

Challenging Convention:  
James Joyce, *Ulysses*, and Literary Modernism in Western Fiction

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There have always been rules, spoken and unspoken, that guided “proper writing” and advised authors aspiring to create works of literature. Writing that failed to follow the rules of their time and genre was commonly ignored. But then came the modernists. They consciously broke all the rules, declared the rules unnecessary, antiquated, even poppycock. In many ways, modernists modeled their writing after the classic work of Greek literature, Dante, the troubadours, and other storytellers of the past, preferring storytelling in its most elemental form and eschewing the cultivated, pompous school of Victorian writing with its formalism and ornate diction. The modernists were gifted writers whose work was imaginative and compelling, yet seemed to follow no rules at all. Riding the first wave of literary modernists was the Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941), who not only broke stylistic convention but also wrote on topics deemed simply inappropriate in proper literature. Topics such as sexuality.

James Joyce is regarded as one of the most influential and important authors of the 20th century. His epic novel *Ulysses* (1922) was a foundational work in the modernist writer’s movement, and it is widely regarded as one of the greatest literary works in history. *Ulysses* was preceded by *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners*, and followed by *Finnegans Wake*—three other widely acclaimed works of Joyce. *Ulysses*, of course, is the Roman/Latinized name for Odysseus, and the episodes in Joyce’s novel loosely follow those in Homer’s epic *Odyssey*. Among the parallel characters are Leopold Bloom (=Odysseus/Ulysses), Molly Bloom (=Penelope), and Stephen Dedalus (=Telemachus). Joyce fans worldwide celebrate June 16th as “Bloomsday” as Joyce’s *Ulysses* takes place on a single day, 16 June 1904.

A strong message in *Ulysses* is that sex is something entirely natural and worthy of celebration. Sex is not a negative or evil thing, and it should not be hidden. In fact, of the hundreds of millions of animal species on Earth, humans are unique in their drive to utilize sex for more than simple procreation, most commonly as a celebration of love or friendship between two people. Evolution has blessed *Homo sapiens* with the ability to also employ sex for sheer enjoyment, for communication, as expressions of desire, and to better understand themselves and others for better or worse. Humans have even made sex an art, with endless variations and ways to express their shared spirit and passion. Indeed, it is one of the most creative aspects of our species’ behavioral and imaginative repertoire. And yet, at the same time it is also something that easily complicates our lives and can be used to manipulate. Over the course of Joyce’s *Ulysses* we learn a great deal about Leopold and Molly Bloom’s sexual desires, hang-ups, and neuroses. For readers who might struggle with sexual repression, or simple modesty or prudishness, such passages can be uncomfortable; but they can also lead to useful self-reflection. It is a curious thing that graphic scenes of torture and murder in some fiction are enthusiastically read by the

same readers who might wince at sex scenes between lovers. But American culture is rooted in a puritanical tradition.

Despite a recommendation from the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board to give Ernest Hemingway a Pulitzer for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the president of Columbia University (which administers the prize) nixed the award because of the novel's "frank sexual content." In this case, one man's prudishness kept Hemingway from a Pulitzer Prize. Based on his own sexual escapades, novelist Henry Miller wrote about sex as transcendence. His writings had explicit and detailed accounts of sexual experiences, unpublishable in the U.S. until the Supreme Court ruled *Tropic of Cancer* (1934, 1961 in the U.S.) to be literature and not pornography.

The same year *Ulysses* was released (1922), T. S. Eliot's 434-line epic poem *The Waste Land* was published. With its fragmented snapshots of disillusionment, sad decadent lifestyles, and death, it epitomized early modernism and set a bar for poetic prose that has rarely since been achieved.

Years before Joyce, Hemingway, Eliot, and Henry Miller became well known, the unflappable avant-garde writer Gertrude Stein, who had long promoted modernism in literature and art from her Paris "salon," completed her now famous autobiographical short story of lesbian love affairs, *Q.E.D.* (completed in 1903, but not published until 1950), followed by many other books and poems about lesbian love that culminated in her celebrated, quasi-memoir *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Her experiments (and those of Virginia Woolf) with stream-of-consciousness writing were forebears to the likes of James Joyce, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg. In fact, Gertrude Stein compared her book *The Making of Americans* to the work of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

In the best of all worlds—if a writer has her/his own style and voice, and a good imagination—a novel can accomplish three things: (1) it spins a good yarn and entertains the reader, (2) it educates or teaches the reader something new, and (3) it challenges the reader—by pushing him/her outside their comfort zone, outside their normal day-to-day world and conversations. The very best literature, literary fiction, is often meant to be provocative. It reveals other ways of living or thinking about things that may be new to the reader. The latter is often portrayed through strong central characters, and it is frequently achieved by depicting an aspect of human nature that is well known, yet rarely talked about. Literary fiction is narrative about the human experience, what can be learned from it of the nature of life and humanity's condition. It thus comprises stories of people—how they think and view the world, their hardships and their triumphs, their battles between good and evil, between sickness and health. Such stories are character driven, as opposed to the commercial genres of mystery and romance novels, which are plot driven (and the characters of secondary importance). Literary fiction can have a plot, or not. Some of the greatest writing is utterly plotless—think of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Cormac McCarthy's last two novels, the stylistically complex *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. Both were plotless stories describing the thin line between sanity and insanity walked by two brilliant siblings whose father helped develop the atomic bomb. Literary fiction often has two (or even three) layers; one is the apparent subject while the others are deeper subjects (text and subtexts).

As with listening to great music, reading good fiction allows one to "unself"—to step outside one's personal identity, and into the world of others in an intimate way. If a poem or novel is

well written, it allows the reader to temporarily become “another,” to be in the heart and mind a narrator or the characters in a story. These are some of the few ways, short of taking psychedelic drugs, that a person can escape the confines of self and see the world through truly different eyes. Indeed, great art, music, and literature speak directly to the human spirit.

The first, unauthorized, U.S. edition of *Ulysses* was seized and destroyed by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. A 1920 prosecution in the U.S. was brought after *The Little Review* serialized a passage of the book dealing with characters masturbating, and in 1921 the magazine was declared obscene and *Ulysses* was effectively banned in the United States. The U.S. Post Office burned any copies they encountered. The first authorized U.S. edition was in 1934 by Random House, published after the decision in *United States Vs One Book Called Ulysses*, finding that the book was not obscene. The book entered public domain under U.S. copyright law on 1 January 2012.

Perhaps the most controversial scenes in *Ulysses* are Episodes 13, 15 and 18. In Episode 13 (“Nausicaa”), Leopold Bloom secretly watches young women at a shoreline southeast of Dublin. One of the ladies (Gerty) notices Bloom and teases him by exposing her legs and underwear, and Bloom, overwhelmed by sexual arousal, must masturbate. In Episode 15 (“Circe”), Bloom experiences various hallucinations of passion and fear. Bloom visits a brothel in Dublin’s red-light district where, observing the activities taking place, he has a series of further hallucinations regarding his sexual fetishes, fantasies, and transgressions. He finds himself on trial to answer charges by a variety of sadistic, accusing women. In Episode 18 (“Penelope”), Molly Bloom lies in bed next to her husband thinking about her childhood, extramarital affairs, extreme sexual appetite, and past suitors (including hints at a lesbian relationship). This episode famously uses stream-of-consciousness in eight extraordinarily long sentences that lack punctuation and flow through many pages. The song “Flower of the Mountain” by Kate Bush, originally the title track on *The Sensual World*, sets to music the end of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy; it took Bush nearly 30 years to get permission to use Joyce’s words from the James Joyce Estate. Bush’s music itself leans into modernism.

It wasn’t until 1959 that Grove Press began selling the American edition of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, first published in 1928 in Europe. The New York City postmaster ordered mailed copies confiscated and Grove sued, winning its case on appeal. Grove Press’s early 1960s victory was a major benchmark and turning point for serious American writers to feel free to write their descriptions of human love in all its physical and emotional dimensions.

Modernist writers have strived to break with traditional writing styles and create a new writing art form, not unlike music’s jazz movement. Literary modernism has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it has since experimented with a variety of styles in form and expression, including stream of consciousness writing. The Beat Generation literature (e.g., Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Huncke) of the 1950s is clearly an offshoot of Modernism.

Although not commonly categorized as a modernist writer, James Salter certainly inclines toward it, especially with *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967), which Webster Schott, in the New York Times, called “a tour de force in erotic realism.” The great American writer Reynolds Price said *A Sport and a Pastime* “. . . is as nearly perfect a narrative as I’ve encountered in English-

language letters, a more brilliant and heartbreaking portrayal of young sexual intoxication than I've found elsewhere" and [it is] "a moving service to love itself." Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Ford claimed Salter, "writes American sentences better than anybody writing today."

Nicholson Baker's books are widely praised for their originality and linguistic virtuosity, and many bend into the modernist style. Baker is the author of a dozen fiction and nonfiction books, three of which he refers to as his "dirty novels" (*Vox*, *The Fermata*, *House of Holes*). All three were met with critical praise for the inventiveness of their concepts and language. The *Paris Review* said of *House of Holes*, "it legitimizes and exalts our most personal and private sources of delight." The *New Yorker* said, "it's packed with dirty words, some familiar, others wonderfully original." Writing in *The New Yorker*, Laura Miller praised Baker's "dazzling descriptive powers married to a passionate enthusiasm for the neglected flotsam and jetsam of everyday life." The *New York Times* describes *House of Holes* as an "extremely dirty book of raunch" (that became a New York Times bestseller). The book's title is explicit. Perhaps as a nod to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in Baker's *Room Temperature* the entire story takes place in the span of a few minutes. His novel, *The Mezzanine*, is a plotless stream of consciousness story of a man's lunchtime thoughts.

The "founding fathers" of modernism also include Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*, 1902), Franz Kafka (*The Metamorphosis*, 1915), T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*, 1922), and Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925). Woolf, in particular, pioneered the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative device. But it was James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) that came to epitomize modernism's approach to fiction in the early twentieth century. The movement was continued with work by William Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying*, 1930), Samuel Beckett (*Murphy*, 1938), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957), and even contemporary writers such as Richard Ford (*Independence Day*, 1995) and Patti Smith (*Year of the Monkey*, 2020), as well the poets Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, and others.

Some scholars and critics claim Literary Modernism petered in the 1940s, while others place its demise in the 1960s. However, many modernist writers and poets (e.g., Samuel Beckett, Charles Olson, J. H. Prynne) continued into the 1970s or 1980s. Literary critics like to bracket things with dates, even if it's unrealistic. Others have come up with interpretations of the changes in the Modernist movement. Some have called work written since the 1940s or so "Postmodernism," or after the end of the Second World War "Late Modernism."

Today, we can look back at the emergence of Literary Modernism and appreciate its prolific arc and be grateful for how it enriched literary fiction in general and moved so many writers and thinkers and artists to nurture their wellspring of creativity beyond customary and quotidian conventions.