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David Coodin Updated April 17, 2017

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The 20th century was like no time period before it. Einstein, Darwin, Freud and Marx were just some of the thinkers who profoundly changed Western culture. These changes took distinct shape in the literature of the 20th century. Modernism, a movement that was a radical break from 19th century Victorianism, led to postmodernism, which emphasized self-consciousness and pop art. While 20th century literature is a diverse field covering a variety of genres, there are common characteristics that changed literature forever.

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Fragmented Structure

Prior to the 20th century, literature tended to be structured in linear, chronological order. Twentieth century writers experimented with other kinds of structures. Virginia Woolf, for instance, wrote novels whose main plot was often "interrupted" by individual characters' memories, resulting in a disorienting experience for the reader. Ford Madox Ford's classic "The Good Soldier" plays with chronology, jumping back and forth between time periods. Many of these writers aimed to imitate the feeling of how time is truly experienced subjectively.

Fragmented Perspective

If there's one thing readers could count on before the 20th century, it was the reliability of an objective narrator in fiction. Modernist and postmodern writers, however, believed that this did a disservice to the reliability of stories in general. The 20th century saw the birth of the ironic narrator, who could not be trusted with the facts of

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The Novel of the City

The 20th century is distinguished as the century of urbanism. As more people moved to cities in Europe and America, novelists used urban environments as backdrops for the stories they told. Perhaps the best known of these is James Joyce's "Dubliners," a series of short stories that all take place in various locales in Dublin. Other 20th century writers are also closely associated with various urban centers: Woolf and London, Theodore Dreiser and Chicago, Paul Auster and New York, Michael Ondaatje and Toronto.

Writing from the Margins

The 20th century gave voice to marginalized people who previously got little recognition for their literary contributions. The Harlem Renaissance, for example, brought together African-Americans living in New York to form a powerful literary movement. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston wrote fiction and poetry that celebrated black identity. Similarly, female writers gained recognition through novels that chronicled their own experience. Finally, the post-colonial literary movement was born, with writers such as Chinua Achebe writing stories on behalf of subjugated peoples who had experienced colonization by Western powers.

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Description of Twain's Style as a Writer of Narrative Prose

Buffy Naillon

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Samuel Langhorne Clemens, otherwise known as Mark Twain, counts as one of the most important American writers, and his style has influenced countless writers. Twain started his career at the newspaper "The Hannibal Journal," and it was his life in Hannibal, Mo., and his work as a riverboat pilot that helped him develop the writer's voice that so many know today.

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Characteristics

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slave dealers, riverboat travelers and gamblers. For example, one of Twain's most famous characters, Jim in "Huckleberry Finn," starts out as a stock character but is transformed when Huck starts to see him as a person. This style of writing marks the ending of Romanticism and the beginning of Realism in American literature.

Great American Novelist

Unlike the English writers who came before him, Twain created a much looser narrative style. The way characters spoke sounded like real speech, and no two characters sounded the same. Each had a distinctive voice that told the reader who was speaking. This American novelist did for literature what Walt Whitman did for poetry -- introduce the vernacular into writing.

Humor

Despite writing almost 150 years ago, the humor in Twain's work still resonates today. Humor is something the writer began producing during his newspaper days at "The Hannibal Journal," where he contributed short, humorous pieces as well as articles to the paper. Interestingly enough, although Clemens mostly went by his pen name Mark Twain when he wrote, he did have another pseudonym that he used when writing humor: Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass.

Leaving His Mark

American writer Ernest Hemingway attributed the proliferation of an American style of writing to the river man. He said Twain didn't sound like any other American writer although certainly other writers of the era such as Sarah Orne Jewett and William Dean Howells also worked in a realistic style. However, many writers that followed Twain have acknowledged his influence on their writing styles.

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