Reading the
American Novel
1920-2010

James Phelan
Reading the American Novel 1920–2010
READING THE NOVEL

General Editor: Daniel R. Schwarz

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In the beginning, there was Dan Schwarz who, as editor of the Reading the Novel Series, believed I could do this book. Along the way were many people at Wiley-Blackwell who provided advice and support. I am especially grateful to Ben Thatcher who was consistently encouraging, patient, and helpful. I am indebted to Brian McHale and Paul McCormick for incisive readings of the Introduction and Chapter 8, respectively. I am grateful to Brian McAllister for substantial help with citations and to Matthew Poland for valuable help with proof-reading. I also owe a debt to my colleague in the History Department at Ohio State, Stephen Kern, for organizing the modernist reading group. Although this book pursues what I call rhetorical reading rather than historicist reading (of one kind or another), the meetings of the group and Steve's own work have been very beneficial to my thinking about the relations between history and literature. Peter J. Rabinowitz offered valuable comments on the Introduction and on Chapter 6. More than that, I have learned a great deal about rhetorical reading from our many conversations over the years and from his own work. Portions of Chapter 1 are based on the collaboration we did for our contribution to Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).

As always, my deepest gratitude goes to my wife, Betty Menaghan, who every day gives me a rhetorician's most prized gifts, understanding and love.

Some previously published material has made its way into this book though no chapter is a straightforward reprint of a previously published piece. I am grateful for permission to reprint.

Chapter 3 draws on material from “Reexamining Reliability: The Multiple Functions of Nick Carraway.” Narrative as Rhetoric. Columbus: Ohio State University Press; 1996: 105–118; and “Rhetoric and Ethics in The Great Gatsby; or, Fabula, Progression, and the Functions of Nick Carraway.” In Approaches

Chapter 4 draws on material from “Voice, Distance, Temporal Perspective, and the Dynamics of A Farewell to Arms.” In Narrative as Rhetoric; and from “Evaluation and Resistance: The Case of Catherine Barkley.” In Reading People, Reading Plots. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1989.


Whenever I tell someone the title of this book, I feel as if I am revealing my hubris. “Reading the American Novel, 1920–2010” sounds like a boast about all the difficult things its author is promising to do. At least the following are implied. (1) Relate the complex history of the United States to its literary history over this 90-year period. (2) Draw on a vast database of primary works—and of relevant scholarship about them—in order to zero in on the story of the novel across the periods of modernism and postmodernism, a story that will track: the genre’s changing subject matters; its dominant thematic, political, and ethical concerns; its evolving conventions, forms, structures, and techniques; its diverse cultural effects; and its shifting status within American culture. (3) Explain and apply a trenchant approach to reading the novel. (4) Offer substantial analyses of a range of individual novels published across those 90 years.

Let me be frank: my hubris is not so great that I will try to fulfill all those promises in the 110,000 words or so I have at my disposal. Besides, as the bibliography indicates, other scholars have collectively done numerous book-length studies on each of these separate tasks—and, indeed, on subsets of them. I do, however, possess the necessary ambition and sufficient confidence to want to fulfill the third and fourth promises, and I believe that I can use this chapter (in conjunction with those readings) to take a few steps toward a more adequate fulfillment of the first two implicit promises. I have, therefore, come to think that a more accurate, albeit far more cumbersome, title for this book would be
Introduction

What a Broad Overview of Twentieth-Century American History, Especially Its Literary History, Some Principles of Rhetorical Reading, and the Detailed Analyses of Ten Diverse and Impressive Works Suggest about the American Novel, 1920–2010. But even this more modest project presents a significant challenge: to provide a solid foundation for studies whose ambitions are to fulfill the first two promises.

Broad Overview, Part One: History ↔ Literary Period ↔ Literary Work

In the most general terms, we can think of the history of the American novel in our 90-year period as part of the larger history of American literature. And American literature is itself a complex body of cultural expression that includes the oral and written literature of American Indians, writings by Europeans who explored the New World, by the English colonists and their imported African slaves, and then by the various inhabitants of the new nation, the United States of America, and their descendants. Since the early days of that nation, writers have been drawn to explore—and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries critics have been drawn to highlight—the issue of American identity: what does it mean to be an American, how do Americans relate to the Old World of Europe, how do non-European Americans (the slaves and their descendants, the American Indians, the Chinese who came to work on the transcontinental railroad and then stayed, and other people of color) figure into the national narrative? As I discuss the ten novels I have chosen to analyze in some detail, I will be stressing their collective diversity and their individual distinctiveness, but I want to start by acknowledging that this group, too, contributes to this now centuries-long exploration of Americanness.

Wisely, however, no single novelist in our period tries to capture the quintessential American experience. Instead each is content to use the genre’s characteristic strategy of exploring concrete particulars as a way to uncover larger truths about some components of American identity or culture. Furthermore, these novelists typically ground their explorations in the genre’s concern with change over time, thereby resisting the idea that Americanness is something stable and fixed and promoting the idea that it is dynamic and subject to change. Thus, in the group of novels I discuss here, the issues addressed include the following: American naïveté and European sophistication; the idea of the self-made man; masculine maturation through the trials of war; the peculiar subculture of the American South; various aspects of African American experience in different parts of the country; the construction of both masculinity and femininity in American culture and in some of its subcultures; the immigrant’s
relation to the broad expanse of this country; California as both golden land
and site of corruption and mystery; the American family, its discontents, and
occasional glories.

These descriptions are at once inadequate (because they are too schematic)
and indicative of issues treated in many novels not analyzed here (which is why
I refrain from linking the descriptions to individual novels). At the same time,
this set of descriptions does not exhaust the issues taken up in the novels of
these 90 years. One can add to the list by thinking about the experiences of other
racial and ethnic groups and about the major cultural and historical events of
the period: technological changes, growth of the suburbs, prosperity, American
political power on the world stage, and more. I invite you to add to the list,
even as I switch to the more general issues of the relation between history and
the novel.

What does it mean to write a twentieth-century American novel as opposed
to, say, a nineteenth-century British one? A novel is a novel, right? Sure, different
novels may have different subject matters and even employ different techniques,
but knowing how to tell a story about changes experienced by fictional characters
in a given setting should be a skill that applies across time and place, should it
not? Well, yes and no. Yes, because some aspects of novelistic construction such
as the invention of characters and the linking of events remain constant across
time. No, because what I will call, with a nod to Hans Robert Jauss, the horizon
of resources for novelistic construction (the conventions, genres, structures, and
techniques, including the handling of the central novelistic elements of plot,
character, narration, time, and space) changes over time.

Consider the following thought experiments. If Ernest Hemingway had been
born, as Jane Austen was, in Steventon, England in 1775 instead of in Oak Park,
Illinois in 1899, and if he wrote a novel called *A Farewell to Arms* and set it in
the Napoleonic Wars, how much would that novel be like the one the historical
Hemingway published in 1929? If Thomas Pynchon had been born, as Charles
Dickens was, in Portsmouth, England in 1812 instead of in Glen Cove, New
York in 1937, and wrote a novel called *The Crying of Lot 49* and set it in London
of the 1840s rather than California of the 1960s, how much would that novel be
like the one the historical Pynchon published in 1966? Finally, if Pynchon were
born in Oak Park in 1899 and wrote a novel called *The Crying of Lot 49* and set
it in California in the 1920s, how much would it be like the one he published
in 1966? Surely the answers to all three questions are “not very much”—and
surely one significant reason would be the very different life experiences that our
transplanted authors would have. But that is not the only reason, and adding
the sensible point that changing the setting would have ripple effects on the
novel also does not adequately explain that answer. We get closer to adequacy
when we add that our transplanted authors would not have been able to choose
from among the same set of resources that they relied on in constructing the novels they actually wrote.

So far, so good. But now we come to the central questions of literary history. (1) What precisely constitutes the horizon of resources at any one time? For example, does a resource, once established as clearly visible on the horizon, remain forever available, does it eventually disappear, or does it perhaps flicker between high and low visibility over time? (2) Even more importantly, how and why does the horizon change over time? The short answer to the first question is that a resource rarely disappears completely, but its visibility will vary over time. The short answer to the second question is that multiple causes, both literary and extra-literary, interact in complex ways. The longer answers to the second question, which will also shed further light on our short answer to the first, seek to identify the various causes behind changes in the horizon and to explain the interactions among those causes. These longer answers, in other words, become complex historical narratives about the emergence of multiple causes, their relations to each other, including each one’s relative force in bringing about change, and each one’s staying power. Given their complexity, these longer answers often generate debates (e.g., are the Marxists right when they identify the economic structures of a culture as a powerful cause of developments in the realm of literature?). The diversity and the persistence of such debates indicate how difficult it is to reach consensus on, say, the best account of how Austen’s horizon of resources gradually morphed into Hemingway’s—and yet we know that the horizon has been radically altered. Thus, although some literary historians have seriously questioned the possibility of success in their enterprise (see Perkins, 1992), those of us who want to know why keep pursuing plausible explanations.

Here is one viable model for developing longer answers to the how and why questions. It starts by identifying four recurring major causes of artistic change, and then describes some features of their interaction.

1. Changes in the extra-artistic realm. Extra-artistic historical events (from wars to scientific discoveries) and evolving socio-cultural conditions (from economic structures to technological developments; from the acceptance or rejection of religious beliefs to demographic patterns) spur artists to develop new resources designed to better address the changing extra-artistic realm. These extra-artistic events can also lead to changes that artists are not fully aware of until they—and others—can look back on both their art and the conditions under which they produced it.

2. Inter-artistic and intra-artistic influence and adaptation. Artists in one field pay attention to artists in other fields and as a result sometimes a feedback loop of influence and adaptation between or among fields develops.
During the rise of modernism, for example, the techniques developed by Impressionist and Cubist painters, which emphasized the subjectivity of perception, influenced writers who were interested in new ways of representing human consciousness. At the same time, artists respond to others in their own field, both their contemporaries and those of previous generations, and, after studying what someone else has done with a particular resource, they often find a way to build on or revise that achievement. Ernest Hemingway, for example, admired Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for its colloquial character narration and then found new uses for the technique in his own fiction.

3. The premium on innovation. The poet Ezra Pound famously implored his fellow modernists to “make it new,” but artists in every generation who aspire to be on the cutting edge seek to “make it different” or “make it fresh.” As a result, the horizon of resources is a dynamic entity whose appearance is always subject to change. Or to put the point hyperbolically, once a set of resources becomes highly visible, its historical clock starts counting down. Often some elements of the set will change before others—and some can have enormous staying power. The initial changes will yield only a difference in degree between the old and the new horizon, but, over time, these differences in degree will bring about a difference in kind.

4. The experiences, capacities, and visions of individual artists as they pursue their individual projects. A novelist typically has more specific purposes than “I want to write a modernist novel,” or “I want to use this subset of the horizon of resources.” She typically will want to work in a particular mode (or combination of modes) using particular resources in order to accomplish particular ends. Indeed, it is often the artist’s effort to accomplish a particular purpose (or a set of purposes) that motivates her to develop new resources.

I have deliberately ordered this list so that it goes from the most general (the workings of history) to the most specific (the actions of an individual artist). But I hasten to add three points about their interactions.

A. The force of these different causes will vary in different interactions. For example, epoch-making historical events such as the Great War are, by the very nature of their deep and widespread effects, likely to be more forceful than an individual artist’s desire to alter a well-worn technique. But by the same token, the development of a new genre such as “historiographic metafiction,” Linda Hutcheon’s term for novels that use the resources of fiction to challenge received understandings of history (Hutcheon, 1988),
may well be a more powerful force for change than the re-election of a President, especially if that President wants to maintain the status quo.

B. Because the artistic and the extra-artistic realms are sufficiently distinct, the temporal relationship between changes in each realm will often be uneven. We tend to think of artistic developments as always following from extra-artistic ones, but sometimes artistic changes will herald and accelerate extra-artistic ones. Furthermore, because there are differences among fields of artistic endeavor, or even among the concerns of artists working in different genres in the same field (e.g., the novel and the lyric poem), we should not assume that all artistic production will share the same general concerns.

C. The arrow of causation travels in both directions. Consider some concrete examples. Following the direction of causes from most general to the most specific, we can say that the unprecedented destruction of human life in World War I (the “war to end all wars”) greatly influenced Hemingway, who served as an ambulance driver in Italy during the War, as he developed his conviction that existence itself was inherently destructive. Continuing in the same direction, we can also say that Hemingway, when composing *A Farewell to Arms* sought, within the horizon of resources provided by 1920s modernism, the appropriate techniques and narrative structures for effectively communicating his conviction and his ideas about its consequences. His understanding of this horizon significantly influenced his choice of an initially naïve, reticent, and unreliable character narrator, Frederic Henry, who gradually comes to shed his naïveté as he learns from others and as he experiences the world’s destructiveness first-hand. But looking in the other direction, we can also see that Hemingway’s particular execution of his project added to the horizon of possibilities for modernist narrative by demonstrating how such a limited character narrator could nevertheless be the central figure in a moving tragedy. Continuing to look in this direction, we can also see that Hemingway’s representation of Frederic’s experiences—and his responses to those experiences—have the power to influence our understanding of the texture and the consequences of the Great War.

Furthermore, in some cases, a novelist’s execution of his or her particular project can influence the shape of extra-literary history. In American literary history, the go-to example is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). US historians acknowledge that Stowe’s abolitionist message influenced the country’s move toward the War between the States, even if they are more skeptical about the authenticity of the story that Abraham Lincoln greeted Stowe at the White House by saying “so this is the little lady who started this
great war." Among the novels I analyze in this book, the most obvious examples of such causation would be found in the works by the African American novelists (Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, and Toni Morrison’s Beloved) as they apply to changes in race relations and the struggle for Civil Rights as well as in Pynchon’s Lot 49 with its influence on the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But once we become aware of causal traffic moving from artistic projects to extra-literary effects, we can also recognize that any novel that gains a significant readership can have such effects by altering a culture’s perceptions and understandings of itself.

The Role of Genre

We can thicken our description of the interaction among causes 2, 3, and 4 by focusing on the role of genre in the two-way traffic between them. But first, a word about the term. It is one that, like irony, has acquired multiple meanings, and I find it beneficial to use three of them in this book, so let me be clear about those uses. (1) Genre, in its broadest meaning, refers to a general category of literary expression, such as novel, epic poetry, lyric poetry, history, biography, autobiography, essay, and so on. (2) In a somewhat narrower meaning, genre refers to a common structure of characters and events, one that forms a recognizable pattern, such as the Bildungsroman and the detective story. (3) In another narrower meaning (whether narrower than the second meaning is not a significant issue for our purposes), genre refers to a form with a recurrent set of affective and/or other responses such as tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, satire, parody, and so on. These three meanings of the term are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Thus, I will describe Edith Wharton’s Age of Innocence, Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man as examples of the Bildungsroman because they all portray the education and maturation of their protagonists, the story of those protagonists’ movements from their limited understandings of their worlds and their places in them to a much deeper understanding of those things. But each novel guides us to a different set of affective responses. Wharton’s Bildungsroman is a bittersweet family drama, Hemingway’s is a tragedy, Hurston’s is a seriocomedy, and Ellison’s is tragicomedy with a political purpose. Furthermore, any one of these meanings of the term genre can be combined with a periodizing term such as modernist or postmodernist. Thus, I regard A Farewell to Arms as a modernist tragic Bildungsroman, whose tragic elements mark it off as different from the other Bildungsroman, and whose Bildung-elements mark it off as different from the two other modernist
tragedies of the 1920s I examine, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Similarly, we can distinguish between a modernist detective story such as Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* and a postmodernist detective story such as *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In selecting a genre (in any sense of the term), an author puts certain limits on his or her constructive choices but still retains considerable flexibility about how to work within those limits, because a genre is not a prescription but a broad outline. Furthermore, at a given point in literary history, that outline will become more specific (ancient Greek tragedy is different from Renaissance British tragedy, which is different from modernist American novelistic tragedy) as the genre (again in any of my three senses) bends in the direction of other foregrounded elements along the horizon of resources. At the same time, for the best writers, the choice of genre is never the choice of a rigid inflexible structure—as the obvious differences among the three modernist tragedies indicate. Furthermore, in the hands of writers as skilled as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner, new possibilities for how to work within the genre are realized. Those results in turn can alter the larger horizon of resources by highlighting some, backgrounding others, and adding still more.

**Periodization and the Concept of the Dominant**

Because history seeks to explain the past, it depends upon selection and emphasis. Indeed, the difference between a chronicle and a history is that the chronicle aspires toward inclusivity and equality, while the history aspires toward differentiation and relationality. A chronicle eschews causal—or, indeed, any kind of—explanation as it lists the events occurring in a given period in their temporal sequence. In contrast, a history seeks to specify the relationships among events, identifying some as causes and others as effects, and giving more prominence to some than to others. In pursuing their explanatory ends, literary historians have found the concept of a period extremely useful, because it helps them shift from chronicle to history, dividing what would otherwise be an unbroken sequence of temporal events into several discrete, coherent units, which can form the building blocks of their explanatory narratives. This description points to the constructivist nature of literary history: as Brian McHale argues, literary historical periods are not objects in the world like, say, Mount Everest or the Statue of Liberty, but rather are “necessary fictions” that historians develop in order to render the past (even the recent past) intelligible (see McHale, 1992, 2011, 2008). To be sure, literary historians want their accounts to be judged not just by their internal logic but also by their capacity to persuasively explain why some literary roads were taken rather than others, and that goal means that
their accounts can be tested against the historical record. But given the complexity of the interaction among causes of change, and the resulting large role of interpretation in the construction of the narratives about that historical record, we should not be surprised that literary historians often disagree about major points. For example, some see postmodernism as an extension of modernism, while others see it as a break. Some want to date the onset of postmodernism just after World War II, some want to put the beginning in the early to mid-1970s, and others, like McHale, want to put it in the mid-1960s.

In their constructions of postmodernism, both McHale and Fredric Jameson have demonstrated the value of Roman Jakobson's concept of the dominant for literary history in general. Before going into the details of Jakobson's use of the term, I want to emphasize its big-picture meaning: the term refers to the element of any phenomenon—a basketball team, a historical event, a literary work—that stands out above all the other elements, and in so doing helps organize the whole. When we say, for example, that the Miami Heat of the National Basketball Association are LeBron James' team rather than Dwyane Wade's team, we are describing not just who is the highest scorer but rather which player the other members of the team define their roles in relationship to.

Jakobson first defines the concept in relation to the individual work of art, as the work's “focusing component. . . . It rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components.” (“The Dominant,” p. 82). In other words, the dominant functions as the center of the work, that which allows the artist to differentiate among the relative importance of its various parts, and, in so doing, to give the work an underlying systemic logic. Jakobson goes on to extend the concept to the period. Just as the dominant organizes the parts of a work into a large system, it also provides a way to understand the diverse works of art produced during a given stretch of time as parts of a larger system of recurring concerns, both formal and substantive. As McHale points out, the concept of the dominant allows us to move beyond comparing periods by means of lists of discrete features (e.g., wholeness versus fragmentation; omniscient narration versus unreliable narration) to comparing them as different systems. In modernism, he suggests, the dominant recurring concerns are epistemological, whereas in postmodernism the dominant concerns are ontological. 2 I will elaborate on these descriptions in the next section.

The concept of the dominant is a valuable tool for both reading individual works and constructing periods precisely because it takes a “greater than/less than” rather than an “either/or” approach to the phenomena it explains. That is, rather than subsuming all phenomena under a single umbrella, it acknowledges the inevitable presence of nondominant elements not covered by the umbrella in the work and in the period. Jakobson’s analysis of semiotic communication
sheds light on this point. Jakobson identifies six parts of any communication: sender, receiver, message or text, context, channel (e.g., writing or speech), code (e.g., gestures or words). He notes that, while any communication would require the presence of all six, in most cases one would be dominant. For example, the sentence “Can you hear me now?” puts the most emphasis on the channel (in Jakobson’s terms its dominant function is “phatic”) even as its intelligibility also depends on the backgrounded relations among sender, receiver, message, context, and code. Similarly, if we say that a work’s dominant concerns are ontological, that still allows room for the presence of epistemological, metaphysical, or other concerns. And the same logic applies to constructions of a period.

Finally, the concept of the dominant proves helpful in constructing an account of the trajectory of a period and the transitions between periods. The trajectory typically has three phases: an onset, or waxing, as the new dominant begins to emerge; a flourishing, or peak, as the new dominant is at its most influential; and a waning, as the dominant remains in place but does not exert the same force it once had and other concerns vie for attention.3 We may locate the transitions between periods either in the form of sharp breaks—often brought about by major historical events (think of the relation between the French Revolution and the rise of European Romanticism)—or in the form of a gradual evolution, but, in either case, some continuity between periods is likely to be preserved. Jameson’s remark about sharp breaks expresses this point well, even as it echoes what I said above about elements in the horizon of resources oscillating over time between prominence and oblivion: “radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuring of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary” (“Postmodernism,” p. 18).

**Broad Overview, Part Two: Modernity/Modernism, Postmodernity/Postmodernism, and the Individual Work**

With these considerations in mind, let us turn to big-picture descriptions of the two main periods of twentieth-century history, modernity and postmodernity (terms that refer to the extra-artistic realm), and the corresponding periods of literary and artistic history, modernism and postmodernism. I follow the general consensus and think of modernity/modernism as having its onset around 1900, its peak in the years between the World Wars (with some differences between the two decades), and its waning after the Second World War. Although there is more debate about the precise onset of postmodernity/postmodernism, I am
persuaded by McHale’s argument for the mid-1960s, and that its peak period was the 1970s and 1980s. While its dominance has begun to fade, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the resulting War on Terror, I do not yet see that a new dominant has clearly emerged.

After the Civil War, in the era of Reconstruction, the dominant concerns of American novelists are reflected in the movements known as naturalism and realism. Naturalist authors such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser focused on the relationship between individuals (and their instinctive responses to the world), and the various larger forces, especially the social and economic, that in their view ultimately determine the fates of those individuals. The naturalists typically adopted techniques that reflected a dispassionate, even scientific, view of their characters and events. Realist authors such as William Dean Howells, Mark Twain (in some of his work), and Henry James did not share the determinism of the naturalists, but like them, they sought to represent as accurately as possible the world as it was and the way people experienced it. In James’ famous definition, the novel is a representation of “felt life,” and, for him and his followers, everything, including the preference for center of consciousness narration, followed from that.

As this description suggests, the dominant concerns of the realists and the naturalists were metaphysical: What is reality? What are the principles that underlie it? What constraints does the real world put on the action of individuals? What is the experience of living in the real world actually like? These metaphysical questions presuppose that there is a stable real world, that it exists independent of human perceptions of it, and that it is knowable by means of careful observation and reflection.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, multiple historical events, changes in social conditions, and developments in various realms of thought combined to render these assumptions highly questionable. To name just a few salient contributions to the changing landscape: in psychology, Sigmund Freud developed his theory about the layered nature of the human psyche, a theory that emphasized the power of the unconscious on human desire and action; in philosophy, Henri Bergson distinguished between chronological, mechanistic time and time as experienced by humans, a distinction that emphasized the gap between scientific reality and psychological reality; in science, Albert Einstein proposed his theory of special relativity, which, among other things, replaced the common-sense notion that time’s arrow moves in one direction at a constant pace with the conclusion that time is relative to the motion of an observer and that time and space can actually transform into each other. But the greatest challenge to the view of the world underlying realism’s faith in a stable, knowable reality was World War I, the Great War, whose
unanticipated violence and destruction traumatized a whole generation (see Fussell, 1975). Furthermore, the Great War contributed, along with the growing acceptance of the theory of evolution and of Friedrich Nietzsche’s proclamation that God is dead, to an increasing loss of religious faith. The outbreak of World War II just 20 years after the conclusion of the “war to end all wars,” the development and dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the post-War revelations about the Holocaust, the German Third Reich’s genocide of more than six million Jews, gypsies, and other “undesirable” non-Aryans, increased Europe and America’s doubts about what we could take for granted about reality and about human nature—and also about the role of science and technology in human progress.

As for societal changes, more and more people left the rural areas to live in America’s urban centers, including large numbers of African Americans who migrated from the South to the North. These demographic changes altered the social fabric, affecting an individual’s assumptions about his or her relations to other people and to the larger society. The inventions of the automobile, the telephone, and the airplane enabled people to feel more connected across distances, and in that way, they too complicated the understanding of time and space (for a much richer account of these changes, see Kern, 1983).

Meanwhile, visual artists began to respond to these changes by shifting their “composing focus” from the objects being represented to the variables that influence how they are perceived. Claude Monet and other Impressionists highlighted the interactions among the object, light, and the visual capacities of the observer. Pablo Picasso, George Braque, and other Cubists highlighted the dual capacity of vision and conceptualization to reveal shapes behind or underneath what could be captured in a photograph. In literature, writers placed more and more attention on the perceiving consciousnesses of individual characters and developed the technique of stream of consciousness.

As a result of all these changes, the metaphysical dominant of realism gave way to what McHale characterizes as the epistemological dominant of modernist fiction. McHale articulates the recurrent questions this way. The first two he borrows from the visual artist Dick Higgins: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?” “And what am I in it?” The others are ones McHale formulates: “What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transferred from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower? What are the limits of the knowable?” (1987, p. 9). Philip Weinstein adds another layer to this characterization by highlighting a feature of modernist fiction, found especially in the work of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner, that he calls “unknowing” (see Weinstein, 2005). Weinstein’s term seeks to capture those
moments in modernist fiction that, through their uncanny treatment of time or space or some other element, defy clear interpretation and shock and surprise their audiences.

This understanding of the dominant helps organize our knowledge of the specific resources that get highlighted along the horizon of modernist fiction: those resources are consistent with (or in some cases follow from) the central concern with epistemology. For example, Stephen Kern, in an impressive 2011 study, contrasts the highlighted resources of the realist novel with those of the modernist novel. Where realist characters have coherence, stability, and purposiveness, modernist ones are fragmented (riven by conflicts, often psychological ones—think of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*), changeable, often irresolute, and occasionally absent. Where the realist novel builds its plots around events whose significance can be taken for granted by readers (think of Huck Finn’s adventures along the Mississippi River), modernism frequently explores minor, small-scale events and invests them with significance (e.g., the young Caddy Compson sitting in a tree with muddy drawers). Where realist novels uncover clear causal connections between events, modernist ones often exhibit skepticism about such clear causation. Where realist plots have recognizable beginnings and endings that aspire to a sense of resolution, modernist plots begin *in medias res* and avoid strong resolutions. Where realist authors either created narrators who could be their spokesmen in the storyworld or character narrators whose perspectives, however unreliable, reinforced rather than challenged the idea of a knowable storyworld, modernist authors eschewed the single, reliable spokesperson in favor of multiple perspectives (*The Sound and the Fury*) or a variously reliable and unreliable perspective, or one whose reliability alters in the course of the telling (*The Great Gatsby, A Farewell to Arms*). Where realist authors favored clear, readable styles, modernist authors often developed abstract or even surreal styles that seek to capture the workings of the unconscious. Kern succinctly summarizes his list of foregrounded resources: “absent protagonists, fragmented characters, ‘trivial’ events, probabilistic causality, weak plots, literary impressionism, stream of consciousness, repetition of traumas and epiphanies, in medias res beginnings, unresolved endings, abstract and surreal styles, singular focalization, embedded focalization, and unreliable narrators” (p. 2).5

Again it is not as if the features foregrounded during realism disappear from the horizon during modernism or as if modernist writers cannot mix and match modernist and realist resources. But putting together the concept of the epistemological dominant with the resources foregrounded on the horizon yields a valuable general account of the state of the novelistic art during modernism. What this contextual account means for the individual work is an issue I will take up after a look at the period of postmodernity/postmodernism.
As we move to this period, the points about the varying force of different causes and about uneven developments in the extra-artistic and artistic realms become especially important. The debates about just when to locate the temporal beginning of postmodernism or whether to regard it as an extension of or a break with modernism indicate that there is no single decisive historical event—or even small group of events—that signals the onset of the new period. Instead, we can productively think of a larger cluster of events and cultural changes, some of them extensions of modernity and some of them breaks with it, that collectively effected the shift from one period to another. Furthermore, the innovations of artists sometimes anticipated—or accelerated—aspects of the broader shift. Let us take a brief look at the effect of some key extra-artistic events and phenomena—and some notable constructions of them.

Fredric Jameson points to the increasing reach and power of multinational capitalism as bringing about a break with modernity and ushering in postmodernity. Corporations and their profit motives have become increasingly focused on and adept at generating commodity production and consumption, “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever increasing rates of turnover” (p. 5), and this change to the economic system has rippled through the larger culture, including the realm of artistic production. Postmodernity has, among other things, given greater validity to post-structuralist claims about “the death of the subject,” the phenomenon of the individual human being’s loss of agency as more and more of the conditions of his existence are determined by external forces and the ideologies that support them. The death of the subject, in turn, brings about what Jameson sees as a move to depthlessness in visual art, to the waning of affect across forms of artistic expression, and to the emergence of pastiche as a substitute for parody. Where parody had the clear purpose of sending-up the source it wickedly imitates, pastiche is a neutral genre, imitation without teeth, because it lacks parody’s faith in a positive alternative to what it imitates.

Linda Hutcheon, who does not share Jameson’s Marxist view of the relation between the economic and the artistic realms of cultures, more sharply distinguishes postmodernity as a cultural condition from postmodernism as a set of artistic responses to that condition. She argues that postmodern art frequently seeks to critique postmodernity, using the horizon of resources to question, oppose, or offer alternatives to reigning ideological positions. She persuasively argues that parody remains a prominent feature of the horizon of resources, something that artists use to both “legitimate and subvert” their targets. In my view, we need not choose between Jameson and Hutcheon, between parody and pastiche, since we can find substantial evidence of both modes in postmodernist artistic practice. For example, Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose
(1983) combines elements of the detective novel, the philosophical novel, and the historical novel not in order to critique them but to help illustrate Eco’s own ideas about semiotics, while Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) parodies both the detective novel and the genre of academic footnotes.

Jean-François Lyotard examines changes in technology and in conceptions of science (among other things) since World War II and concludes that these changes ushered in an age marked by “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). In Lyotard’s view, these changes meant that grand narratives about history, progress, science, and other foundational concepts of Western culture had lost their persuasiveness, leaving in their place less ambitious narratives (*petit recits*) about smaller entities. These narratives are, like Wittgenstein’s language games, too disparate and incompatible to be synthesized into any coherent overarching account. If we want to explain the effects of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, for example, we might assemble, say, a series of survivor narratives, a series of first-responder narratives, some fictional treatments such as Deborah Eisenberg’s “The Twilight of the Superheroes” and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, an account of George W. Bush’s decision to engage in the War on Terror, narratives of Iraqis whose family members are killed in the war, and so on. No one of these narratives would encompass all the others, and they would have too many divergent ideological commitments for us to combine them into an overarching account.6

Jean Baudrillard, observing the West’s increasing technological capacity to produce and its increasing ideological tendency to privilege simulations of reality—shopping malls that resemble small towns, amusement parks, most of Las Vegas, and visual images of all kinds—argues that this “virtual reality” becomes a “hyperreal” that displaces interest in the real world. In *White Noise* (1985), Don DeLillo provides a succinct and effective illustration of Baudrillard’s thesis in the short episode about the most photographed barn in America: tourists do not really see the barn but instead see signs about approaching the barn, souvenir shops filled with postcards of the barn, and people taking photographs of the barn—and, indeed, of each other taking photographs.

The most significant social movement in the shift from modernity to postmodernity was the rise of the counterculture of the 1960s. Populated primarily by members of the post-World War II Baby Boom generation, the movement rebelled against what Boomers regarded as an overly constrained, hypocritical, and ultimately untrustworthy older generation, one too affected by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. The counterculture is notorious for advocating the liberatory potential of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” but it also provided effective opposition to the US war in Vietnam and strong support for the Civil Rights and the women’s liberation movements. The counterculture, interestingly, did not reject the art of high modernism (T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste
Land, with its bleak portrait of the world and its more optimistic ending, was widely read and quoted, but it also embraced pop culture of all kinds, which led to a blurring or even an erasure of the line between high and pop art. Andy Warhol, who turned such things as images of Campbell soup cans and Marilyn Monroe into art exhibited in museums, both embraced and helped shape an aesthetic that Larry McCaffery has aptly called Avant-Pop.

As far as events in the artistic realm heralding or accelerating change, we can follow Charles Jencks and point to the demolition of the Pruitt–Igoe public housing project in St. Louis on July 15, 1972 as announcing the end of modernism and the onset of postmodernism in architecture, one more populist, playful, and in line with a changing culture. Brian McHale points out that Bob Dylan, the Beach Boys, and the Beatles all released albums in 1966 that combined mass appeal and musical sophistication so that they claimed dual status as popular and high art. In that way, they both anticipate and foster the cultural esthetics of the counterculture. Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 appeared in 1966 and, as I shall argue in more detail in Chapter 8, deserves credit for unmasking the growing uncertainty and paranoia of America in the years after the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy.

In light of this account, I find persuasive McHale’s case that the dominant concerns of postmodernism were ontological. He once again takes his first group of characteristic questions from Dick Higgins: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” And he follows with his own set, which are about the ontology either of the world(s) represented in the fiction or of the fictional text itself, and the last two of which allude to Oedipa Maas’ question in Pynchon’s Lot 49, “shall I project a world?” (p. 79). “What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured?” (1987, p. 10).

Again, combining this dominant with a list of resources foregrounded along the postmodern horizon can yield a good description of the state of the period’s novelistic art. Adapting Kern’s template, I identify the following resources:

- depthless or exploded characters (Pynchon’s Tyrone Slothrop in Gravity’s Rainbow initially appears to be a protagonist but he eventually disappears);
- unnatural events, that is, events that defy the physical laws governing the real world (Toni Morrison depicts literal human flight in Song of Solomon);
- unnatural storyworlds (Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” presents a storyworld in which a series of incompatible events all occur);
anti-mimetic narrators (the character narrator in Alice McDermott’s *Charming Billy* authoritatively reports and interprets events that she has no access to as character);

- metafiction (John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” continually comments on the elements of its own construction);

- new genres (historiographic metafiction);

- the Avant-Pop mixing of popular and avant-garde esthetics (*Lot 49* again);

- border crossings (or metaepesses) between different ontological levels of narrative (in Julio Cortazar’s “A Continuity of Parks” a reader curls up with a book describing a plot to murder a man curled up with a book, who turns out to be himself);

- uncertain causality (*Lot 49* once more);

- deliberately confusing beginnings (see my discussion of Morrison’s *Beloved* in Chapter 10);

- open or ambiguous endings (*Lot 49, Beloved*);

- and weak or absent epiphanies (in John Edgar Wideman’s “Doc’s Story” the unnamed protagonist turns to the urban legend—or perhaps historical narrative—of a blind man having successfully played basketball for solace and insight about his own situation but it does not lead him to any new understandings).7

**History ↔ Period ↔ Work Redux: Toward a Shift in My “Composing Focus”**

Individual novelists, then, operate within these broad contexts of dominant concerns and foregrounded resources. As noted above, however, these contexts are not determinative of their choices, and successful novelists typically regard them as enabling their work rather than interfering with it. In practical terms, then, we can draw three general conclusions about the relationship between period contexts and individual works.

1. **The Substance over Time Principle:** We call a novel modernist or postmodernist not because of the particular date of its composition but because of its dominant concerns and its deployment of particular resources. Modernist novels have been written after the mid-1960s (e.g., three of John Updike’s four novels about Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom: *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)), and postmodernist ones have been written before then (*Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 1962). The one caveat here is that I would restrict the term “post-modernist” to a work that is, in some way, engaged in a response to modernism.
2. The Cause and Effect Principle: A given novel does not have a particular structure and set of techniques because it belongs to one period or the other (modernist or postmodernist), but rather it belongs to one subgenre or the other because it has a particular structure and set of techniques. Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* does not use stream-of-consciousness narration because it is a modernist novel, but rather it is a modernist novel because it uses stream-of-consciousness narration.

3. The Two-Way Traffic Principle (again): Because the construction of period contexts focuses on the big picture, the generalizations that apply across a diverse corpus of works, it can flatten out significant differences across texts and miss or understate the distinctiveness of some authorial choices from or additions to the horizon of resources. We should therefore look to the study of individual texts to help us add both depth and nuance to the big picture descriptions.

These conclusions in turn have one major consequence for my work in the rest of this book. Because the period contexts help place individual novels in the larger literary history of the twentieth century and help us understand the horizon of resources available to their authors, they shed valuable light on the individual novels. At the same time, the task of coming to grips with the specific choices an author makes—understanding the logic behind and the multiple effects of those choices—will require a shift in my “composing focus,” a shift from history to rhetorical form. In the next chapter, I will outline and explain the principles of rhetorical reading that will guide my efforts to understand the particular projects of my 10 chosen novels. I conclude this chapter with some reflections on those choices.

**Choosing Ten Novels**

Here is the list in chronological order:

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1920)
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929)
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)