

## American Literature: 1914-1945

### Overview

#### THE TWO WARS AS HISTORICAL MARKERS

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- The two world wars (World War I, 1914–1918, and World War II, 1939–1945) bracket a period during which the United States became a fully modern nation. Both wars mobilized the country's industries and technologies, spurred their development, and uprooted citizens.
- World War I left many Americans distrustful of international politics and committed to steering the nation back to prewar modes of life. Many were wary of the growing influence of socialist and Communist ideas, which they associated with labor unions and immigrant radicals. Congress enacted sweeping exclusionary immigration acts in 1924, radically curtailing the flow of immigrants into the country.
- For other Americans, World War I ushered in more progressive forms of political and social life. Women and racial minorities gained some civil liberties and some new social freedoms during this period, though they still faced discrimination.
- Political, social, and cultural life in the United States was transformed by the stock market crash of 1929, which led to an economic depression with a 25 percent unemployment rate. This economic catastrophe was known as the Great Depression.
- The Great Depression did not fully end until the United States entered World War II in 1941. The war unified the country politically and revitalized industry and employment. The United States emerged from World War II as a major industrial and political power.
- The literature of the modern period reflects the nation's attempts to come to terms with the many meanings of modernity. Some writers celebrated modern developments while others lamented them. Most writers believed that old literary forms would not work for new times and were inspired by the possibility of creating something entirely new.
- Writers of the period debated the uses of literary tradition. Some wanted to honor traditional forms and language and to include allusions to canonical works of the past. Others saw such homage as imitative or old-fashioned. Still others used literary tradition oppositionally—alluding to canonical literature ironically or fracturing traditional literary formulas.
- Writers of the period also debated the place of popular culture in serious literature. Some embraced popular forms while others rejected them as cynical commercialism.
- Another issue was the question of how far literature should engage itself in political and social struggle. Some felt that art should participate in the politics of the time, while others believed that art should remain a domain unto itself.

#### CHANGING TIMES

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- The 1920s saw ideological debates pitting adherents to small-town values such as the work ethic, social conformity, duty, and respectability against

internationally minded radicals and affluent young people who argued for more diverse, permissive, and tolerant lifestyles.

- The social codes governing sexual behavior became less restrictive. These social changes found their most influential theorist in Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, inventor of the practice of psychoanalysis and an important developer of the concept of the “unconscious.”
- Women gained the right to vote in 1920 and found new freedoms in educational possibilities, professional opportunities, geographic mobility, and sexuality.
- Around 1915, as a direct result of the industrial needs of World War I, job opportunities opened up for African Americans in the factories of the North. Many left the South for Northern cities in what came to be known as the “Great Migration.”
- Even though African Americans faced racism, segregation, and racial violence in the North, a black American presence soon became powerfully visible in urban cultural life. The Harlem Renaissance—an outpouring of innovative cultural production by African Americans centered in Harlem, a neighborhood of New York City—was one manifestation of this development.
- Class inequality generated intellectual and artistic debate during the modern period. Following the rise of the Soviet Union, the American left increasingly drew its intellectual and political program from the tenets of German philosopher Karl Marx, who located the roots of human behavior in economics and believed that industrialized societies were divided by an antagonistic relationship between capital and labor.
- Americans who thought of themselves as Marxists in the 1920s and 1930s were usually subjected to government surveillance, suspicion, and occasionally violence.

## SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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- Access to electricity, and to modern appliances designed to make communication and domestic work more efficient, expanded dramatically in American homes during the interwar years.
- Devices for recording and playing music, the radio, and motion pictures brought mass popular culture into being.
- Automobiles became affordable for more Americans and transformed ordinary people’s mobility, the structure of American industry, and national topography.
- Scientists during the interwar period made important discoveries about the size and shape of the universe, as well as the nature of time and space. The increased specialization of science as a discipline sometimes made these discoveries difficult for ordinary people to understand and led to rifts between literary intellectuals and scientists.

## THE 1930S

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- The Great Depression was not limited to the United States but was a worldwide phenomenon. It fostered social unrest that led to the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe.
- Many Americans began to question the efficacy and justice of free-enterprise capitalism.

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and instituted a “New Deal” designed to combat the Depression. He inaugurated liberal reforms such as social security, job creation acts, welfare, and unemployment insurance.
- The dire economic situation in the United States produced a significant increase in Communist party membership among Americans during the 1930s. Many supporters of Communism later felt disillusioned and betrayed by the brutality of Soviet Communism under Josef Stalin. Some of these left-wing activists became staunch anti-Communists after World War II.

## AMERICAN VERSIONS OF MODERNISM

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- In literary contexts, the term “modernism” is a catchall for any kind of literary production in the interwar period that dealt with the modern world.
- Literary critics often designate as “high modernism” work that represents the transformation of traditional society under the pressures of modernity and that breaks down traditional literary forms in doing so. Many high modernist texts interpret modernity as an experience of loss and represent the modern world as a scene of ruin.
- As a movement, modernism involved many art forms and media, including sculpture, painting, dance, and music, as well as literature.
- High modernist works are characterized by their construction out of fragments—fragments of myth or history, fragments of experience or perception, fragments of previous artistic work. For the modern artist or writer, the political, social, and aesthetic structures that had organized human experience previously no longer seemed viable in the modern world. Order, sequence, and unity did not seem to them to convey reality. Instead, they emphasized discontinuity, discordance, and fragmentation as more representative of the modern experience.
- Modernist literature often conveys fragmentation through abrupt shifts in perspective, voice, and tone and through a reliance on sometimes obscure symbols and images rather than clear statements of meaning.
- Some modernist literature draws on structures and fragments borrowed from earlier world literature, mythologies, and religions. For some writers, these references to earlier texts expressed profound truths. Other writers alluded to literary traditions ironically.
- Many modernist works are self-reflexive, or concerned with their own nature as art. In this way, they foreground the search for meaning and query the role of art and the perception of art in the production of meaning.
- Faced with making sense of fragments and intuiting connections left unstated, the reader of a modernist work is often said to participate in the creative work of making the poem or story.
- Despite their concern with involving the reader in the production of meaning, modernist literature reached only a limited audience. Many readers found it difficult to understand the meaning of these texts’ fragmentation and to parse their often obscure allusions to other texts or traditions.
- Some major publishers sought out the works of modernist writers to publish alongside more conventional bestsellers. Many more modernist writers found publication in the so-called “little magazines,” which were magazines with very

small circulations. The number of little magazines in the period was in the hundreds.

## MODERNISM ABROAD AND ON NATIVE GROUNDS

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- High modernism was a self-consciously international movement, and many of its leading American exponents lived as permanent or temporary expatriates in Europe. Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H. D., and T. S. Eliot all left the United States permanently, while Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Claude McKay, Katherine Anne Porter, Nella Larsen, Robert Frost, and Eugene O'Neill, among others, spent significant periods of time abroad.
- Modernist writers claimed to find climates more hospitable to artistic achievement and high culture in Europe, though they seldom thought of themselves as deserting their nation. Instead, they believed they were bringing the United States into the larger context of European culture. Many continued to write works that were overtly “American” in theme.
- Regionalism continued to be an important force in American literature. An especially strong center of regional literary activity emerged in the South.
- The history of race in the United States was central to the specifically national subject matter to which many American modernists remained committed.
- The Harlem Renaissance brought African American writers like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston into particular prominence.
- Women writers faced a backlash after their prominence in the nineteenth century. Some male modernist writers asserted their own seriousness by identifying women writers with the didactic, popular writing against which they rebelled. But women still emerged who associated themselves with the important literary trends of the era. Many of these writers concentrated on depictions of women characters or women’s thoughts and experiences, yet few labeled themselves feminists.

## DRAMA

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- Although theatrical productions had been a part of American life since the eighteenth century, drama only emerged as a branch of contemporary literature—rather than a stepchild of popular entertainment—between 1910 and the latter part of the 1920s. It was at this point that drama began to conceive of itself as a literary form.
- Innovations in American theater are often launched in reaction against the popular productions mounted on Broadway. Playwrights Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill were launched off Broadway.
- Musical comedy emerged as a distinctively American dramatic form in the interwar period.
- During the Depression, social criticism became an important dramatic theme, with political plays performed by many radical groups.

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