Modernist English Canon In Works Of Virginia Woolf And Zora Neale Hurston

The Modernist period in English Literature, popular from the 1910s to the 1960s was a period of unexpected breaks in the traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. The Modernist period came to be due to a series of cultural shocks, beginning with World War One. In response to the horrific effects of war and a mechanised society, writers of modern literature were attempting to find ways to capture an individual's experience, identity and the mind. In straying away from traditional literary forms and representation, modernist texts were identifiable for its composition style to be typically fragmented and an altered perception of reality. At a time were men dominated the English Canon, two influential women broke through the norms and contributed significantly to the Modernist English Canon. These women were Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston.

Author of modernist classics such as Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf is regarded as one of the greatest modernist writers. In feminist literature, Virginia Woolf is seen as a foremother in paving the way for women writers in the twentieth century." Born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London 1882, Woolf was the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, a highly respected Victorian intellectual and her mother Julia Prinsep Stephen, who served as a model for painters. Born into an upper-middle-class family, Woolf however did not have the same formal education has her brothers but was educated at home with her sister. Her family and childhood memories later served as inspiration for some of her works. Throughout her life, Woolf suffered from mental illnesses as a result of a series of deaths in her family. The trauma she endured throughout her life led to her mental instability, causing her to take her own life in 1941. Woolf began writing professionally in 1900 and published her first novel "The Voyage Out" in 1915. In 1912, Woolf married writer Leonard Woolf and together they founded the Hogarth Press. The Hogarth Press published some of the most important literature and non-fiction of the day, including works by T.S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud. Woolf published a range of works in the form of essays and novels which received both critique and praise. J.K Johnstone states she "had always an ambivalent desire because of her vivid awareness of two worlds, one flowing in wide sweeps overhead, the other tip-tapping circumscribed upon the pavement." Known for her distinct writing style, Woolf used experimental language and created works that delved deep into the psychology of central characters. Woolf is most commonly known for the use of the stream of consciousness technique evident in her works including Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and A Room of One's Own. Woolf paved the way for women writers in the 20th century and her works have gained much attention and widespread commentary for inspiring feminism.

Woolf's novel, Mrs Dalloway (1925) features the stream of consciousness style. The novel takes place over the course of a single day in the lives of two opposing characters, Clarissa Dalloway, a middle-aged woman, and Septimus Warren Smith, a young veteran, in which Woolf includes various subjective experiences and memories. Although the characters do not know each other personally, the novel concludes with Clarissa learning about the death of Septimus. The events of each characters day contrast to each other quite distinctively. Clarissa makes her way leisurely through London, her mind and actions occupied with preparations of her party later that evening while reminiscing on past memories; Septimus suffers from shell shock as an

effect of war and experiences the day with distorted perceptions, vivid hallucinations and paranoid suspicions ultimately leading him to take his own life.. Woolf uses Clarissa to explore the personal impact from social changes such as new technologies including automobiles and planes while Septimus is used to convey the personal aftermath of war in which the extremities of his conditions reflects society's response to those who survived the war. Modernist writers sought to present audiences with a response to the events of the world at the time, hence Mrs Dalloway serves the same purpose in providing exposure to such realities.

Another writer of great influence to the Modernist English Canon is Zora Neale Hurston. Zora Neale Hurston was a renowned anthropologist and writer associated with the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a significant moment in history as it was a turning point in black cultural history. The Harlem Renaissance helped African American writers and artists alike to gain control over the representation of their culture and experience within literature. As the movement evolved, writers debated the representation of African Americans. Zora Neale Hurston reflected her life in most of her novels, short stories and essays. As a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, her writings did not receive initial recognition as it deterred from the 'norm' of the time period. Authors of the Harlem Renaissance were expected to write politically about race, but Hurston grew tired of seeing the same writings hence the deviance in her literary works.

Hurston realised her work embraced southern vernacular and explored female sexuality but received criticism for doing so. Her writings inspired and influenced other writers to do the same hence her significance to the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston wrote novels, short stories and plays which often depicted the life of African Americans. Due to her great influence on many writers, she became one of the foremost female writers of the 20th century. Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891, Alabama. She was the daughter of two former slaves and in her early childhood moved to Florida with her family, a place plagued with sexism and racism later represented her writings of fiction. After the death of her mother, Hurston lived with an assortment of family members. In 1920, she earned herself an associate degree from Howard University, publishing one of her earlier works in the university newspaper. In 1925 she received a scholarship to Barnard College where she befriended writers such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. Together they joined the black culture renaissance taking place in Harlem. Hurston dedicated herself to the study and promotion of black culture which she often incorporated into her fictional writings.

Zora Neale Hurston's short story Sweat was published in 1926 as a product of the Harlem Renaissance. It tells the story of a woman named Delia and her marriage to her husband; an abusive man named Sykes. As the story unfolds, the depiction of African American women in this time period is made clear. "As a skilled female author writing on an issue of female inequality…Hurston makes subtle arguments to forward the cause of feminism." In Sweat, Hurston is not only promoting feminism, but more so black feminism. Returning to the idea of Hurston reflecting her own life in her works, the character of Delia is similar to Hurston in the experiencing of being underprivileged by gender and further more race; Sykes in this case is underprivileged by race but due to the relationship with Delia, he is superior due to his gender. As the story concludes, the parallels become evident between Delia and Hurston. Delia triumphs and so does Hurston and all African American women alike. " While much more progress must be made in the field of literature for women for African Americans and African American women, Hurston serves as a reminder of the progress women and black women have made in the field of literature.

The Modernist English Canon heavily dominated by male writers left little room for women writers to emerge. However, with Virginia Woolf paved a way for female writers of the 20th century and similarly, Zora Neale Hurston strayed from the expected works of the Harlem Renaissance and took control of the depiction of African Americans in literature. Both women held great influence within the Modernist English Canon and contributed greatly to the English canon with their literary works. From Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, a novel portraying post-war England and Hurston's Sweat, a short story about the inequality of African American women, both women left a mark in the Modernist English Canon, leaving such significant texts to be studied for generations to come indicating the progress of women writers throughout history.