

# American Literature 1865 to the Present

Dr. Alex E. Blazer

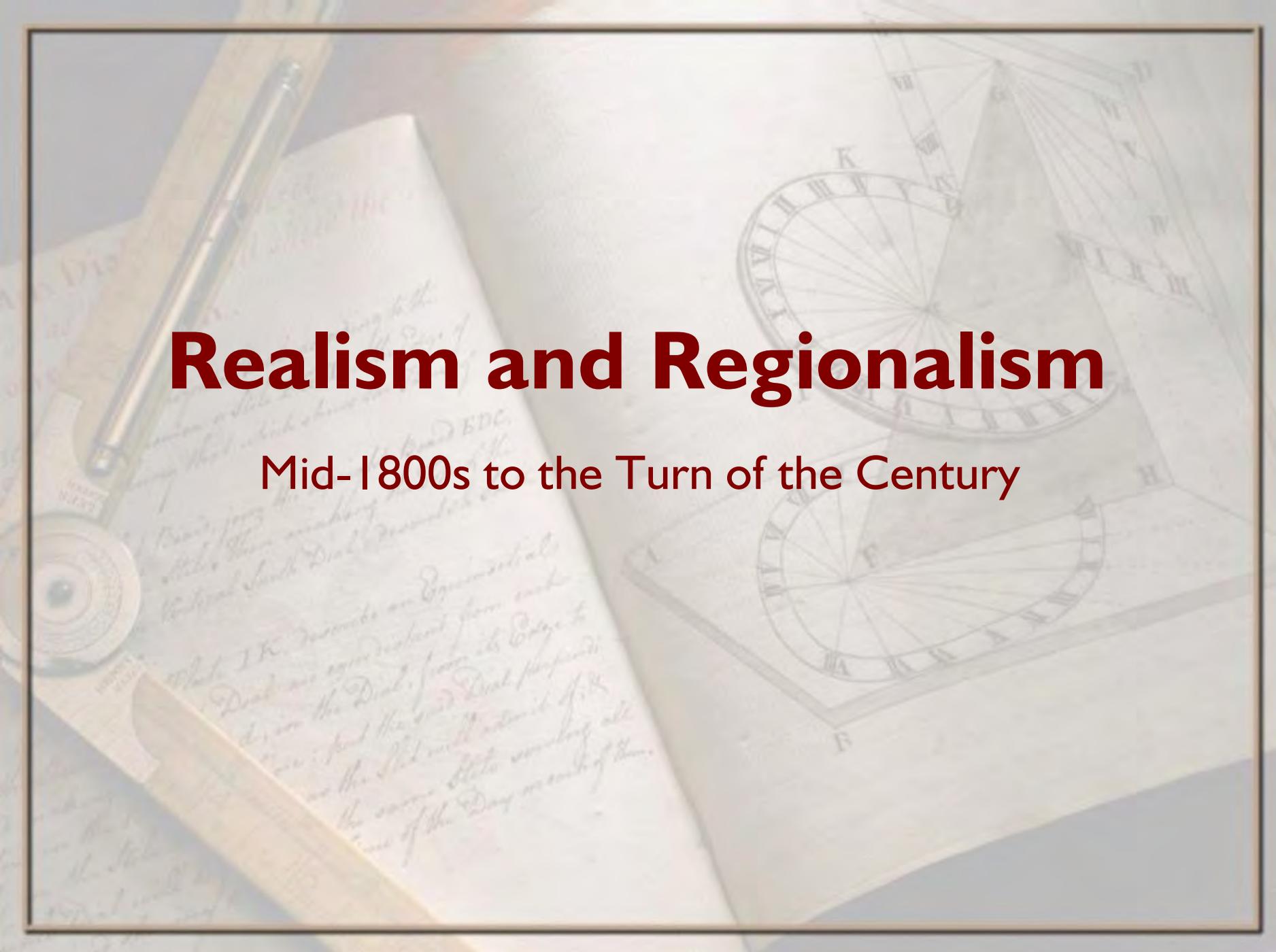
English 312

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<http://www.louisville.edu/~a0blaz01>

# Realism and Regionalism

Mid-1800s to the Turn of the Century



# Regionalism

- ★ The primary American paradox has always been that we are one nation of many individuals. Today, we live in a time of multiculturalism and identity politics. Between the Civil War and the turn of the century, the issue centered on America's reconstruction and evolution from an agrarian country that was divided in distinct regions to an increasingly industrial and decidedly united nation-state.

# Regionalism

Continued

★ Regionalism was popular from approximately 1800 to 1910, especially in urban centers. America's nascent literature sought to preserve (if not also patronize) its pre-industrial, traditional, and sectional identities on the national scene as well as in city power centers through magazines that (nostalgically) exempified the heterogenous regional lives that were passing away in the face of urbanism and industrialization.

# Regionalism

Concluded

- ★ Women-centered magazines grew to prominence in the time period, gave women a place to publish, and disseminated regionalist writing, which at the time was not considered high art but rather like a travelogue.
- ★ Thus, besides issues of urban vs rural life and regional vs national culture, regionalism also tarried with travelogue writing vs high art by giving voice to female writers in the traditionally male-dominated literary arts.

# Realism

- ★ Whereas regionalism might be considered the popular form of the late 1800s, realism was the mode of high art during that time period.
- ★ Realism as an art form seeks to present life and society in a truthful and real manner. Realism downplays the literary and artistic constructedness of its own form and instead foregrounds the transparency of its lens on life.

# Realism

## Two Subsets

- ★ Psychological, or moral, realism is subset of realism that represents the complex and contradictory moral life of the mind. It is akin to stream-of-consciousness.
- ★ Naturalism is another subset of realism, one which emphasizes the pessimistic and fatalistic determinism of environmental and material forces over against the individual. Nature, the order of things, determines, if not completely overwhelms, existence.

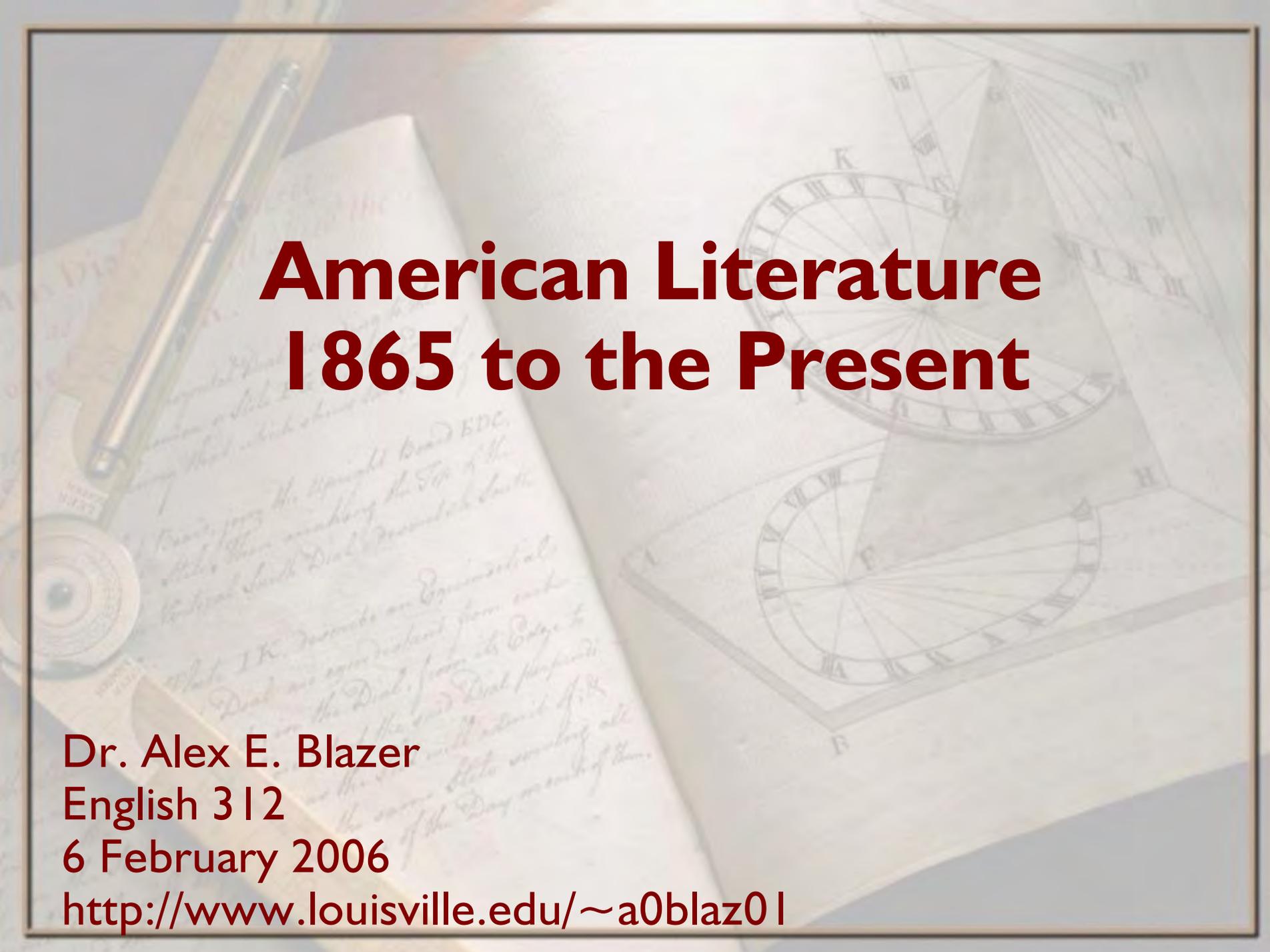
# Examples

- ★ The five authors that we're reading constitute a continuum of styles from regionalism to realism.
- ★ The message of Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" is one of conservation--preserving the folksy and wooded Northeast from the encroachments of the city.
- ★ Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* is simultaneously regionalist and realist for it exemplifies Southern and negro dialect (like a regional) but self-consciously so and with the moral irony of high art (like a realist).

# Examples

## Concluded

- ★ Henry James's psychological realism in "Daisy Miller" shows the complexities and also
- ★ In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman puts a modern(ist) spin on the realism/naturalism movement by creating a realist text written from the point of view of a wholly unreliable narrator who was made insane by her society.
- ★ Like Twain's *Huck Finn*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* carries with both regionalism and realism in that it foregrounds Southern Cajun aristocracy while focusing on literary themes of the female artist in society.



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# Modernism

1910-1945

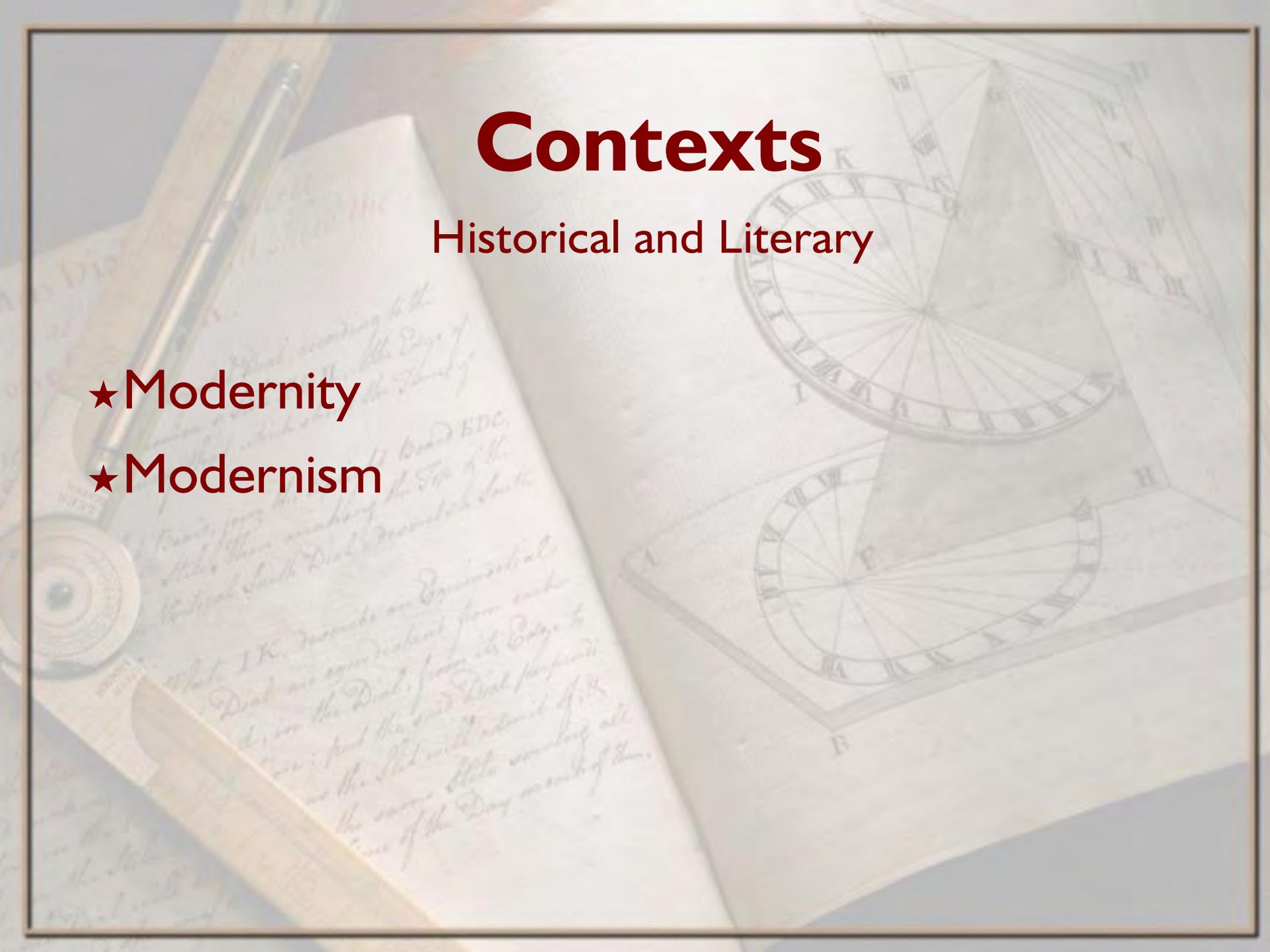


# Contexts

Historical and Literary

★Modernity

★Modernism



# Modernity

Historical Era

from the Industrial Revolution to the mid-1900s

- ★ Industrialization
- ★ Urbanization
- ★ Exponential technological progress
- ★ Rise of mass, popular, consumer culture
- ★ Global political conflicts and modern warfare (World War I and World War II)

# Modernism

Literary Period from the late-1800s to 1945

- ★ Crisis of belief in traditional authority,
  - ★ Resulting in the critique of culture that would use its technological progress not for civilization but for mechanized slaughter
  - ★ And the wistful search for new teleological meanings in the fragmentation and flux of the lost generation's waste land.
- ★ Radical experimentation with form,
  - ★ Such that modernism foregoes conventional forms and structures in order to invent new forms and systems of thought adequate to modern experience.

# Modernism

## Continued

### ★ Crisis of representation

- ★ Pulp and popular conventions of representation no longer convey the modern experience of reality;
- ★ And so authors find new, utterly impressionistic and perspectivist, ways of representing the real

### ★ High vs Low

- ★ During modernism, culture becomes bifurcated between the high (academic, elite) and the low (popular, mass).

# Examples

- ★ The eight authors we're reading constitute a continuum of modernist values and styles
  - ★ Wallace Stevens' philosophical poetry searches for a new imaginary order either to attune itself to the mind of winter or flee from nihilism.
  - ★ Hart Crane's *The Bridge* criticizes the vulgarities and profanities of modernity by invoking the populist, transcendent, and ecstatic consciousness of the America past, of which Walt Whitman is exemplary.

# Examples

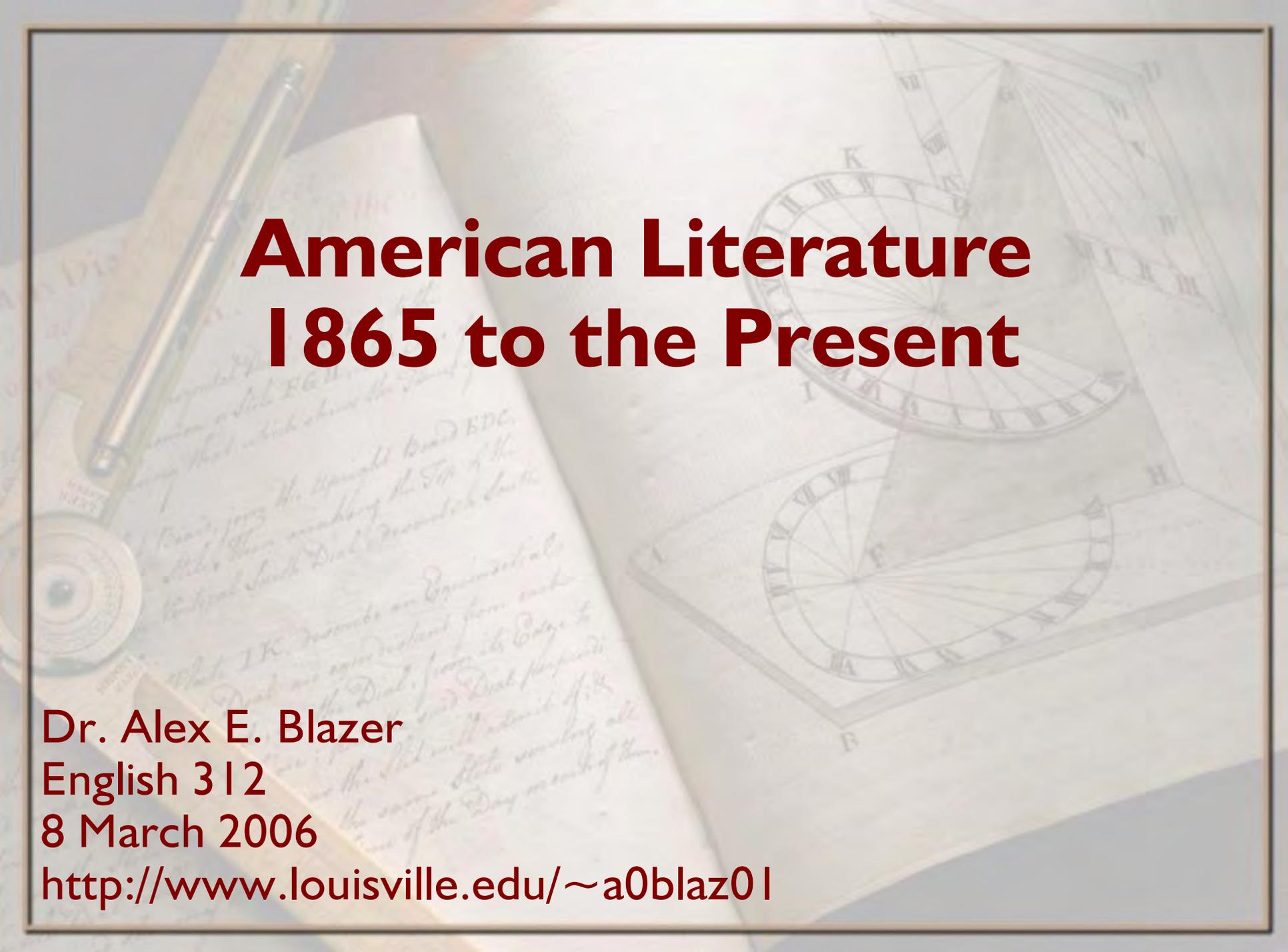
## Continued

- ★ Gertrude Stein's experimental *Tender Buttons* paradoxically attempts to represent the root, stable object that undergirds modernity's radical subjective perspectivism.
- ★ Claude McKay's Harlem Renaissance poetry criticizes modern America and calls for a return to the primal past even as it affirms the idealistic dream of American democratic progress.
- ★ Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" illustrates the existential repercussions of institutionalized racism.

# Examples

Concluded

- ★ F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" is an expatriate exploration of the decadence and speculation of the Lost Generation.
- ★ William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a tour de force of family dissolution and narrative fragmentation.
- ★ Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* descends into the depths of binding familial dysfunction in modern America.



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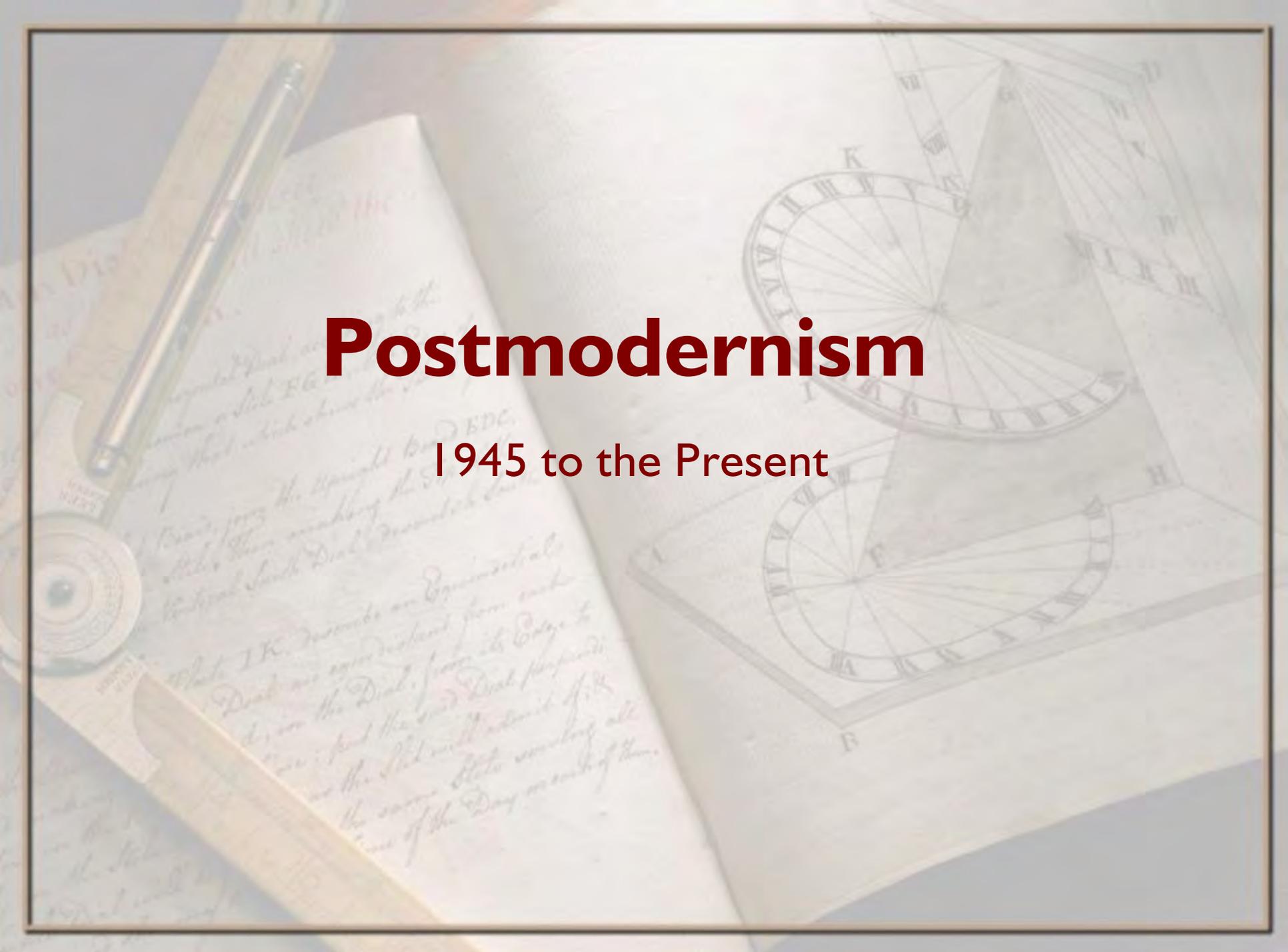
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# Postmodernism

1945 to the Present



# Postmodernity

Historical Era from 1945 to the present

- ★ Inaugurated by the Bomb (the Nuclear Age)
- ★ From world wars to cold wars, civil wars, wars on drugs and terrorism
- ★ The rise of multinational, late capitalism
- ★ Multiculturalism and identity politics
- ★ Decline of industry; rise of information (the Information Age), networking (cyberspace), and image consumption (hyperreality)

# Postmodernism

Literary period from 1960s to the present

After years of cultural and canonical fragmentation, there remains much dispute regarding the definition of postmodernism. Some critics theorize that postmodernism is merely an extension of modernism; some say the two are directly opposed. Still others argue that there is no definable postmodernist movement and instead speak of the contemporary. The following is one version of postmodernism, the version our survey class will generally pursue.

# Belief

- ★ Postmodernism has no crisis of belief in traditional authority, as in modernism.
- ★ Rather, the modernist anxiety has been replaced with a postmodernist, relativistic, "anything and everything goes" attitude.
- ★ Literature attempts neither to play off of grand narratives nor to search for absolute Truths.
- ★ Instead, literature seeks to create little narratives and little truths, which result in qualified beliefs and self-conscious themes.

# Form

- ★ Experimentation with form is no longer avant-garde and radical, as in modernism.
- ★ Rather, experimentation with conventional forms is the norm--the convention--in postmodernism.
- ★ As postmodern existence becomes eclectic, laissez faire, and hyperreal,
- ★ Postmodern literature loses linearity and coherence and revels in the playful and idiosyncratic mixing of forms, genres, disciplines, and systems all within one work. (Modernist collage gives way to postmodernist bricolage.)

# Representation

- ★ Crisis of representation a mainstay, as in modernism, but with this twist:
- ★ Postmodernist literature doesn't believe there's a real real to represent, for everything's an image or a signifier, reality is socially constructed by language, and the self is in process.
  - ★ Therefore, postmodernist literature is self-reflective, self-reflexive, and self-conscious.
  - ★ It may not represent grand narratives, but it does try to reveal its own artificiality and textuality in various meta-fictional and intertextual turns.

# High and Low

- ★ There is no battle between high and low, as in modernism.
- ★ Instead, postmodernism blurs boundaries.
  - ★ Just as postmodernist critics write on the elite *and* the popular culture, postmodernist literature blends high *and* low forms in a playful dance of arcane *and* mass consumption. Some would argue that the low is campily sublimated into the high.

# Subjectivity

- ★ In the postmodernist world, there remains no modernist lament over the fragmentation of self and world; nor is there a desire to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.
- ★ Rather, postmodernists revel in socially constructed realities and multiplicitous, shifting subjectivities.
  - ★ Any self-cohesion is merely a tentative suturing of signification.
  - ★ Postmodern literature thematizes the play of *the* self in *a* constant process of construction.

# Examples

## Of Postmodernist Literature

- ★ John Berryman is a poet who carries with the fluid, unconscious psyche through a poetic identification with Anne Bradstreet and the dreamscape alter ego Henry.
- ★ Sylvia Plath is a confessional poet who transforms her personal abjection into a persona of mythological proportions.
- ★ Allen Ginsberg is a Beat Generation poet who criticizes the oppressive establishment culture of the 1950s and 60s and popularizes poetry.

# Examples

Continued

- ★ Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* not only continues the collapse of the family begun in O'Neill's neurotic and modernist *Long Day's Journey*, but also examines the psychotic collapse of the American dream under post-industrial capitalism.
- ★ Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman" stages, exemplifies, and then subverts American's racial and gender stereotypes.

# Examples

Continued

- ★ Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" illustrates the constructedness of black and white racial stereotypes by playing with racial identity.
- ★ Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby" examines unresolvable multicultural conflicts between white and Native American cultures.

# Examples

Concluded

- ★ Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" turns the short story into a hypertext network of multiple imaginary possibilities and narrative outcomes.
- ★ Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy" represents the chaos and eventual exhaustion (heat-death) of sustained postmodern disorder.
- ★ Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* shows the psychotic effects of late capitalism's commodity and image fetish on the postmodern subject.