

Mohamed KHEIDHER University of Biskra | Faculty of Arts and Languages |
Department of Foreign Languages | English Division | Master 1 - Literature and
Civilization

Course: American Literature

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I. Introduction to Modernism

1. Three Scales of Analysis

In the following course, we approach literary works from three different perspectives in an attempt to understand as a complex and outstanding culture as the American culture. The first level, labelled as Hermeneutics –the process of reading literature looking for meaning, we focus on the meaning the author wants to convey through composing the literary text, whether fiction or poetry. The other two perspectives aim at relating the fictional discourse with the real discourse in order to fully grasp the American culture through certain episodes in its history, mainly the crucial period at the dawn of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the macro-historic level focuses on the bigger picture of events in American and world history, where we work on Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to analyze the reciprocal relation between Americans and the rest of the world. On the other hand, a more detailed level tackles the micro aspects in American society at a crucial period of its history, known as the roaring twenties, Jazz Age, Prohibition Era, along with other names. In this particular scope, we take *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as an example to scrutinize.

The works we are dealing with in this semester refer to each scale, but this does not mean each literary work is limited to this or that scale. We can find the three scales combine altogether in only one of this works, due to the wide range of topics they address and the multiplicity of both themes and style in them.

Moreover, to classify these works in order of importance and significance, one might do wrong to one or two of them, thus, the works are ordered chronologically, not according to the width of the scale. Otherwise, the order would be something like: (1) *For Whom the Bell Tolls* due to its international scene and universal themes it tackles. (2) *The Burial of the Dead*, which limits its scope of addressees to the Western Culture in particular. And finally (3) *The Great Gatsby* addressing one exceptional theme in the American culture –the American dream.

2. Experimentation

One might fully express modernism if they limit it to one specific literary and artistic term at the turn of the century –*experimentation*. The term applies to the endless endeavors by authors and artists to try innovative and novel methods and techniques on many literary elements, such as language, narration, impressions and perspectives. Some even took it a step further through experimenting on time and space scales, human experience and senses, and even cultural phenomena. Although, we have seen some examples of experimentation and novelty in Romantic fiction, (Hawthorne’s setting his novels and stories in a different time period than the reader’s) but in modernism, time setting is portrayed strangely crossing periods back and forth, neglecting the usual flow of events. In T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for instance, the author provides an astonishing but real example of a casual person who also neglects time restless flow:

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

Another example from American literary tradition, Ernest Hemingway tries experiments on space setting by taking the American reader to different

countries and continents (Spain, Italy and Cuba), at a time where American people did not really care about what's outside their continent, in what is known as Isolation politics. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a narrative of a love story set in the Spanish Civil War, where Hemingway himself volunteered there as a correspondent. The fighting parties in the war included many international powers, such as Italy, Germany, Soviet Union, France and United Kingdom. The USA did not fully nor officially participated in the war, but many of young Americans volunteered to support the legitimately elected government against the fascists. Hemingway was interested in this international scale of human relations, and therefore he kept traveling from one country to another even after the end of the war, Italy, France, Spain to lastly settling in Cuba.

The last example of experimentation would be *The Great Gatsby*, where Fitzgerald not only challenges the very definition of American dream, but also the way we usually perceive details in our everyday life. In the following passage, for instance, the narrator uses visual images to describe someone's voice/sound, conflicting of different senses.

“her voice compelled me forward breathlessly **as** I listened – then the glow faded, each light deserting her with lingering regret like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk”

In this excerpt, the author mixes the two in an attempt to question the very basis of our experience with simple details in our lives, let along our understanding of complicated notions and concepts such as the American Dream, freedom, and personhood.

3. Themes:

We have seen the overall scheme of elements in literary periods in American tradition, some of them can be summed as (1) focus on: reason, common sense, values and morality in revolutionary literature. (2) in Romantic period, we can notice exaggeration of human emotions, focus on personal experience, intuition rather than reason and so on. In (3) Gothic literature, we have discussed themes and motifs like graveyards, dark tall castles, supernatural phenomena, and the cycles of life and death over-conflicting with one another.

Concerning Modernism, the shared literary elements of the era consist of some sort of rigid, direct, bald style of retelling events without any glorification or diminishing. However, unlike Realism, reality is depicted differently; it is a result of the aftermath of the First World War, where authors, even though from the winning side, did not really feel like they won the war, they did not think there is a winner in such a war. As in the following abstract from Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."

The style is very rigid and economical; without any exaggeration, nor embellishment. It actually sums up all Hemingway's writings in a quote; and all this was sort of a reaction to the WWI. Many other modernist authors used the same language among them Fitzgerald who followed the same style in the *Great Gatsby*. Moreover, Realism used a linear narration of events, while modernist, after the great war, did not see that as possible. They followed strange and peculiar manners of narration; they chose to tell the story backward, jumping between time periods (past, present and future), juxtaposing different perspectives and confusing different senses and impressions.

4. The War Impact:

Many of modernists author had a direct experience with the atrocities of the First World War. Hemingway, for instance, was a correspondent in WWI and the Greco-Turkish war right after that. He had a personal experience with the War. In his writings, we can feel a deep and grave loss of hope experienced by both, the victors and the victims. It was a “dirty” war that ended with no victors, because there was no place for hope during or after it. Fitzgerald and T.S. Eliot shared the same loss of hope because of the First World War. The war is at the center of their writings. They depict the war as an ugly reality that has no morals in it nor righteous side. Ironically, only Faulkner, who did not come to direct contact with the First World War, writes about wars in a heroic and often utopian manner; but all the other modernist authors, whether participated or not in the war, did not dare to describe the war heroically.