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Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature

(24 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)
Course No. 2539

Taught by **David Thorburn**
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Ph.D., Stanford University

JOSEPH CONRAD

Perhaps this has happened to you: You've picked up a great novel—James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, or William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* You launch in, ready to discover treasures in this great work of 20th-century fiction.

But the novel is not what you expected. The style is unfamiliar, the narrative is fragmented, and there isn't a clear plot. It's like nothing you've ever read before. If you finish it, you find yourself unsatisfied. What did it all mean? Or perhaps you don't finish at all, and find yourself putting it off until "someday."

Maybe you've yet to attempt one of these great novels. You've always wondered what you're missing, but you know these works are famously difficult, and you've hesitated to start without a guide to help you find your way through this rich but complex tradition.

You needn't wait any longer. Now you can explore this remarkable literary movement and gain insights into the secrets behind Modernism with **Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature**. With Professor David Thorburn as your guide, you'll see how Modernist authors created new techniques to reflect an increasingly complex post-Victorian world. This tradition includes some of the greatest authors world has known—Joyce, Faulkner, Conrad, Woolf, Kafka. Their works are some of the most challenging—yet rewarding—you'll ever encounter.

Each lecture is accessible and engaging—even if you're new to these authors. And if you've studied Modernism before, Professor Thorburn's perspectives will make you eager to return. Filled with fascinating facts and insightful readings, **Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature** is more than just an introduction to the great writers of the period. With Professor Thorburn's expert guidance, you'll understand why these authors were great.

Modernism Made Accessible—and Compelling

Choosing short but representative novels and stories, Professor Thorburn offers a compelling overview of Modernism you'll find intriguing—whether or not you have time to read the works along with him. Each work is introduced with a full plot summary to ensure that readers from all backgrounds will easily understand the lectures.

Guided by the tenet "trust ourselves and trust the texts," Professor Thorburn demystifies the world of literary criticism and demonstrates how a thoughtful, careful reader can find exciting and enriching insights in these works. You'll examine these great novels and stories from all angles, through close readings of selected passages and illuminating discussions of structure, form, symbolism, and character.

You'll also get to know the authors as people in fascinating biographical facts and anecdotes.

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This course is well-suited to any format. The professor paces himself so that both audio and DVD audiences will benefit.

Course Lecture Titles

1. Road Map—Modernism and Moral Ambiguity
2. How to Read Fiction—Joyce's "An Encounter"
3. Defining Modernism—Monet's Cathedral
4. Defining Modernism—Beyond Impressionism
5. *The Man Who Would Be King*—Imperial Fools
6. *Heart of Darkness*—Europe's Kurtz
7. *Heart of Darkness*—The Drama of the Telling
8. *The Shadow-Line*—Unheroic Heroes
9. *The Good Soldier*—The Limits of Irony
10. *The Good Soldier*—Killed by

Kindness

11. Lawrence (and Joyce)—Sex in Modern Fiction
12. "Horse Dealer's Daughter"—A Shimmer Within
13. *The Metamorphosis*—Uneasy Dreams
14. *Dubliners*—The Music of the Ordinary
15. *Ulysses*—Joyce's Homer
16. *Ulysses*—The Incongruity Principle
17. *To the Lighthouse*—Life Stand Still Here
18. *To the Lighthouse*—That Horrid Skull Again
19. Isaac Babel—Jew and Cossack
20. Isaac Babel—Odessa's Homer
21. Faulkner's World—Our Frantic Steeplechase
22. *Absalom, Absalom!*—The Fragile Thread
23. *Pale Fire*—Modern or Postmodern?
24. The Moral Vision of Modern Fiction

Here's a sample of what you'll learn:

- Although his writing is often held up as a model of English prose, Joseph Conrad was not a native speaker. English was his third language, after French and his native language, Polish.
- One of Soviet Russia's most revered authors, Isaac Babel briefly worked for the Soviet secret police as a translator. Later he fell out of favor, and in 1940 he was arrested, tortured, and secretly executed by the Stalinists.
- Vladimir Nabokov was a trained lepidopterist—an expert on butterflies and moths—and discovered several new species during his academic career.
- At the time of his death at age 41, Franz Kafka had just finished correcting the proofs of one of his final stories, "A Hunger Artist." The story, which recounts the death by starvation of a performance artist, eerily predicted Kafka's own demise: Sickened by tuberculosis, he was incapable of eating and died of starvation.

A skilled storyteller, Professor Thorburn weaves these and more fascinating details from the authors' lives to show how their personal experiences shaped their literary visions.

Finally, you'll view the works of these great authors through the lens of what went before. Using classic texts from previous centuries—the works of Jane Austen, William Thackeray, and George Eliot—Professor Thorburn provides a striking contrast that underscores the boundaries in thought and expression that were crossed as the 19th century gave way to the modern era.

"On or About December, 1910, Human Nature Changed."

No picture of Modernism is complete without an understanding of the forces that helped bring it about. As Virginia Woolf so famously noted, the modern era represented a new way of thinking about humankind and its place in the world. The Modernists lived during a time of innovative breakthroughs and awareness that affected all realms of life.

It was the world of Einstein and Marx, Freud and Wittgenstein. From the theory of relativity to perceptions on the depths of the human psyche, new discoveries overturned time-honored assumptions about humankind.

You'll see how innovative scientific pronouncements called into question old notions about the nature of existence, and how Freudian psychology focused attention on ordinary people and the mysterious psychological forces that compelled them. Stunning ideas about the world works—such as Darwin's theory of evolution and Marx's ideas about economics—created a new image of a hostile world order.

How did these forces affect the great artists of the day? What kind of art could capture the newly fragmented, alienated sense of self of the Modern era?

To begin to answer these questions, Professor Thorburn explores the world of visual arts. Examining contemporary works in Impressionism, Postimpressionism, and German Expressionism, he shows how these striking paintings provide an illuminating visual counterpoint to the literary works you'll be studying.

Seeing the World through Modern Eyes

In this context the great literature of the Modernist era will come alive. You'll explore the techniques these great artists employed—stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmented plots, unreliable narrators—that helped capture their sense of uncertainty in a world unmoored from traditional beliefs. And you'll explore the dominant themes of the age—the sense of alienation and nostalgia for an irretrievable past, and the commitment to capturing the experience of ordinary people.

Each author brings unique insights and innovative techniques to bear on this new understanding of the human condition. You'll encounter experimental forms of narrative and you'll see how these authors contend with the fallen idols of an earlier age. From the echoes of Greek mythology in James Joyce's wandering hero of *Ulysses* to Joseph Conrad's indictment of the European mission to "civilize" the peoples of developing nations in *Heart of Darkness*, these authors remade tradition to reflect a new, fragmented world order.

You'll also sample the rich variety the tradition holds. For some authors, Modernism represents a bleak vision of human existence, as in "The Metamorphosis," Kafka's dark story of a man transformed into a repulsive insect. But other authors find hope—or at least consolation—within the new order, as in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

You'll meet indelible characters—Conrad's megalomaniac explorer Kurtz and Vladimir Nabokov's mad academic, Kinbote, among others—and you'll travel around the world, from James Joyce's Dublin to Rudyard Kipling's Afghanistan to the crumbling aristocratic estates of the American South.

But the real journey is into the modern sensibility as it was transformed and expressed by some of the world's greatest literary artists. With **Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature**, you'll discover a new appreciation for this rich literary tradition and witness the birth of ideas about life and art that still resonate today.

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