

Individualism vs Family in Modernist Writings: The thought development reflected in the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald

From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, literature reflected a broad range of ideas and values which dramatically represented the time period it was composed in. While not altogether simple to define, the Victorian era of literature is described to have roughly spanned from 1830-1900 which transitioned into the Modernist era of literature which lasted up until around 1965. While the two periods were temporally aligned, they reflected vastly contradicting views which were ultimately as a result of the world events going on during those eras.

The Victorian era of literature, distinguished by famous writers such as Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte, among many others, was highly influenced by the industrial revolution taking place in Europe. With such progress and development came the ever widening gap between the “haves” and “have nots”. Writers took the opportunity to discuss the growing inequality and to speak out against the social injustices. For such reasons, the Victorian era of literature is defined as one that spoke to the people as it encouraged society toward a better future. Yet ironically, as Victorian literature exposed economic disparities, permeating across novels and poetry alike, was the running theme of the domesticity of the home which provided comfort and good cheer, even as gender subordination and domestic violence rippled through society. The family was depicted as a safe haven within a cruel world, a sentiment propagated by Queen Victoria herself, upon whom the time period is named. A happy home life was central to her control of power, viewing this idea as the source of her popularity with the people. And so, while there existed a sect of feminist literature breaking through during this period which rejected the idea of an idealized domestic

family life, this theme still wound itself around the many literary accomplishments of the Victorian era.

The Modernist era of literature, on the other hand, depicted an entirely different set of ideals and values. Encompassing two world wars, this time period marks a sharp break away from the traditional and accepted views present up until then, emphasizing individualism and experimentation. As opposed to progress, growth, and development, in reaction to the chaos and horrors of World War One, Modernist writers speak of instability, decay, and alienation amongst individuals. Many writings were inspired not by hope, but by bleak feelings suggesting that the new century would bring the collapse of society and culture. However, the feelings and thoughts identified in the Modernist period didn't persist for too long, and eventually optimistic ideas rejecting alienation began to reappear in literature in the 1950s. With that, Modernist literature still influences to an extent the writings of today, affecting the way many people view reality and perceive the truth.

On a whole, Victorian and Modernist literature vary widely in their opinions surrounding marriage and family. While Queen Victoria, and thus the Victorian era itself, emphasized the significance and value of a family life, Modernism strongly encouraged the importance and development of the individual himself. One such writer acclaimed for his works during the Modernist era was Francis Scott Fitzgerald, who composed four novels and almost 170 short stories during his lifetime. Two such short stories, “The Rich Boy” and “Babylon Revisited”, strongly exemplify the ideas expressed by Modernist writers, including the exaltation of the individual. These short stories give us a glimpse into the ideas behind what Modernists tried to portray and how they eventually developed, strongly lacking a “happily-ever-after” one might expect from a Victorian novel. Fitzgerald uses two very different characters, circumstances, and locations, yet manages to bring to life the sense of loneliness and collapse of family life that one felt in the beginning of the twentieth century.