they seemed to be having more and more, both together, of this strong, right feeling. More and more every day now they seemed to know more really, what it was each other one was always feeling. More and more now every day Jeff found in himself, he felt more trusting. More and more every day now, he did not think anything in words about what he was always doing. Every day now more and more Melanctha would let out to Jeff her real, strong feeling. (Stein: 109)

While this prose can be seen as an attempt to replicate the unadorned speech and thoughts of simple people, Stein's repetitions also create some complex effects. As words (for example, "feeling") subtly change meaning with each iteration, Stein demonstrates the relationship between language and time, and the way that meaning subtly shifts through context. Hence her fascination with past continuous tense ("they seemed to be having," "what he was always doing"): it both offers and then removes the idea that language refers to some constant state of being. Indeed, the technique also explores the relationship of psychology to language, showing that the feelings of the lovers are not easily rendered into either conventional prose or the expected romantic figures of speech. Stein's prose experiment, in other words, involves creating a new rhetoric with which to convey the elusiveness of how people really think and feel through the moment-to-moment passage of time.

This interest in finding new ways to express unconventional perspectives was characteristic of much modernist narrative experimentation. Important works of the period portray the perspective of a young immigrant child (Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, 1934), a baby (William Carlos Williams's *White Mule*, 1937), the insane and socially outcast (Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 1936), and historical figures like the Viking explorer, Eric the Red (Williams, *In the American Grain*, 1925). William Faulkner frequently structured his narratives as composites of the perspectives of multiple characters. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the story of the death and burial of Addie Bundren is related from the limited first-person perspective of fifteen different characters. Faulkner's difficult and temporally complex work *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is also told from multiple perspectives, including that of a mentally disabled man, Benjy Compson. In a more popular, but equally experimental vein, Ring Lardner and Anita Loos comically rendered the written language of the uneducated and semi-literate: respectively, in a bluster-filled baseball player's letters home to his buddy in *You Know Me Al* (1916), and in the diary of a gold-digging flapper in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925).

Such related experiments in perspective and style may be seen as symptomatic of the larger modernist sense of society's complexity. This recognition also influenced the length and structure of much modernist prose fiction. Experimenters with prose were often attracted to very short forms that abandoned conventional requirements of plot and closure. Here again Stein was an important innovator, with her short portraits. But we may also see this brevity and fragmentation appearing in longer works

as well. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) can be read as a collection of short stories, all of which share the common setting of a small Ohio town and a set of themes regarding the personal isolation of individuals within small-town Protestant America. But read as an arranged ensemble, the stories also comprise a fragmented bildungsroman of George Willard, a continuing character throughout many of the stories, whose sexual and emotional maturation is loosely charted throughout the work. While Anderson was himself indebted to Stein, *Winesburg, Ohio* directly influenced other important modernist works such as Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). These works are also loosely assembled collections of fragments. Though a number of the stories in *In Our Time* also seem to suggest the development of a unifying protagonist, Nick Adams, it also contains stories that seem wholly unrelated to Nick or his experiences. Moreover, the stories are separated by inter-chapters, sketches of only a few paragraphs in length. Though one of these inter-chapters is usually read as referring to Nick Adams and his experience in World War I (and, thence, to Hemingway's autobiography), the ensemble cannot be seen to cohere around a common plot, character, or setting. Instead, the unity of the work is thematic, addressing the breakdown of late-Victorian ideas of masculine honor and prerogative. In other words, the formal principle fragmentation simply mirrors the thematic issue of the fragmentation of modern life and its values.

In the case of Toomer's *Cane*, the form is even more complex. It is comprised not only of short narratives, but of lyric poetry, sketches, songs, and drama. There are no significant common characters, and no concrete shared setting. What unites the complex whole of this important work – often cited as the inaugurating masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance – is an extremely elaborate conceptual structuring. *Cane* is divided into three parts, which move geographically from the South of the rural Georgia black belt, north to the middle-class black neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., and then south again to a fictional small Georgia town. Each of the sections is associated with a season and a time of day: rural Georgia with autumn, harvest, and dusk; urban Washington with winter, sterility, and night; small town Georgia with dawn, spring, and rebirth. Indeed, as Toomer himself noted, "From three angles, CANE'S design is a circle" (Toomer: 152).

There is significant tension here between the fragmentary nature of the text and Toomer's insistence upon conceptual design and closure. For indeed, Toomer's desire here is both to try to describe African American life in its cultural entirety and to re-imagine it in such a way that closes what he sees as the gap between the tragic violence and ignorance of the authentic rural folk and the alienation and sterility of the urban black middle class. The book ends, however, on what is perhaps a necessarily inconclusive note, given the ambition and grandiosity of the project. Closure is less achieved than insisted upon through a heavy-handed use of symbolism. *Cane* closes the circle with a scene in a basement, where an old, blind ex-slave makes oracular pronouncements as the sun rises: "Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (Toomer: 117).

Thus we see that, even in the case of these fragmented narratives, there remains a strong desire for something like a totality. This helps account for the fact that, in the moment of the short, sketchy narrative, monumentally long works were also characteristic of modernist fiction. Notable examples of this are Stein's thousand-page long family epic, *The Making of Americans* (1925) and the linked autobiographical fictions of Thomas Wolfe (*Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929; *Of Time and the River*, 1935; *The Web and the Rock*, 1939; *You Can't Go Home Again*, 1940). Another important attempt at this kind of total vision is William Faulkner's invented world of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. The setting for most of Faulkner's fiction from 1929 on, Yoknapatawpha County came to define the total project of Faulkner's major work, bounding his creation both spatially and temporally, as he explored the deep history of the place and its people back to the time of contact between the Europeans and the Choctaw Indians who gave the county its name.

In some ways combining the competing impulses toward monumental totality and fragmentation was John Dos Passos' massive *U.S.A.* trilogy. Each volume of the trilogy (*The 42nd Parallel*, 1930; *Nineteen Nineteen*, 1932; *The Big Money*, 1936) is structured as a composite of four discrete kinds of text: "Camera Eye," "Newsreel," a series of biographies of historical personages, and extended fictional narratives. Each of these different strands has its own distinct style and function in the text, and yet all serve to illuminate modern American life in different ways. The long fictional sections narrate the loosely interconnected lives of a distinctly twentieth-century set of characters, including an itinerant worker, an advertising executive, a Hollywood actress, and a radical social worker. The biographies, of real people including Thomas Edison, Theodore Roosevelt, Eugene Debs, and Henry Ford, are works of popular history, often detailing the tragedies and failed promises of historical change. The "Newsreels" are collages of newspaper headlines, advertisements, popular songs, representing a kind of mass chorus of noise surrounding the passage of historical time. Finally, the "Camera Eye" sections are stream-of-consciousness recordings of events and impressions of a given moment in American life. Dos Passos himself described his epic project in *U.S.A.* as a giant "four way conveyor system" (Denning: 170). Whether or not the whole trilogy transcends Dos Passos' rigid structure to present either a coherent or comprehensive picture of the early twentieth-century United States is a topic of critical controversy. Nevertheless, we may understand the very effort to render the totality of a moment's events, senses, and characters, and the slightly precarious result, as exemplary of the modernists' desire to grapple with the impossibility of representing the ever-more complex modern world.

### Modernist Themes

Of course, modern complexity was not unique to the United States, and neither were these types of formal experiments. But it is possible to locate certain themes and concerns that were characteristic of the American modernists in particular. The first

involved Americans' desire to see themselves as having their own cultural traditions separate from those of Europe – especially England, North America's most significant colonizer. The second concerned the persistence of essentially pre-modern ways of life in the context of American hypermodernity. In some ways, these issues were related as two elements of a new cosmopolitan vision of America. For the bohemians of Greenwich Village, America was a rich amalgam of immigrant and indigenous cultures. Polemicists including Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne asserted that Americans had for too long viewed themselves as England's cultural inferiors; with the increasing financial and industrial power of the United States, it was time to assert a distinctively American cultural identity. In this vein, it is significant that Stein, writing from Paris, repeatedly addressed the topic of the American character (*The Making of Americans*; *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, 1935; *Four in America*, 1947). Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925), a fascinating mix of historical fiction and cultural commentary, resituates American history within a complex and multinational story of contact and conquest: from the early Viking explorations of the Atlantic seaboard to Spanish contact and conquest and the French missionary efforts in the Great Lakes region. In this deeply complex historical vision (which anticipates current efforts to reconceptualize American history as a story of transatlantic contact), English settlement not only figures as less central to American history, but as a culturally repressive influence that has hindered the development of a uniquely American voice.

But for others, history hardly mattered. As the Great War raged on the continent, Americans could imagine themselves (at least until 1917 when the U.S. entered the conflict) as beyond the struggles of the Old World. In the rising global capital of New York, as elsewhere around the world, it was possible to see America as nothing less than the home of the future: an amalgamation of races and nationalities living in a mechanized paradise of automobiles, airplanes, electricity, motion pictures, and stock ticker tape. And yet, even for writers who celebrated this sleek, mechanized America (for example, Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer*, 1925), there is also a strong critical awareness of the alienation of modern society and the degradation of modern mass culture. Many modernist writers worried that, as a young country, America had no deep and abiding culture capable of developing beyond what many saw as the trashy and commercial products of the emergent mass culture. Most famously, this is a central concern of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), in which a man with apparently no past – and a rather indefinite personality – very nearly succeeds in becoming a big shot through extravagant expenditure on clothes, cars, houses, and parties. Similarly, Sinclair Lewis satirized the pathetic pretensions to real culture of a typical Midwestern middle-class woman in *Main Street* (1920), while Nathanael West offered up grotesque visions of Americans both seduced, and then incited to fury, by a "surfeit of shoddy": the fake, cheap, mass-produced objects, songs, and narratives of mass culture (West: 157). In the 1930s, both West and Lewis would connect their diagnosis of a degraded culture to the threat of fascism (Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, 1935; and West in *A Cool Million*, 1934, and *The Day of the Locust*, 1939).

For others, however, the very idea of American newness seemed questionable. From the perspective of, say, a sharecropper in the Southern black belt, life was hardly different from the days of slavery. Indeed, especially before the modernization projects of the New Deal, the United States as a whole represented an interesting example of uneven development. While the U.S. stood out among nations for the number of people who owned radios or cars, this was juxtaposed to the disproportionate number whose lives were largely untouched by modern conveniences and media. This was notoriously the case in Appalachia and the rural South, but also true for the Great Plains and mountain West as well. These peripheral regions provided the raw materials devoured by the great American metropolitan and industrial centers of the Northeast and upper Midwest. But they also presented sites of stark contrast to urban industrial modernity.

Modernist writers addressed this cultural divide (and its political and economic contexts) in different ways. For some, events like the famous 1925 Scopes “Monkey” trial, in which a high-school biology teacher was prosecuted for teaching evolution in a Tennessee public high school, simply confirmed the backwardness of rural America. Such views informed a number of novelists including Lewis, whose controversial *Elmer Gantry* (1927) portrayed a hucksterish preacher and his gullible followers. But for others, the culture of the periphery could also be seen as an antidote to the excesses and horrors of modernity, or indeed as a source for locating authentic American values and traditions. For the “Twelve Southerners” (including John Crowe Ransom, Alan Tate, and Robert Penn Warren) who wrote the Southern agrarian manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), traditional Southern culture – which they understood narrowly as the inheritance of the genteel white planters – needed to be protected from the encroachment of the industrial and commercial modernity that they associated with the North.

For many modernists, what proved most interesting was the intersection of these various regions and modes of life, and the way this translated into the complexity of American modernity. Willa Cather’s work is exemplary for addressing the relationship between such peripheral areas as the Nebraska prairie or highland New Mexico and the more sophisticated and industrially developed urban centers (see, for example, *My Ántonia*, 1918; *The Professor’s House*, 1925; and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927). Faulkner also touched upon these issues of regional difference and uneven development. Indeed, regional difference is built into the very narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), where one of the central scenes in the telling of the rise and fall of the Sutpen family is in a dorm room at Harvard College. There, a Canadian interlocutor, Shreve, is, by turns, honestly engrossed and condescendingly invested in reducing events and characters of Quentin’s story into his stereotypes of a hopelessly tradition-bound American South.

For the black modernist writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the problem of uneven modernity was central for a number of reasons. The first was historical and even biographical, for many of these writers were part of the Great Migration that brought thousands of African Americans from the rural periphery to Harlem and other urban

centers in the first few decades of the twentieth century. But the issue of rural black life was also central to the problem of trying to conceptualize an African American culture that could serve as the basis for new artistic efforts. The rural South and Caribbean simultaneously represented the site of the pain and degradation of slavery and of important cultural traditions, and from thence to Africa itself. Toomer's *Cane* is again exemplary in this context for its attempt to map African American life between North and South, as is Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), which explores similar geographic terrain, with an additional side trip to Europe and its exotic fascination with African Americans. The work of Zora Neale Hurston, set largely in the South, also participates in this exchange between the rural folk and the centers of modern life. For, while Hurston is most obviously a chronicler of rural African American and Caribbean life in such novels as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), and in folklore collections including *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1937), she was also a participant in the Harlem Renaissance and an academically trained ethnographic observer, who brought with her the perspectives and interests of the metropole. For indeed, the folk – whether rural African Americans, white Appalachians and Midwesterners, or immigrants – were ultimately the creation of the urban struggle to understand how America was to become a wholly modern nation.

## Conclusion

The shared project of the American modernists was to find new ways to address the special context of modern life and art in the United States. The drive toward experimentation was intense precisely because this was a transitional period for Americans, who had yet to understand themselves either as holders of a major aesthetic tradition or as living in a fully modernized country. This self-perception would change dramatically, however, after World War II, when the U.S. became an undisputed military, political, and economic superpower. With significant consequences for our subsequent understanding of modernist literature, it was in this postwar period that the canon of modernist literature was also established, as part of the drive to assert a U.S. cultural presence on the international stage commensurate with its geopolitical might. Certain prose experiments, such as Hemingway's famously concise diction or Faulkner's fragmented and temporally discontinuous narrations, were enshrined as touchstones of a postwar literature with truly international aspirations; Faulkner would win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950, and Hemingway would win in 1954. Subsequently, postmodernist writers and polemicists would react to this canonical modernism, particularly what they saw as its off-putting difficulty, its aversion to popular culture, and its desire to represent a social totality. Meanwhile, what was often lost in this retrospective view was the sense of American modernism's "joyous season": its political and social radicality, its experimental energy and diversity, and its engagement with a modern world still in the making.

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