

## INTRODUCTION



Paul Bowles

(1910-1999)

Paul Bowles is a precursor of Postmodernism. He was a versatile artist--composer, fiction writer, translator--whose primary contribution to American literature is his unique rendering of the Arab world. His vision is Existential, comparable to Sartre and Camus in valuing free will, but also with an emphasis on overwhelming forces and victimization that is Naturalistic and Gothic. His tone is detached from his characters and his Expressionistic style evokes a frightening universe, haunting desert atmospheres and spiritual emptiness. Like his "climaxless music, hypnotic music," his prose makes its effects without the reader being aware of it.

## BIOGRAPHY

Bowles was told that his father tried to kill him when he was a baby by exposing him on a window ledge during a snowstorm, evidence of his Gothic outlook. His mother read him stories by Hawthorne and Poe and he said later that Poe in particular inspired him to write. At the University of Virginia, where Poe was enrolled for one term, Bowles studied T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), the most influential poem of the 20th century--informing many poems and works by writers including Djuna Barnes, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Williams, Bellow and Bowles, who set his novels in wastelands and went so far as to make his home on the fringe of the Sahara Desert.

Bowles was raised in New York City--a place he disliked. During the 1930s he visited Paris, the center of expatriate Modernism. There he joined the circle of Gertrude Stein, who recommended his visit to Tangier, Morocco in 1931. The following year he traveled more widely in North Africa. He studied musical composition with his friend Aaron Copland and wrote music for theatrical productions in New York, collaborating with Shakespeare, Orson Welles, William Saroyan, Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams and others. His translation of *No Exit* by Sartre, directed by John Huston, won a Drama Critics Award in 1943.

In 1947, Bowles moved to Tangier, where he lived for the rest of his life, spending winters during the 1950s in what is now Sri Lanka. He lived a bohemian life, smoking kif and hashish. In 1948 he was joined in Tangier by his wife, the distinguished writer Jane Bowles. The Bowles became icons of expatriation, literary attractions visited in Tangier by students and many writers such as W. H. Auden, Claude McKay, and the Beatniks Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso. In his

*Advertisements for Myself* (1959) Norman Mailer said, “Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square, the call of the orgy, the end of civilization.” The critic Leslie Fiedler called Bowles “the pornographer of terror.”

The Bowles marriage became the model of unconventional: His most intimate friends included Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Gore Vidal. Bowles is often anthologized as a gay writer, but he considered such categories irrelevant. In the tradition of Modernism as opposed to Postmodernism, Bowles believed correctly that, like the plays of Williams and the work of all universal writers, his art transcended his sexuality.

#### NOVELS

His first novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), set partly in Tangier, was a great success and made his literary reputation. An American couple, rich naive “intellectuals” from New York City, journey into the desert, which becomes increasingly metaphysical and terrifying. The ironically named Port falls ill and dies of typhoid, no longer a safe harbor. His wife Kit is carried off by nomads into the depths of Africa. She is raped repeatedly and goes mad in a harem. Minor characters including pimps, prostitutes and French garrison officers are depicted with realistic precision. The novel was adapted to film by Bernardo Bertolucci in 1990. *Let It Come Down* (1952) is set in Tangier and is similar to his first novel: a shallow American named Nelson Dyar is traumatized by culture shock and disintegrates. *The Spider's House* (1955) is set in Fez, Morocco: Three expatriates and a young Moroccan get involved in the conflict between Moroccan nationalism and French colonialism. Some consider this his best novel. His best known short stories are “Pages from Cold Point” and “The Delicate Prey.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

#### INCREASED SIGNIFICANCE OF PAUL BOWLES

“In this new century, his life and work will take on even greater significance, as we find ourselves immersed in what seems to be an extended and irreconcilable conflict with the Islamic Middle East. Bowles lived more or less continuously in Morocco during the last half of the century. No other American writer of any note has spent so long immersed in Arab/Islamic culture, and his experiences and insights are woven into the tapestry of his fiction. Like Joseph Conrad and his narrator Marlowe, Bowles journeyed into the heart of darkness, saw the horror of it all, returned, and gave it exquisite aesthetic form.”

Allen Hibbard

*The Authorized Paul Bowles Web Site* (2003)

