

Modernist Literature and the Black Atlantic

In this talk, we'll explore modernist literature through the lens of Paul Gilroy's influential theory of "The Black Atlantic," which Gilroy published in 1993. Throughout the talk, we'll learn about the meaning of Gilroy's "Black Atlantic", and its literary significance within British and American literature, using specific novels and poems as examples.

First, let's establish some key terms. The term "Modernism" refers to a literary and artistic movement that emerged in the early 20th century. Modernist literature resulted from a period of immense transformation in all areas of life, and it challenged the established norms of society by pushing the boundaries of traditional art forms. Modernism arose during an important historical moment for both the United States and Britain, so let's go over some of its historical contexts too.

In the early 20th century, World War One changed society's understanding of violence and global politics, and rapid urbanisation and industrialisation changed the landscape of family life and employment opportunity. In the United States, the Great Northward Migration began in the late nineteenth century and continued into the early twentieth. This involved the movement of millions of African Americans from the agricultural South to the industrial North, as they sought escape from segregation. Then, in 1920's America, the "Jazz Age" boom included the musical and literary innovations of African Americans within the Harlem Renaissance.

On the other side of the Atlantic, British modernist writers including T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf also responded to social and cultural disruption. In essence, the early twentieth century was characterized by cultural, social, and political shifts. And often, such periods of intense change produce literary, intellectual, and artistic responses that attempt to represent or understand these changes. That is where we get the term "modernism" - it is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of innovations in the novel, poetry, and fine arts that responded to a moment of immense change.

It might seem unexpected to think about early twentieth century modernism in terms of a theory written by Paul Gilroy in 1993. First, let's more clearly define Gilroy's theory, which was published in a text titled "The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness." In the theory, Gilroy argued that the Black Atlantic is a space in which people of African, African American, Afro-European, and Afro-Caribbean heritage intersect and influence one another, forming a complex web of connections that spans the Atlantic Ocean. At the time, the theory was groundbreaking because it rejected ideas of history and literature that excluded Black people, Caribbean people, and other descendants of the African diaspora. *Diaspora* is an important term to Gilroy's theory: it is used to describe the displacement or spread of people from their original homelands. Prior to "The Black Atlantic", scholarship neglected the experiences and contributions of Black people and their diasporic cultures, and Gilroy's work challenged these Eurocentric perspectives. Gilroy also thought a lot about the modern world (which is related to

the term *modernism*). He argued, ultimately, that the history and culture of Africa and the Caribbean, and their diasporas, are very important to the development of modernity itself.

So, let's think about how to examine modernist literature – which stems from the changes of the early twentieth century – from the perspective of Gilroy's Black Atlantic. When we apply Gilroy's theory to modernist literature, we encounter an array of texts that engage with the Black Atlantic. We can even apply Gilroy's theory to texts which were written before he actually published his work, because his ideas were all about the formation of modern life, which he looked at in retrospect.

Let's consider the Harlem Renaissance, which, as I mentioned briefly in the context, was a key period in 1920's America that produced a lot of significant modernist writing. During this decade, many important African American novels came out of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City. And, critically, many of these novels represented Gilroy's theory of The Black Atlantic.

Nella Larsen is an example of a Harlem Renaissance modernist writer. She was a modernist writer because she addressed early twentieth century changes in society through her work. In her novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen tells the stories of Helga Crane, Clare Kendry, and Irene Redfield. These three characters are all African American women who deal with issues that are specific to post-Reconstruction America. But while they deal with issues that are specific to African American womanhood, Larsen's characters also embody the interconnectedness of African diasporas that are articulated in Gilroy's theory of The Black Atlantic. For example, these three young characters continually envision what their mothers or grandmothers might have experienced in their journeys from Africa or the Caribbean. Through thinking about their heritages and generational migrations, Nella Larsen's characters think about their own identities not just as Africans, Americans, or African Americans, but as figures who embody broad, geographic exchanges. If we recall that an important element of Paul Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic involves interconnectedness between figures within diaspora, whether their roots are African, Caribbean, or European, then we can see how Nella Larsen's characters might embody some of Gilroy's thinking.

It's important to remember that Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic considers diasporic experiences that resulted from systems and movements across the Atlantic Ocean. One of these critical systems is the Triangle Trade. This was a trading system between Britain, Africa, and America that began in the 16th Century. It was responsible for the violent movement of enslaved people who were captured from their homelands and traded to America and Europe. Gilroy's Black Atlantic is concerned with diasporas that resulted from this system, and systems like it – which means he considers all of the places that were connected, in some way, by the Atlantic Ocean. This results in characters like those written by Nella Larsen, who are African American, but who feel connected to their enslaved ancestors and ancestors in Africa. But it also means that, besides American and African American literature, British literature can be considered in the context of Gilroy's theory – because Britain was also a key figure in Atlantic trade. We might consider another modernist writer, who lived in Britain, named T.S. Eliot. Eliot's 1922 poem "The Waste Land," is an important piece of modernist literature. Throughout it, Eliot engages with his contemporary moment post World War I, but also with the much longer history of the British

Empire. One instance of this is in Eliot's focus on the Thames River throughout "The Waste Land." Eliot writes: "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song." On the one hand, Eliot's attention to the Thames River could be seen as a reflection of British nationalist pride and prosperity. But we could also consider the role that the Thames played in Britain's violent colonial past. The Thames was vital to Britain's rise as an imperial power, as it played a significant role in Britain's stake in the Triangle Trade. In Eliot's work, mention of the Thames could also be a reference to Britain's dark and violent history. Eliot's work, like Nella Larsen's on the other side of the Atlantic, again reflects the interconnectedness of diaspora and the lingering effects of the Triangle Trade that formed Gilroy's theory of the "Black Atlantic."

To conclude, let's look back at what we discussed during this lecture. We first looked at the term *modernism*, and discussed how modernist writing responded to major changes in society during the early twentieth century. Then, we defined Paul Gilroy's seminal theory of The Black Atlantic. To recap, Gilroy's theory argues that there is an interconnectedness between African, Caribbean, American, and European diasporic communities and people. This interconnectedness results from the long history of the Atlantic Ocean, which actualized violent systems like the Slave Trade. The voices and experiences of those descended from African and Caribbean heritages, Gilroy argues, are key to understanding human history and modern culture. Elements of this theory can be seen in much modernist literature from both sides of the Atlantic, including through the works of T.S. Eliot and Nella Larsen.

One way to think about applying this theory to literature is to think about a novel or poem that you have a strong understanding of, or one that you have enjoyed reading.

Works Cited

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