The pen becomes a sort of blind-man's dog, to keep him from falling into the gutters. The pen works for itself, and acts like a hand, modelling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best. The form is never arbitrary, but is a sort of growth like crystallization, as any artist knows too well; for often the pencil or pen runs into side-paths and shapelessness, loses its relations, stops or is bogged. Then it has to return on its trail, and recover, if it can, its line of force. The result of a year's work depends more on what is struck out than on what is left in; on the sequence of the main lines of thought, than on their play or variety. Compelled once more to lean heavily on this support, Adams covered more thousands of pages with figures as formal as though they were algebra, laboriously striking out, altering, burning, experimenting, until the year had expired, the Exposition had long been closed, and winter drawing to its end, before he sailed from Cherbourg, on January 19, 1901, for home.

American Literature between the Wars
1914–1945

Life and Thought between the Wars

Although World War I began in 1914, the United States did not enter that war until 1917. Both the long delay and eventual entry expressed sides of a continuing debate over the desirability of American involvement in European affairs. For some Americans, the nation had its own special mission to pursue and could only be contaminated by engagement with the Old World. For others, America was so inextricably tied to Europe that a major European war was inevitably an American war too. The participation of the United States in World War I did not end this debate, which was complicated by the success of the Russian revolution in 1919 and the related formation of international Communist and labor movements dedicated to the demise of capitalism worldwide. In response to these developments, the so-called red scare in America immediately after the war (red was the color of the Soviet flag) led to the deportation of many American radical agitators of foreign birth. Some native-born Americans resented immigrants who criticized American policies, and there were profound antagonisms between white-collar, management-class Americans and people of the working classes. This turbulence produced a highly restrictive immigration act in 1924 and underlay the continual labor violence that marked the period right up to the outbreak of World War II. There were bloody strikes in Colorado, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and elsewhere.

Simultaneously, as German armies invaded one European country after another in the late 1930s, Americans remained divided about whether to fight against Hitler or turn their backs on the plight of Europe. Not until the Japanese bombed the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, did the United States enter this war, and even then it entered the European theater only because Germany and Japan were allies.

Nevertheless, U.S. participation in World War I marked a crucial stage in the nation's evolution to a world power. More narrowly but more immediately, it involved American artists and thinkers with the brutal actualities of large-scale modern war, so different from imaginary heroism. American losses were not great in "absolute" terms—more men had been killed in the Civil War—and there was no fighting on American ground. Ironically, more soldiers were killed by disease than in battle, and in the fall of 1918, after the war had officially ended, but before many soldiers were discharged, a worldwide flu epidemic struck army camps with particular intensity. But the sense of a great civilization being destroyed or destroying itself, of social breakdown, and of individual powerlessness became part of the American experience as a result of its participation in World War I, with resulting feelings of fear, disorientation, and, on occasion, liberation. Certainty that an old order had ended (whether one regretted or rejoiced at this fact) and uncertainty as
to what might arise (whether one looked ahead with fear or anticipation) marked what more than one social critic called the "modern temper." Other forces making for rapid social change and resultant disorientation had been at work in the country for some time. Urbanization, industrialization, and immigration had been altering the appearance and character of the United States since the end of the Civil War and they continued apace after World War I. New technology evolved as well. The telephone and electricity, both nineteenth-century inventions, now expanded into American homes at large. The phonograph record and the record player, the motion picture (which acquired sound in 1929), and the radio made possible, and perhaps inevitable a new kind of connectedness and a new kind of culture, neither elite nor regional, which we call mass or popular culture. This culture—verbal, visual, musical—quickly overpowered both "high" and "folk" culture in its influences. Many writers criticized the commercialism and manipulativeness of this culture. But no artist could escape it; nobody could grow up in America between the wars without listening to the radio, hearing records, and going to the movies. Talented writers were recruited by Hollywood; the possibility of selling one's book to the movies promised new levels of wealth; and various cinematic techniques—the flashback, intercutting, and the like—gave writers new ideas about literary form.

By far the most powerful technological influence in America between the war was the automobile. Automobiles came into existence just before the turn of the twentieth century, thanks to Henry Ford's development of the assembly-line technique for producing them, after 1920 they became cheap enough for most Americans to buy. They drastically reshaped the American occupational structure; literally millions of jobs—in automobile plants, steel mills, highway construction, gas stations, roadside restaurants, and motels—became dependent, in one way or another, on the automobile. The appearance of the countryside and the shape of American cities changed as highways were constructed, as rings of development around urban cores expanded, and as the suburbs came into being. Individual Americans acquired a mobility unimaginable to previous generations. There is no detail of American life that the automobile did not affect. Yet, considered historically, it can be said merely to have intensified qualities of American life that the French social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville pointed to as early as the 1830s: continual movement, lack of tradition, and rootlessness.

To divide history into decades is to simplify; yet to those living in the era, America in the 1920s seemed very different from America in the 1920s, because of the depression brought on by the stock market crash of 1929. The 1920s saw a great struggle over such concerns as personal freedom, social permissiveness, the pursuit of pleasure, and the results of new affluence. Traditionalist Americans—believing in the work ethic, social conformity, duty, and respectability—attempted to control social and private behavior according to a model of white, Protestant, small-town virtues; arrayed against them were newly articulate groups: immigrants, minorities, youth, women, and of course, artists, arguing for a diversity of styles of life. Much energy focused on the issue of Prohibition. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, forbidding the "manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors" was ratified in January 1919. It was widely and openly ignored. Some historians believe that Prohibition opened the door to organized crime, and certainly the phenomenon of the "gangster" arose in the 1920s in connection with bootleg liquor, which organized crime was ready to transport and supply to otherwise law-abiding citizens. The amendment was finally perceived to be unenforceable and was repealed in 1933. The gangster, however, persisted in American life and became a central figure, sometimes a hero, sometimes a villain, in the movies and in the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s.

The 1920s also saw a significant relaxation of sexual mores. Because the double standard had always granted sexual freedom to men, the sexual revolution of the 1920s consisted chiefly in increased freedom for women and increased openness of sexual behavior. The wide-awake yet innocent American girl whose fresh femininity had been celebrated by such writers as Henry James (for example, in Daisy Miller) gave way to the wis-cracking, free-wheeling, independent "flapper" of the Jazz Age, as the 1920s were widely called.

The condition of women improved in other areas of life as well. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was ratified in August 1920 after more than seventy years of activity on behalf of female suffrage. During the 1920s women began to enter the workforce in much larger numbers than before and in a wider range of occupations than the domestic service and factory work that had previously been their chief options outside of marriage. Primary- and secondary-school teaching and clerical and sales positions became almost exclusively female occupations, while women began to enter the higher professions as well—academia, law, medicine, and journalism—although in very small numbers. The numbers of women attending college increased, as did the numbers living alone, traveling on their own, and generally forging independent lives for themselves— notwithstanding that the great majority still looked to marriage and family as their chief goals. Ironically, many of the American male writers who spoke up for self-expression and individualism did not extend their ideas of freedom to women, indeed, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, and T. S. Eliot all interpreted the "New Woman" as an ominous sign of social breakdown.

Although the lives of African-Americans also changed significantly, the deeply segregated structure of American society still resisted integration or respect for black culture. Beginning around 1915, the growth of urban and industrial centers in the North brought millions of blacks out of the rural South and into northern cities. Although this transition turned many black Americans into urban wage earners, the available jobs were at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. They were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools. The most important intellectual development in the period between the wars was certainly the growth of modern science. But because scientific thought and practice remained obscure to most Americans—even American intellectuals—science entered the public domain through the metaphors it provided for organizing nonscientific realms of reality. Without understanding the precise scientific implications of Albert Einstein's special and general theories of relativity, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and Niels Bohr's quantum mechanics theories, people could tell from their very names that scientists saw less certainty and more chance in the universe than had nineteenth-century science, whose procedures of labeling and classifying had assumed stability in nature. Distinctions between matter and energy, between observer and observed, and between time and space were blurred at the frontiers of scientific thinking.

For many literary intellectuals, especially the more conservative, the chief problem raised by the expansion of scientific authority was the corresponding loss of authority for traditional, humanistic explanations of the real world and human life. Such southern writers as John Crowe Ransom, John Peale Bishop, and Allen Tate, as well as poets Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, reacted spiritedly to the increasingly prevalent assumption that nonscientific thinking, because it was imprecise and value-laden, could not explain anything. They belittled the capacity of science to provide accounts of the things that matter, like subjective experience and moral issues. Art, to them, became the repository of a way of experiencing the world other than that offered by science, an alternative worldview. Their approach put a heavy burden of "meaning" on art and was a sign, if not a contributing cause, of the increased specialization of intellectual activity and the division of educated people into what the British novelist and physicist C. P. Snow was later to call the "two cultures"—science versus letters.
The two thinkers whose ideas had the greatest impact on the period were the Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and the German Karl Marx (1818–1883). Freud, who invented the practice of psychoanalysis, propelled an idea of the self as grounded in an “unconscious” that controlled a great deal of overt behavior. Hidden in this unconscious were experiences that one had repressed: traumas, forbidden desires, unacceptable emotions—most of these of a sexual nature and most of them from childhood. Freud believed the development of at least human male development—was universally marked by what he called an “Oedipus complex,” a name borrowed from the classic story of King Oedipus, who had, in a series of dreadful mistakes, killed his father and married his mother. Freud theorized that the story represented the disguised childhood wish of most boys to eliminate the father as a rival and to possess the mother. The forbidden and impossible nature of these wishes left lifelong scars on the adult personality. Freud hypothesized that the process of analysis would help patients understand these emotions and that understanding in turn would enable them to recover the ability to function as productive adults. In popularized form, these ideas were extended to support the relaxation of sexual mores as well as permissiveness in childcare, and they underlay the larger trend toward openness and informality in American behavior.

Marx was a social thinker who believed that the root cause of all behavior was economic and that the leading feature of economic life was the division of society into antagonistic classes based on a relation to the means of production. The Industrial Revolution, according to him, depended on the accumulation of surplus capital by industrialists who paid the least possible amount to workers. The ideas and ideals of any particular society represented the interests of its dominant class; thus individualism was a middle-class or “bourgeois” value because it opposed group movements such as unions or communes. Marx provided an analysis of human behavior directly opposed to Freud’s, since for Marx people were controlled by forces outside the self. Yet both seemed to espouse a kind of determinism that, although counter to long-standing American beliefs in free will and free choice, also seemed better able to explain the terrible things that were happening in the twentieth century.

Marxism can be either a theoretical way of describing society and history or a justification for radical political action. Russian Communists adapted it to their revolutionary aims in 1917. Americans who thought of themselves as Marxists in the 1920s and 1930s were interested in identifying themselves with the world’s workers and in advancing the cause of a society in which the workers would control the means of production. Of course, these ideas went counter to traditional American beliefs in free enterprise and competition in the marketplace. The growth of labor movements in the 1920s, therefore, was contested by industrialists, and because Marxism was of “foreign” origin, the popularity of radical ideas in the decade was often attributed to foreign influences. In the 1920s American Marxists, Socialists, anarchists, and radicals, along with union organizers, were subject to great hostility. The most dramatic instance of this hostility was the so-called Sacco-Vanzetti case. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were two Italian immigrants, both avowed anarchists, who were arrested near Boston after a paymaster and his guard were murdered during a robbery on April 15, 1920. They were tried for this crime and condemned to death in 1921, but it was widely felt that they had not received a fair trial, that their political beliefs had been held against them. There were a number of appeals but eventually, in 1927, they were executed, maintaining to the end that they were innocent. Many literary and public figures became involved in their defense, and several were arrested and jailed during demonstrations that is estimated that well over a hundred poems as well as six plays and eight novels of the time treated the incident.

The Great Depression made political and economic issues even more salient in American life. If the leading theme of the 1920s was social and personal, then that of the 1930s was economic and political. The justification of free-enterprise capitalism, that it ensured a better life for all, seemed disproved by the massive bank and business failures of the decade, along with unprecedented unemployment. In the worst years of the Depression, more than 25 percent of the labor force was unemployed; because most families had only one breadwinner and because there was no help from welfare or social security benefits, the extent of the hardship was enormous. The suicides of millionaire bankers and stockbrokers made the headlines, but more compelling was the enormous toll among ordinary people who lost homes, jobs, farms, and, in life savings in the crash. Conservatives advised waiting until things got better, radicals espoused immediate restructuring of the economy. In this atmosphere, the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 was a victory for American pragmatism; his series of liberal reforms—social security, acts creating jobs in the public sector, welfare, and unemployment insurance—cushioned the worst effects of the Depression and avoided the revolution that many had thought inevitable. Real prosperity did not return, however, until World War II created a great expansion in industry. The Depression was a worldwide phenomenon, and social unrest led to the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe, among which were those of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in Spain, Benito Mussolini in Italy, and Adolf Hitler in Germany. Hitler’s program, which was to make Germany rich and strong by conquering the rest of Europe, led inexorably to World War II.

Given the terrible situation in the United States, the Communist party enjoyed a significant increase in membership and prestige in the 1930s. Numerous intellectuals allied themselves with its causes even if they did not become party members. An old radical journal, The Masses, later The New Masses, became the official literary voice of the party, and various other radical groups founded journals to represent their viewpoints. Visitors to the Soviet Union returned with glowing reports about a true workers’ democracy and prosperity for all. The appeal of communism was significantly enhanced by its claim to be an opponent of fascism. Communists fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 and 1937. Hitler’s nightmare policies of genocide and racial superiority and his plans for a general European war to secure more room for the superior German “folk” to live became increasingly evident as European refugees began to flee to the United States in the 1930s, and many believed that the U.S.S.R. would be the only country able to withstand the German war machine. But Soviet communism showed another side to Americans when Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator, instituted a series of brutal purges in the Soviet Union beginning in 1936 and then in 1939 signed a pact promising not to go to war against Germany. The senses of disillusionment and betrayal felt by many radicals over these acts led, after the end of World War II, to many 1930s left-wing activists’ becoming staunch anti-Communists.

LITERATURE AND THE TIMES

Despite the dramatic social changes of the period between World War I and II, American literature was not completely separated from its roots. The influences of such great nineteenth-century figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ralph Waldo Whitman remained strong, while those of other, newly recognized, writers like Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson were also felt. The teaching of American literature in colleges began to establish in the 1920s on the premise that these earlier writers constituted a true American literary tradition worthy of study alongside the British. Many writers of the post—Civil War period were still active in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Hamlin Garland, the spokesman for literary naturalism, wrote his best-known autobiography between 1917 and 1930; Edith Wharton published her masterpiece, The Age of Innocence, in 1920; and Theodore Dreiser’s best novel, An American Tragedy, appeared in 1925. A number of writers who achieved emi-
nence after 1914—Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Sherwood Anderson, H. D., Edwin Arlington Robinson, Carl Sandburg, and Willa Cather—had begun to publish before the beginning of World War I. Finally, writers like Edmund Wilson, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, and others who achieved their greatest recognition after World War II began their careers before 1945.

Nevertheless, we are justified in seeing coherence in the work written between the two world wars and in relating that coherence to historical pressures. Put in the most general terms, much serious literature written between 1914 and 1945 attempted to convey a vision of social decay through appropriate techniques or offered radical critiques of American society on behalf of working people or tried to develop a conservative literature that could counter social breakdown. In contrast, literature created before World War I reflected a sense of society as something stable, whose repetitions and predictability enabled one to chronicle a universal human situation through accurate representation of particulars. And in contrast again, writers after World War II tended to lack the faith that literature could reflect any reality, even a disintegrating one; they also had much less confidence in the literary art than did writers working in the 1920s and 1930s. To simplify: writers before World War I had faith in society and in art, writers between 1914 and 1945 had faith in art, and writers after 1945 had lost even that sustaining faith and hence the faith in themselves that had inspired and sustained writers between the wars.

MODERNISM

Modernism is the name of the major artistic movement responding to the sense of social breakdown in the early twentieth century. It was an international movement shared by many art forms. The poetry of William Butler Yeats, James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past (1913–27), Thomas Mann’s novels and short stories, including The Magic Mountain (1924)—these were only a few of the literary products of this movement in England and on the Continent. In painting, artists like Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, and Georges Braque invented cubism; in the twenties the surrealist movement known as dadaism emerged. The American public was introduced to modern art at the famous New York Armory Show of 1913, which featured cubist paintings and caused an uproar. Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, which, to the untrained eye, looked like no more than a mass of crudely drawn rectangles, was especially provocative. Composers like Igor Stravinsky similarly produced music in a “modern” mode, featuring dissonance and discontinuity rather than neat formal structure and appealing tonal harmonies. His composition The Rite of Spring provoked a riot in the Paris concert hall where it was premiered.

At the heart of the modernist aesthetic lay the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies. To the extent that art incurred such a false order, it had to be renounced. Order, sequence, and unity in works of art might well be considered only expressions of a desire for coherence rather than actual reflections of reality. Generalization, abstraction, and high-flown writing might conceal rather than convey the real. The form of a story, with its beginnings, complications, and resolutions, might be mere artifice imposed on the flux and fragmentation of experience.

Thus the defining formal characteristic of the modernist work, whether a painting, a sculpture, or a musical composition, is its construction out of fragments. The long work is an assemblage of fragments, the short work a carefully realized fragment. Compared with earlier writing, modernist literature is notable for what it omits—the explanations, interpretations, connections, summaries, and distancing that provide continuity, perspective, and security in traditional literature. A typical modernist work will seem to begin arbitrarily, to advance without explanation, and to end without resolution, consisting of vivid segments juxtaposed without cushioning or integrating transitions. There will be shifts in perspective, voice, and tone. Its rhetoric will be understated, ironic. It will suggest rather than assert, making use of symbols and images instead of statements. Fragments will be drawn from diverse areas of experience. The effect will be surprising, shocking, and unsettling: the experience of reading will be challenging and difficult.

In practice, as opposed to theory, most modernist literature retains a degree of coherence, but its dynamic pattern is beneath the surface. The reader has to dig the structure out. This is why the reader of a modernist work is often said to participate in the actual work of making the poem or story. Often, the modernist work is structured as a quest for the very coherence that, on its surface, it seems to lack. Because patterns of searching appear in most of the world’s mythologies, many modernist works are unified by reference to myth. Christianity appears among world myths as the basis of Western civilization, and the modern world for some comes into being when circumstances seem to show Christianity to be only a myth, a merely human construction for creating order out of, and finding purpose in, meaningless flux.

The search for meaning, even if it does not succeed, becomes meaningful in itself. Literature, especially poetry, becomes the place where the one meaningful activity, the search for meaning, is carried out, and therefore literature is, or should be, vitally important to society. The subject matter of modernist writing often became, by extension, the poem or literary work itself. Ironically—on this subject matter was motivated by deep concern about the interrelation of literature and life—this subject often had the effect of limiting the audience for a modernist work. The difficulty of this new type of writing also limits the appeal of modernism: clearly, difficult works about poetry are not candidates for best-sellers. Nevertheless, over time, the principles of modernism have become increasingly influential.

The content of the modernist work may be varied as the interests and observations of the writer; indeed, with a stable external world in question, subjectivity was ever more valued and accepted in literature. Modernists in general, however, emphasized the concrete sensory image or detail as the direct conveyer of experience. They also relied on the reference (allusion) to literary, historical, philosophical, or religious details of the past as a way of reminding readers of the old, lost coherence. Vignettes of contemporary life, chunks of popular culture, dream imagery, and symbolism drawn from the author’s private repertory of life experiences are also important. A work built from these various levels and kinds of material may move across time and space, shift from the public to the personal, and open literature as a field for every sort of concern. The inclusion of all sorts of material previously deemed ‘unliterary’ in works of high seriousness involved the use of language that would also previously have been thought improper, including representations of the speech of the uneducated and the inarticulate, the colloquial, slangy, and the popular. The traditional educated literary voice, conveying truth and culture, lost its authority; this is what Ernest Hemingway had in mind when he asserted that the American literary tradition began with Huckleberry Finn.

Though modernist techniques and manifestos were initiated by poets, they entered and transformed fiction in this period as well. Prose writers strove for directness, compression, and vividness. They were sparing of words. The average novel became quite a bit shorter than it had been in the nineteenth century, when a novel was expected to fill two or even three volumes. The modernist aesthetic gave new significance to the short story, which had previously been thought of as a relatively slight artistic form. (Poems, too, became shorter; modernist poets struggled to write long poems but the principles of unity or organization that had enabled long poems to be written in previous eras were not available to them.) Victorian or realistic fiction achieved its effects by accumulation and saturation; modern fiction preferred suggestion. Victorian fiction featured an authoritative
narrator, modern fiction tended to be written in the first person or to limit the reader to one character’s point of view on the action. This limitation accorded with the modernist sense that “truth” does not exist objectively but is the product of a personal, subjective interpretation. The selected point of view was often that of a naïve or marginal person—a child or an outsider—so as to convey better the reality of confusion rather than the myth of certainty.

“Serious” literature between the two world wars found itself in a curious relationship with the culture at large. For it was attacking the old-style idea of traditional literature, it felt itself attacked in turn by the ever-growing industry of popular literature. The reading audience in America was vast, but it preferred a kind of book quite different from that turned out by literary modernists: tales of romance or adventure, historical novels, crime fiction, and westerns became popular forms that enjoyed success the serious writer could only dream of. The problem was that often he or she did dream of it; unrealistically, perhaps, the Ezra Pound of the era imagined himself with an audience of millions. When, on occasion, this dream came true—as it did for F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway—writers often accused themselves of having sold out.

Nevertheless, serious writers in these years were, in fact, being published and read as writers had not been before in earlier times. The number of so-called little magazines—that is, magazines of very small circulations devoted to the publication of works for a small audience (sometimes the works of a specific group of authors)—was in the hundreds. Poetry: A Magazine of Verse began in 1912. The Little Review followed in 1914. Then came the Seven Arts in 1916, the Dial in 1917, the Frontier in 1920, Reviewer and Broom in 1921, Fugitive in 1922, The Quarter in 1925, Transition and Hound and Horn in 1927, and many more. The culture that did not listen to serious writers or make them rich still gave them plenty of opportunity to be read and allowed them (in such neighborhoods as Greenwich Village in New York City) a freedom in style of life that was quite new in American history. In addition, such major publishers as New Directions, Random House, Scribner, and Harper were actively looking for serious fiction and poetry to feature along with best-sellers like Gone with the Wind and Anthony Adverse.

**TRADITIONALISM**

The profession of authorship in the United States has always defined itself in part as a patriotic enterprise, whose aims were to help develop a cultural life for the nation and embody national values. From these aims, a powerful tradition of regionally based literature emerged after the Civil War. Because modernism was an international movement, it seemed to some to conflict with the American tradition in literature and hence was by no means automatically accepted by American writers. To some, the frequent pessimism, nostalgia, and conservatism of the movement made it essentially unsuited to the progressive, dynamic culture that they believed to be distinctive of this nation. To many others, modernist techniques were exciting and indispensable but required adaptation to specifically American topics and to the goal of contributing to a uniquely American literature. Thus artists who may be thought of as modernists in one context—Hart Crane or William Carlos Williams, for example—must be thought of as traditional American writers in another, since they wanted to write “American” works as such. And a profoundly modern writer like William Faulkner cannot be extricated from his commitment to writing about his native South.

The leading American exponent of a “pure” modernism tended to be peremptory in literature. Writers like Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H. D., and T. S. Eliot. (But two important exceptions to this generalization are Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens.) These writers left the United States because they found the country singularly lacking in a tradition of high culture and indifferent, if not downright hostile, to artistic achievement. They also believed that a national culture could never be more than parochial. In London in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and in Paris during the 1920s, they found a vibrant community of dedicated artists and a society that respected them and allowed them a great deal of personal freedom. Yet they seldom thought of themselves as deserting their nation and none of them gave up American citizenship. They thought of themselves as bringing the United States into the larger context of European culture. The ranks of these permanent expatriates were swelled by American writers who lived abroad for some part of the period: Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Frost, Eugene O’Neill, and Dorothy Parker all did so, as did many others including Sinclair Lewis and Djuna Barnes.

Those writers who came back, however, and those who never left took very seriously the task of integrating modernist ideas and methods with American subject matter. Many writers chose to identify themselves with the American scene and to root in a specific region. The treatment of the region in such works was sometimes celebratory and sometimes critical. Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Willa Cather worked with the Midwest; Cather grounded her later work in the South; John Steinbeck wrote about California; and Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost identified their work with New England.

An especially strong center of regional literary activity emerged in the South, which had a weak literary tradition up to the Civil War. Critics and poets centered at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, produced a group manifesto in 1929 called I’ll Take My Stand, a collection of essays that advocated some traditional southern values—the gracious, stable, leisurely, ritualized, hierarchical plantation civilization—as a cultural alternative to the social fragmentation they perceived in the North. Among these “Southern Agrarians” were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, all writing an elegant, learned verse in which they tried to revitalize what they took as the ideals of an earlier time. The influence of these writers, especially in academe, sometimes tended to conceal the fact that the South spoke with many voices during this period. Ellen Glasgow wrote about a South made up of cities and small farmers; Thomas Wolfe’s was an Appalachian South of hardy mountain people; Katherine Anne Porter wrote about her native Texas as a heterogeneous combination of frontier, plantation, and Latin cultures. Above all, William Faulkner depicted a decaying Deep South anguished by racial and historical conflict.

Some writers—as the title of John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. clearly shows—attempted to speak for the nation as a whole. Hart Crane’s long poem The Bridge and William Carlos Williams’s Paterson both take an American place as symbol and expand it to a vision for all America, following the model established by Walt Whitman. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby is similarly ambitious, and many writers addressed the whole nation in individual works—for example, E. E. Cummings’s next to of course god america i and Robinson Jeffers’s Shim, Perishing Republic.

Some attention to regionalism can be seen in the new literary articulateness of black Americans. In the 1920s the area of New York City called Harlem, whose population had been swelled both by black New Yorkers moving “uptown” and by southern newcomers, became a center for black cultural activities. The so-called Harlem Renaissance involved the attempt of African-American artists in many media to develop a strong cultural presence in America, both to demonstrate that black artists could equal white artists in their achievements and to articulate their own cultural traditions and values. Writers like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston attained prominence. The Harlem Renaissance, though it expressed protest and anger, was deliberately upbeat, avoiding the rage and despair characteristic of African-American writing after World War II. The note of pure anger was not expressed until Richard Wright, who had come to literary maturity in Chicago, not Harlem, published Native Son in 1940. A more
nated by a view of good literature as necessarily disengaged from specific social issues, ignored this engaged, partisan work entirely. Moreover, in the atmosphere of the McCarthy era, many writers suppressed or revised their earlier radical poetry. Finally, recognition of the repressive and brutal aspects of Soviet communism was deeply disillusioning to many writers; the more idealistic they had been to start, the greater their later cynicism.

**AMERICAN DRAMA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Drama in America was slow to develop as a self-conscious literary form. It was not until 1920—the year of Eugene O'Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon*—that America produced a playwright. This is not to say that theater—productions and performances—was new to American life. After the American Revolution theaters—at first with itinerant English actors and companies, then with American—opened throughout the East; among early centers were Boston and Philadelphia as well as New York City. As the country expanded westward, so did its theater, together with other kinds of performance: burlesques, showboats on the Mississippi, minstrel shows, pantomimes. As the nineteenth century went on, the activity became centered more and more in New York—indeed, within a few blocks, known as “Broadway.” Managers originated plays there, and then sent them out to tour through the rest of the country, as Eugene O’Neill’s father did with his *Count of Monte Cristo*.

Healthy changes in American theater are often in reaction against Broadway, a pattern observable as early as 1915 with the formation of the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players, both located in New York’s Greenwich Village and both dedicated to the production of plays that more conservative managers refused. The Provincetown Players would shortly be producing the first works of Eugene O’Neill. These fledgling companies, and others like them, knew better what they opposed than what they wanted. European influence was strong. By 1915, Henrik Ibsen in Europe and George Bernard Shaw in England had shown that the theater could be an arena for serious ideas, while the psychological dramas of August Strindberg, the symbolic work of Maurice Maeterlinck, and the sophisticated cynicism of Arthur Schnitzler provided other models. The American tours of European companies, in particular the Moscow Art Theatre in 1923, further exposed Americans to the theatrical avant-garde. American playwrights in the 1920s and 1930s were united not just by a common cause of ideas, European or American, but by the new assumption that drama could be a branch of contemporary literature.

The era’s leading playwright, if not the most successful in all his experiments, was Eugene O’Neill. Just as his contemporaries in poetry and fiction were changing and questioning their forms, so O’Neill—although not under their influence—sought to redefine his. He experimented less in language than in dramatic structure and in new production methods available through technology (e.g., lighting) or borrowed from the stylized realism of German expressionism. Almost as famous at the time was Maxwell Anderson, whose best plays—the tragic *Winterset* (1925) and the romantic comedy *High Tor* (1937)—embodied a stylized blank verse, a language attempted by few modern dramatists. Playwrights such as Sidney Howard, Lilian Hellman, and Robert Sherwood explored problems of the modern character in serious realistic plays. George Kaufman and his many collaborators, especially Moss Hart, invented a distinctively American form, the wisecracking domestic and social comedy, while S. N. Burt and George S. Kaufman and Philip Barry wrote higher comedies of ideas. The musical comedy was another distinctively American invention: beginning as an amalgam of jokes, songs, and dances, it progressed steadily toward an integration of its various elements.

Social commentary and satire had been a thread in the bright weave of American drama since the early twenties, beginning, perhaps, with Elmer Rice’s fiercely

**PROSE, POETRY, AND POLITICAL**

Many of the modernists met the social challenges of the postwar era by producing severely pessimistic cultural criticism or by boldly rejecting social issues altogether. Imaginative vision was thought by many to give access to an ideal world, apart from and above reality, or to contain alternatives of higher values than those reigning in the statehouse and the marketplace, which could enrich life. Others maintained that literature was an independent domain, with its own subjects and rewards, whose independence would be undermined by nonliterary goals. And still others maintained that literature had to be a sanctuary of free artistic expression, so that its ultimate meaning was precisely the value of the individual, a meaning that would be compromised by social platforms and party politics. Because poetry had always been thought of as the purest and highest form of literature, arguments of this nature tended to center on poetry not prose.

Many poets rejected these arguments, and the idea of literature itself was hotly contested during this period. Writers following the Communist party line insisted that art should celebrate the working classes, attack capitalism, and forward the revolutionary goals articulated in Moscow. Less doctrinaire social-minded writers argued that poetry, with its historical origins in public ritual, could continue to play a role in the public domain without sacrificing artistic quality. Moreover, they held that defenses of artistic freedom should extend to artists who chose to write for political or social ends. Some maintained that unlike prose, which could at best only reflect and analyze social conditions, poetry could change the world. Thus, along with the social realist and proletarian prose of the 1920s and 1930s came a significant outpouring of political and protest poetry. Few poets did this kind of work exclusively, but almost every writer of the period produced some of it, with politics ranging from the libertarian conservatism of Robinson Jeffers and the fascism of Ezra Pound through the liberalism of Edna St. Vincent Millay to the radicalism of Langston Hughes and T. S. Eliot. With the coming of World War II, many poets who had previously held themselves aloof from social activism—like Marianne Moore—felt the need to put their writing to public service. For several reasons, however, the political poetry of many modernist writers slipped out of view in the 1950s and early 1960s. College literature classes, domi-
expressionistic play about a rebellious nonentity, *The Adding Machine* (1923). After the Depression social criticism became a much more important dramatic theme. Propaganda plays were performed by many radical groups. Perhaps the most significant was Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), which dramatized a tax drivers’ strike meeting and turned the stage into a platform for argument.

The year 1945 saw the first successful production of a play by Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, while Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* was produced in 1947. Each play introduced its audience to themes and emphasized that its author would pursue in future works—for Williams a heightened “poetic realism” in the study of troubled characters of a “fugitive kind,” and for Miller more intellectualized examinations of ordinary people under social pressure. In the 1940s and 1950s, as in the 1910s, experimental productions that could not exist in the conservative and expensive atmosphere of Broadway were done “off-Broadway,” usually in Greenwich Village. Off-Broadway became the alternative center for both new and established playwrights. The Circle in the Square, for example, had a remarkable success with its premiere of O’Neill’s *Tae Iceman Cometh* (1956), a production that did much to revive flagging interest in the playwright. The Circle also hosted the first public production of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964).

The same experimental impulse surfaced again in the 1960s, this time as “off-off-Broadway.” The movement was in part a reaction to the rising costs of off-Broadway, but was also part of the American counterculture. The plays of Off Off, wrote the theater historians Albert Poiard and Bruce Mailman, “have a common language that is rooted on a new set of symbols. The new symbols are a function of the new audience, for Off Off is an audience-oriented theatre.” The venues were often non-commercial theaters, but “performance spaces,” such as those at the Caffe Cino and the La Mama Experimental Theater. Sam Shepard was among the playwrights who served an apprenticeship in this heady atmosphere.

Moreover, theatrical activity outside New York has strongly increased: a number of cities support regional theaters, as do universities. What is noteworthy about these theaters is their support of new work. David Mamet, for example, for years directed his plays produced in Chicago theaters; some of Shepard’s works were written for San Francisco’s Magic Theater; and August Wilson, the most powerful African-American playwright in recent years, has his plays mounted at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Indeed, the plays of the Broadway year 1987–88 almost all originated elsewhere, for, as critic Gerald Weales has remarked, “Broadway... is now a merchant of pretended goods.”

The Asian-American playwright David Henry Hwang, winner of a Tony award in 1988 for *M. Butterfly*, has noted that “American theater is beginning to discover Americans. Black theater, women’s theater, gay theater, Asian-American theater, Hispanic theater.” Thus although Lorraine Hansberry’s early death prevented her from fulfilling the promise of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), she has been followed by such tough-minded but lyrical writers as LeRoi Jones (later Imamu Amiri Baraka). Ed Bullins, Ntozake Shange, and Wilson. A generation of younger women have written warmly and incisively—and not only on women’s themes—among them Tina Howe and Beth Henley, Marsha Norman’s *Night, Mother* (1982) won the Pulitzer Prize.

Many of the poets and fictionists of this century have written plays—among them Saul Bellow, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Angelina Grimké, T. S. Eliot, John Steinbeck, and Robert Lowell. Such work indicates that drama has moved decisively into the American literary mainstream.

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BLACK ELK

1863–1950

The land was ours before we were the land’s,” Robert Frost intoned at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961, conveniently forgetting (like most of his compatriots) that the first European settlers of North America had arrived on a soil already supporting more than eighteen million occupants. Dispersed across the continent, representing at least three hundred different cultural groups, speaking over two hundred languages and many more dialects, these diverse peoples were dubbed “Indians” by the newcomers who, more or less systematically over the next two and a half centuries, displaced and decimated them. These peoples, in the European imagination confronting them, were merely noble or barbaric “savages” whose destiny it was to give way before the march of civilization.

Within the first century of European settlement, northeastern Native American populations were drastically reduced, more by such imported diseases as smallpox and tuberculosis than by warfare. During the 1830s, under the administration of Andrew Jackson—the president celebrated as democratic champion of “the common man”—the U.S. government instituted an “Indian removal” policy that forced southeastern tribes to relocate on the plains west of the Mississippi. Those who survived the marches had to live on unfamiliar terrain and mingle uncomfortably with resentful Plains tribes. As the pressures of immigration and land hunger increased, all the tribes were pushed farther and farther west and required to live under the eye of U.S. government officials. When the arid lands to which they had been driven were found to contain precious metals and minerals, Native Americans were subjected to yet more pressure. Beginning around 1860, desperate for land and freedom, they intensified their ongoing struggle against the encroaching whites. They were victorious over General Custer in 1876 at the battle of the Little Bighorn, but in 1890 the massacre at Wounded Knee brought American Indian resistance to an end.

Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota (one of the many branches of the Sioux), was born in 1863, on tribal lands that are now probably within the borders of Wyoming. A year later, the cutting of the Bozeman trail opened this region to white passage and settlement. Thus Black Elk never knew a time when his tribe’s traditional ways of life were not threatened. When he was nine years old, he had a vision—an event not uncommon to Lakota boys, part of whose rites of passage to manhood involved a formal quest for visions that would show them the future and their place in it. Black Elk’s childhood vision showed that he was to be a holy man, his social role to heal and conduct religious ceremonies. Black Elk did not reveal his vision to tribal elders and practice his calling until he was almost seventeen years old. By this time his people had returned from Canada, where they had fled following the defeat of Custer, and we were living on the Sioux reservation in what has since become South Dakota.

In 1886 Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, traveling in the eastern United States and Europe for the next three years. His motive was to find out the nature of the white’s power so that he could appropriate it in ways that would regenerate the Lakota. Returning to the Sioux reservation, he witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee, an event that he interpreted as a call to responsibility to contribute to the health and renewal of the tribe. He married in 1892, took the name “Nicholas Black Elk,” and settled down on the reservation to raise a family, to ranch, and to farm. In 1904 he became a Catholic and in 1907, a catechist, authorized to travel around the reservation and give instruction in Catholic rites and doctrine.