"An Overview of American Literature"

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Overview: Beginning to 1700

Columbus's voyage to the Americas began the exploitation of Native populations by European imperial powers, but we need not think of the intellectual exchange between the two hemispheres as being entirely in one direction. A Taino Indian whom Columbus seized and trained as a translator, and renamed Diego Colón in Spain, had as much to say to his people upon his return to the Caribbean in 1494 as Columbus did to Ferdinand and Isabella after his triumphant first expedition. The "new world" that Columbus boasted of to the Spanish monarchs in 1500 was neither an expanse of empty space nor a replica of European culture, tools, textiles, and religion, but a combination of Native, European, and African people living in complex relation to one another. After early wonder and awe at their unexpected discovery of inhabited land, Europeans used their technological edge in weaponry (gunpowder and steel) to conquer the region. They were aided in this task by the host of diseases they had brought from the Old World, against which early Americans had no immune resistance. Smallpox, measles, and typhus decimated Native populations, and in response to the lack of a local labor force the Spanish began importing Africans to take their place, thereby compounding genocide with slavery. But by no means were Natives merely helpless victims. Many adopted European weapons and tactics to defend themselves from invaders, and while some collaborated with Europeans, as did some Aztecs with Cortés's Spanish force against their king Montezuma, or the Narragansetts and Mohegans with the New Englanders against the Pequots, they did so not out of submission or gullibility but to gain a temporary upper hand against their Native rivals—truly, a resourceful response to an impossible situation.

The Native cultures Columbus found in the New World displayed a huge variety of languages, social customs, and creative expressions, with a common practice of oral literature without parallel east of the Atlantic. Compared to the three dozen languages, common religion and printed alphabet, and stable boundaries of the European nation-states, the Native peoples were much more diverse. They spoke hundreds of distantly related languages and widely differed in their social organization, from the hunting-gathering, nomadic Utes to the highly structured farming society of the Iroquois confederation. Eight different creation stories have been catalogued, each attesting to the religious diversity of early Americans. But since no Native peoples had a written alphabet, they relied instead on an oral tradition of chants, songs, and spoken narrative, what some critics have called "orature," for their artistic expressions. These verbal genres (trickster tales, jokes, naming and grievance chants, and dream songs, among many others) are "literary" in the sense that they represent the imaginative and emotional responses of their anonymous authors to Native culture. But our Western sense of "literature" is mainly derived from the effects of the written word and has little to do with the performance issues of tempo, pauses, and intonation common to verbal genres. Translations of orature, first into English and then onto the page, leave out a great deal.

Exploratory expeditions to the New World quickly led to colonial settlements, as the major European countries vied with each other for a portion of the western hemisphere's riches. Early voyages by Columbus for Spain, Cabot for England, and Vespucci and Cabral for Portugal mapped and claimed large areas for later colonies. Small settlements made on Hispaniola by Columbus (1493) and in Jamestown by John Smith (1607) faced organized and more numerous Native adversaries as well as internal dissent and mutiny; the early settlers were followed by waves of better armed and equipped settlers who came to stay. The Spanish were most successful in establishing their empire, which by the 1540s reached from central North America and Florida southward, to northern and western South America. The Portuguese settled in eastern Brazil, the French along the St. Lawrence River in present-day Canada, first explored by Jacques Cartier and then settled sixty years later by Samuel de Champlain. The English came to the New World late, after several failed expeditions by Walter Raleigh, Humphrey Gilbert, and Martin Frobisher. Once the Jamestown colony survived its first trials of starvation, disease, riots, and violence with the Powhatan tribe, the English expanded from this base up and down the eastern coast of North America.

The role of writing during the initial establishment and administration of these overseas colonies involved influencing policy makers at home, justifying actions taken without their explicit permission, or bearing witness to the direct and unintended consequences of European

conquest of the Americas. The development of the printing press fifty years before Columbus's first voyage allowed many of his descriptions of the New World to spur the national ambitions and personal imaginations of the Spanish, ensuring new expeditions and future colonies. The long lag time between sending and receiving directions from Europe meant many written records exist as "briefs," in which better informed explorers attempted to adjust colonial policy written largely in reaction to events abroad or to justify opportunistic actions taken without the crown's knowledge, as with Cortés's messages to Charles V about his subjugation of the Aztecs. Writing also recorded the hideous consequences of empire wrought by the Europeans, many of whom reacted strongly against both the unintentional infection of the Natives with Old World diseases and the enslavement of the remainder for plantation labor. It could also be used subversively, as it was by an anonymous Aztec poet who lamented the fall of Montezuma in the Nahuatl language, but in the Roman alphabet. It also afforded opportunities to scribes such as Diego del Castillo and John Smith, who were born into the European underclass, to reshape the possibilities of colonial life away from hereditary privilege and in favor of merit, talent, and effort, all three of which were in short supply but high demand in the New World.

The Puritans who settled in New England represented a different type of colonist, one that emigrated for religious rather than national or economic reasons. The first Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts founded Plymouth Plantation in 1620 and, under William Bradford, began a settlement devoted to religious life: they thought of themselves as Pilgrims. They were separatists whose beliefs were persecuted by the Church of England; after moving briefly to the Netherlands, they chartered the *Mayflower* and sailed for America, where with help from the Wampanoag tribe they survived their first winter. When John Winthrop arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630 with many more Calvinist dissenters, Plymouth was subsumed into the larger organization. Pilgrims and Puritans held similar beliefs, such as the doctrine of "election," that God had predestined before birth those who would be saved and damned. But although the Puritans were rigidly exclusive in their early colonial days, requiring public accounts of conversion before admitting people to church membership and their communion, their faith emphasized rapturous joy and zeal rather than bleak or doleful subsistence.

Since the English language arrived late to the New World, it was by no means inevitable that the English would dominate, even in their own colonies. But by 1700, the strength of the (mostly religious) literary output of New England had made English the preeminent language of early American literature. Boston's size, independent college and printing press at Harvard (founded in 1636), and non-nationalist, locally driven project of producing Puritan literature gave New England the publishing edge over the other colonies. But other tongues existed in small enclaves within the thirteen English colonies that gave a foreign inflection to the local culture. In Albany, New York, for example, Dutch and Belgian mixed with French and Spanish speakers, and the inhabitants were immigrants from throughout Europe; Dutch persisted as an everyday language until the mid-1800s. Similarly, German immigrants in Pennsylvania prompted publishers to cater to their native language.

The state of American literature in 1700, consisting of only about 250 published works, reflects the pressing religious, security, and cultural concerns of colonial life. Printing presses operated in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Annapolis, and colonists could also acquire works published in England. The most prolific author of the period was Cotton Mather, whose writings recorded the late-century war between New England and New France and its Indian allies, a series of biographies (in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*) of American religious "saints," and conduct guides for ministers and servants. Other authors focused on relations with Native Americans, including pamphlets on conferences with New York's important Iroquois allies and captivity narratives recounting the barbarity of their Indian enemies. Still others focused on matters of unsuccessful social integration, as was the case for Quaker dissenters in Boston in 1660, or looked ahead to social problems looming on the horizon, as did Samuel Sewall's antislavery tract *The Selling of Joseph* (1700).

Overview: 1700 – 1820

During the eighteenth century, the religious, intellectual, and economic horizons of the thirteen English colonies expanded, challenging the dominance of Puritan culture with Enlightenment thought and uniting the different regions behind common national interests. The death of the minister and author Cotton Mather in 1728 symbolizes the waning influence of Puritan theocentrism. The scientific and philosophical writings of Isaac Newton

and John Locke argued in favor of a worldview that accepted the ability of individuals to puzzle through and understand the universe and placed a premium on mutual sympathy, or "sentiment," to guide moral action rather than religious grace alone. The Enlightenment emphasis on sentiment helped guide Americans to accept rapid population expansion due to European immigrants, lured overseas by tales of healthier, less crowded communities and merit-based opportunities, and economic expansion, especially in industries relating to agriculture and shipping. The boom in these industries resulted in cosmopolitan comforts, wealth and prosperity, and trade linkages between the colonies and the other ports and countries of the Atlantic Rim. But it also caused suffering for exploited indentured laborers and the African slaves who were brought to work on plantations. And the two populations who had met each other when the Pilgrims landed in 1620 found their numbers and influence dwindling: many communities of New England Indians disappeared entirely due to urban expansion, and from the same cause many of the small-town Puritan settlements lost families due to religious dissension and a search for better farmlands. The same prosperity and security that led colonists to rely less on their neighbors for their physical safety allowed them to think less of what separated them from communities in other colonies (or from those descended from other ethnicities) than of their common social and cultural experiences—potentially national interests that would lead directly to the Revolution.

The Enlightenment involved the uneasy mixture of new scientific and philosophical investigations into the nature of the universe with traditional responses to scripture. Some of these questioners were "deists," who believed in a comprehensible universe ordered by a supreme being who was rational and benevolent. Their empirical studies replaced the Puritans' habit of looking past reality for emblems of spiritual grace with an emphasis on the stable, observable world. People became more interested in how their actions related to the social well-being of their neighbors than their own spiritual progress; similarly, readers were more eager to read the accounts of ordinary individuals as they thoughtfully responded to the feelings and experiences of others, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, than the metaphysical introspections of divines like Cotton Mather popular in the preceding generations. Enlightenment thought drove many to reject the innate depravity of human beings in favor of the assumption that people were basically good, and therefore capable of living together in sympathy and understanding with their fellow citizens.

In response to the Enlightenment's intellectual rigor and call to ethical sentiment, the "Great Awakening" of 1735–50 encouraged a return to Calvinist zeal by stressing an intense emotional commitment and complete surrender to faith. Itinerant ministers like the Methodist George Whitefield traveled the countrysides of England and America, preaching to thousands of new converts with appeals designed to register with the cult of feeling John Locke's philosophy had sponsored. Jonathan Edwards's preaching in New England was the most successful integration of Enlightenment thought and Puritanic zeal during the Great Awakening. His ministry rejuvenated the Calvinist doctrine of election in spite of its irrationality by stressing the rational delights to be gained by surrendering to God's sovereignty and how spiritually moving true religious feeling could be. Edwards went too far when he demanded early signs of personal conversion; his Northampton congregation dismissed him from his ministry in 1749.

Imperial politics and the American Revolution dominated the writings of the late eighteenth century. After the British began imposing punitive and damaging laws on the colonies to punish dissent and repay debts from a recent war with France, the Second Continental Congress pushed through a Declaration of Independence authored by Thomas Jefferson. What had started as a meeting to oppose overseas taxation policies quickly led to open revolt once the common interests of the delegates were made clear. Revolutionary writings by Thomas Paine, most notably *Common Sense* (1776) and *The American Crisis,* used Enlightenment ideals and the antimonarchy language of the British Whig Party to spur public support for the fledgling rebellion. The success of Paine's writings underscores the growing importance of American newspapers, the first of which appeared in 1704, and whose number had grown to about fifty by the Revolution. Significant political writings like those by Hamilton and Jay and Madison's *Federalist Papers* (1787–88), which successfully argued for adoption of the U.S. Constitution, appeared mainly in New York newspapers, and after the war, poets and satirists like Philip Freneau continued to use periodicals to engage in partisan attacks on political positions. Some successful women writers, most notably Judith Sargent Murray and Sarah Wentworth Morton, used pseudonymous publications in periodicals to claim their right as women to

engage in the political sphere traditionally reserved for men. And some women novelists like Susannah Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster capitalized on the increased appetite for women's writing to publish novels they hoped would sell enough to stay in print.

Lasting effects of the Enlightenment include a greater social mobility, cultural acceptance of ideals such as reason and equality, and the assumption of an innate moral sense in all Americans. Whereas John Winthrop had assumed in his *Model of Christian Charity* (1630) that both privileged and poor had a stable place in society, by 1800, President John Adams would remark on the American lack of an aristocracy and therefore the possibilities for social mobility unheard of in Europe, at least for white men. Others were less fortunate: African Americans were enslaved, and even the Founding Fathers turned a blind eye to such hypocrisy; and white women, despite their privileges, could neither vote, nor own property, nor earn wages for themselves. Native Americans, too, found their lot unacceptable: they had supported the British in the Revolution and now faced reprisals from greedy and vengeful Americans. But by and large, the preeminent mood of the period was one that supported the ultimate "perfectability of man," and the Enlightenment principles that had led to the Revolution would eventually be extended to those groups that had not won liberty and equality. For many, Benjamin Franklin's example proves most representative for this period: ambitious, self-educated, and constantly curious, self-improving, introspective, and civic-minded. Franklin's influence and direct involvement are evident in many of the important documents and treaties of the Revolutionary period. His idealistic assumption that all people shared a common sense of right and wrong was shared by many Enlightenment thinkers and represents a fundamental tenet of American democracy.

Overview: 1820-1865

The 1941 publication of F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* helped to establish the writers in this volume as pioneers of American literary nationalism who helped shape American literature for the next two centuries. Matthiessen argued that the years between 1820 and the Civil War represented a first flowering of American literary talent. Calling the period a "renaissance," he selected a small group of neglected authors (Melville, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau) whose works he felt had been undervalued by readers and critics. Matthiessen argued that the writers of this period helped to forge a stable national literary perspective and greatly influenced the nineteenth- and twentieth- century writers who came after them. Matthiessen's list of "renaissance" writers has been challenged and adapted since its first publication. Among other things, his list focused primarily on male writers from the same class and ethnic background, and excluded many of the more popular novelists and poets whom most readers living during these years might have read and recognized. Critics have also noted that Matthiessen exaggerates the separateness of the English and American literary traditions. Still, the idea of an American "renaissance" has proven useful to students and critics wishing to study how these antebellum writers both built upon the work of those who preceded them and shaped the work of future writers.

During the 1820s, writers and critics called for nationalistic literature to reflect the new sense of cultural independence from Britain. After Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans to end the War of 1812, a heroic national myth grew up around him that asserted the strength and optimism of the American character and suggested a hopeful trajectory for national literature that concentrated on ordinary people. British literary nationalists looked down on the efforts of American authors to establish a distinct or "emancipated" literary tradition, and many of the most successful U.S. writers of the 1820s saw themselves in conversation with European culture rather than separated from it. Instabilities in the territorial boundaries of the growing country and unresolved sectional contradictions regarding approaches to slavery, tariffs, and federal works projects made any consensus on how American literature should represent its culture extremely difficult to achieve. By and large, though, authors in the 1820s shared a sense of the distinctiveness of the American landscape, its colonial history, and the legitimacy of its traditions, and worked to represent the ways that ordinary Americans were coming to grips with their country's contradictions.

The geographical expansion and population growth of the United States in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century was matched by a marked increase in publication of books and periodicals. As cities grew in size and transportation to the interior of the country became faster and easier thanks to the construction of canals and railroads, the market for printed materials expanded. The

professional writer's ability to devote his or her time to creative writing during the antebellum years was often challenged by differences in international and American copyright laws and by negative attitudes about the writer's occupation. American readers might have benefited from cheap pirated editions of novels and poems, but the unpredictability of copyright royalties meant that many authors had to support themselves through another occupation, such as editing or writing short journalistic criticism for a newspaper or magazine. Social stigmas made it difficult on the one hand for male writers to justify sole occupation as poet or novelist, and on the other hand for women to enter the public sphere as authoritative social commentators.

Despite these economic difficulties, antebellum writers had the ability to reach a larger and more educated audience than ever before. Many used this opportunity to argue for reform and to represent the necessity of resolving looming cultural conflicts. Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings, in particular, argued for the creative power of the imagination and implied an agency for the individual in rethinking his or her role in society. Emerson's influence on authors such as Whitman, Hawthorne, Fuller, and Melville can be found in their willingness to question current institutions and reinterpret the status quo of American society within their works. Much of the energy for reform during these years derived from literature's ability to cause readers to sympathize with other people's plights by representing characters from unequal positions of privilege or freedom—slaves, Native Americans, and poor immigrants in urban settings. Many women writers, rising to prominence through abolitionist or urban reform efforts, also wrote about the right to vote for women and the need for greater legal equality between men and women. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, the first national suffrage meeting of its kind, is one example of the expanded role of women in national politics, but the massive popularity of women's temperance and anti-slavery literature (especially Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) speaks to the power of women's involvement in these social issues. One typical rhetorical tactic used by both suffragist and abolitionist reformers was to remind their readers of the unrealized potential of the Declaration of Independence. Margaret Fuller, for example, argued in "The Great Lawsuit" (1843) that Jefferson's "Declaration" implied that the right to vote ought to extend to women as well as to men. Henry David Thoreau's speech "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854), meanwhile, objected strenuously to the hypocrisy of a northern state that had voted to outlaw slavery yet abetted the recapture by southerners of fugitive slaves. As reform movements increasingly were replaced by violent harbingers of the Civil War to come, writers of the renaissance turned increasingly to expressions of disillusionment with the failed promise of the American Revolution.

Although the American renaissance should by no means be considered a coherent school or movement, the writers included in this anthology responded to the same pressing issues of their times and stayed in conversation with each other through their writings. Much of the literature of the antebellum years reflects the direct and indirect influences these writers had on one another. Common interests in travel and international friendship, as well as a shared sense of the need to shore up their current literature in references to the languages and cultures of the classical and imperial past, also linked these authors. But their desire to root the writings of the renaissance in a nationalist historical tradition was always in service to the development of an American perspective that could take its place in the context of the other cultures of the world.

Overview: 1865-1914

Between 1865 and 1914 the United States transformed from a country just emerging from a destructive civil war to an imperial nation with overseas possessions and coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific. Completed in 1869, the transcontinental railroad opened up the interior to settlement by homesteaders and prospectors, who arrived to exploit cheap land and discoveries of gold and other useful ores. Such innovations as the development of telegraph, telephone, and electricity networks helped develop these new Western settlements along with the East and allowed a burst of economic prosperity and industrialization. Enticed by promises of ready work made by businesses trying to keep wages down through an oversupply of labor, a massive influx of immigrants arrived, mostly from Europe and East Asia, and swelled the ranks of New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. By 1893, so many Americans had moved westward that the historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed. Americans subsequently turned their attentions overseas, toward new territories in Samoa and Hawaii and former Spanish possessions in Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, in an attempt to join the European empires on the world stage.

Though these years brought wealth to some and stature to America in the eyes of the world, the undesirable consequences of rapid territorial, population, and industrial expansion were felt most by those with the least resources to resist the greedy, unscrupulous, and powerful. The Native American populations of the Great Plains, whose cultures depended on the free-roaming buffalo herds, faced the shock of interference in their hunting grounds by crisscrossing telegraph lines and railroad tracks. The federal government developed small reservations to replace hunting traditions with farming, always with the expectation that Native customs and distinctiveness would eventually vanish. Much of the land stolen from Natives was acquired cheaply by railroad companies and land prospectors, even though the Homestead Act of 1862 had intended the land to be improved by small farmers and immigrant families. Those homesteaders who did settle the plains were squeezed by the pricing policies of railroad monopolies that attempted to corner the transportation market and eliminate all competition. In the railroad industry, as with steel, oil, meat packing, and banking and finance, corporate power was focused in the hands of a few powerful men such as Gould, Stanford, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Morgan, Hill, and Rockefeller. The plight of workers in the major cities was dire, not just because of the monopolists' control over inhumane and often dangerous working conditions, but because of corrupt government officials who allowed them to act without hindrance. Early efforts to organize labor against the monopolists were often violent and had to fight against social prejudices favoring unfettered capitalism and a hands-off approach to business. In the same way, small farmers often failed to organize because of an abiding desire for independence that trumped the benefits of collective action.

The literature of this period appears in the context of the dramatic diversification of American experience, both ethnic and regional, and the small but insistent movement among authors to combat the social inequities arising from too-rapid growth. Immigration from Europe and Asia resulted in a newly heterogeneous American population, now no longer mainly of New England descent, and now more diverse in terms of class and ethnic backgrounds. As populations in large urban centers and all geographic areas of the country increased, newspapers and magazines focusing on specific ethnic and regional readerships flourished. Among many others, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, founded by Abraham Cahan, catered to a Yiddish-speaking New York reader, and the *Overland Express* was the first periodical to feature Western-themed fiction and journalism. With new publishing opportunities available to depict previously underrepresented and "marginalized" peoples, many fictional characters, often created by authors from the same cultural and economic backgrounds, began to challenge received notions about the American character. But this new diversity often resulted in suspicion, antagonism, and cultural paranoia, triggering a cultural unease that pitted urban against rural, labor against management, and immigrant against native. In response, a generation of writers spoke out against social, economic, and political injustices in newspapers and magazines. Among these were journalists known as "muckrakers" for their devotion to exposing the dangers of the city and the evils of monopolies. Some notable muckrakers included Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris, who took on the railroad monopoly on behalf of small farmers, and Lincoln Steffens, who exposed the corruption of government officials like Boss Tweed of New York. Other writers took advantage of the new periodical media to write the "literature of argument," which brought the spirit of reform to sociology, philosophy, and economics: some examples include Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), which attacked U.S. injustices against Native Americans, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898), which explored wealth and women's rights, and Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which examined the "conspicuous consumption" of the super-wealthy business magnates. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1900) and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are two examples of nonfiction prose that responded to racial injustices by challenging white audiences to work toward political solutions.

To face the challenge of representing these dynamic cultural changes, American authors turned to the international aesthetic of realism, whose European practitioners include Leo Tolstoy, Henrik Ibsen, and Gustave Flaubert. American realism was an attempt to accurately represent life as authors saw it through the use of concrete descriptive details that readers would recognize from their own lives. William Dean Howells advanced a type of realism that concentrated on affectionate portrayals of ordinary, middle-class characters in an attempt to make the novel more democratic and inclusive. Henry James and Edith

Wharton, meanwhile, focused on refined mental states, rather than exterior surfaces and surroundings. Their "psychological realism" attempted to find a precise language for intangible moral situations. The realism of Mark Twain was devoted to rendering the vernacular dialects and colloquialisms of his ordinary characters, often using humor to help readers sympathize with roguish heroes like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

A distinct aesthetic response to the late nineteenth century, American naturalism continued the realist attempt to represent new and unfamiliar types of characters, but naturalists concentrated on lower-class and marginalized people and merged the realist attention to detail with a strong belief in social determinism rather than free will. Building on the theory of natural selection proposed by Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), naturalists like Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London tried to represent life scientifically rather than providentially. Characters in naturalist novels exist in worlds where the environment determines character, events happen randomly, the strong prey on the weak, and protagonists often have neither the intelligence nor the resources to overcome adversity. But despite these bleak and unforgiving features, naturalist novels present their characters as case studies to suggest social solutions: Crane's "The Open Boat," for example, emphasizes the individual frailties of its protagonists in order to commend how they eventually band together and survive.

Another crucial development of realism was regional, or "local color," writing, an attempt to capture distinct language, perspectives, and geographical settings before industrialization and cultural homogenization erased them. Some regionalist writing relied on nostalgia to generate interest in authentic but vanishing characters. In the West, writers like Bret Harte, Twain, and Owen Wister romanticized the lone cowboy and frontiersman, while Native American writers like Sarah Winnemucca offered a Native alternative. But other writers found regional specificity to be a vehicle for social change. Hamlin Garland used local descriptions of the Midwest to combat nostalgic stereotypes and depict the real plight of farmers. Women writers found regional writing an important opportunity to record their perspectives. The fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Mary Austin challenges readers to attune themselves to women's thoughts and rethink society's privileging of men. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a regional work that demands respect for a feminine perspective while also critiquing the patriarchal constraints of Catholic Louisiana.

Overview: 1914-1945

Between 1914 and 1945, the United States engaged in two world wars and emerged as a modern nation and a major world power. American involvement in World War I was brief (1917–19) and left many yearning for the isolation of previous years. Yet despite some exclusionary immigration measures in the 1920s after a "Red Scare" of suspicion about foreign control over labor union activities, progress toward a more mobile and international perspective seemed unstoppable. A generation of American expatriates enjoyed European life thanks to a newly favorable currency exchange rate. African American soldiers and officers returned from WWI determined to see their rights in the army continue at home. And those workers who could not travel were inspired by the international Communist movement to agitate for fairer pay and conditions. After the stock market crashed in 1929 and the United States sank into the Great Depression, social tensions threatened the country's stability for a decade, until Americans were united by World War II. The dominant literary aesthetic of these years is known as "modernism," a response to the contradictions and pressures of contemporary life. In the same way that the country struggled with rapid modernization, modernist authors struggled to put a current face on traditional literature and to translate American themes and preoccupations into an international style.

Many of the social and cultural changes of the interwar period centered around the sexual and psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, the social and racial writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, and the economic and political programs of Karl Marx. Freud, the inventor and chief practitioner of psychoanalysis, developed the idea of the "unconscious," a repository of sexual desires and dreams. Freud's theories helped some Americans break free from small-town, white, Protestant values in favor of increasingly permissive and tolerant attitudes toward the sexual freedoms and desires of women and acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals. African Americans, who migrated northward to fill factory vacancies during WWI, found a social theorist in Du Bois to describe their complex status in American society. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* identified in the black psyche a "double

consciousness" of blacks themselves as Americans and as the racial stereotypes accepted by whites. Through the NAACP and journals published in the black neighborhood of Harlem in New York, the "city within a city" to which thousands of blacks migrated, Du Bois and others argued for the intellectual and cultural achievements of African Americans within this urban setting. Marx's economic theories were used to diagnose class inequalities as antagonism between owners and management (collectively known as "capital") on the one side and labor on the other. His writings encouraged workers to reject the middle-class individualist ethos in favor of collective action to improve the lot of all workers. Marx's ideas led directly to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which inspired communists around the world to act in concert to overthrow their own governments. Two infamous court cases from this period demonstrate the resistance to the social changes these theorists promoted. The trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921 was thought by many to have been unfairly decided based on the defendants' status as Italian immigrants and active anarchists. The conviction in Scottsboro, Alabama, of nine black men for the rape of two white women on dubious evidence convinced many writers that the southern justice system was fundamentally unfair to blacks.

Alongside these social changes, rapid advances in science and technology contributed to the modernization of America, resulting in the birth of a mass popular culture and the sundering of empirical science from the artistic search for meaning. The increased presence of new inventions like electric lighting and appliances, telephones, phonograph record players, motion pictures, and the radio combined to make person-to-person communication quicker and easier and to standardize American tastes in fashions and ideas. The automobile changed America more than any other invention by allowing new industries and jobs dependent on transportation, by causing a network of new roads and highways to spring up, and by dictating the birth and death of cities, suburbs, and towns based on proximity to those arteries. But while these technologies were breakthroughs in the ease and productivity of everyday life, the science underlying them seemed increasingly difficult and contrary to common sense. Einstein's relativity theories, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and the discovery of both subatomic particles and the infiniteness of the universe threatened the traditional role of science as an explanation of felt human experience. As a result, scientists and artists became mistrustful of one another's methods, and art began to rival science as a way of interpreting reality, especially in terms of subjective experience.

The crisis point for the interwar period occurred during the 1930s, when international cultural, economic, and political tensions resulted in the Great Depression and World War II. In Germany, Italy, and Spain fascist dictators rose to power and began to threaten their neighbors with aggressive rhetoric, military rearmament, and anti-Semitic genocide. In the United States, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal offered a pragmatic solution to the disastrous failure of free-market capitalism. Through social security, unemployment insurance, welfare support, and government creation of utility and public works jobs, the United States averted the revolution that had seemed inevitable. Even so, many writers were sympathetic to the Communist cause and the USSR as the answer to the U.S. crisis, mainly because the Soviets seemed to be the chief opponent of fascism. But the Russian dictator Stalin's oppressive rule and nonaggression treaty with Hitler in 1939 soured many to Communism by the end of the decade.

The literary aesthetic of "high modernism," which represented the ways modernity was transforming traditional culture by experimenting with, adapting, and altering literary styles and forms, is best understood as an antagonism between popular and serious literature. The antimodern sentiments of many modernists who thought of the present in terms of what had been lost did not keep them from disrespecting the literary styles of their predecessors to represent that loss. Modernist poetry and prose tended to be short, precise, subjective, and suggestive rather than exhaustively detailed with exterior descriptions, to include fragments and disjointed perspectives rather than cohesive or coherent patterns, to favor questions over pat explanations, and to reject artificial literary order and assurances of objective truth that they did not see in the real world. When works like T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* did include overarching patterns, they referred to classical or mythic narratives through allusion or foregrounded the self-reflexive search for meaning as a rationale to continue asking difficult questions. The modernist emphasis on individual experience over objective truth also meant incorporating elements of popular culture, which had not been thought literary enough for high art until then, mixing in colloquialisms and dialects without the aid of an

interpretive narrator. The demands of modernist style meant a small readership but prestige and influence; modernists scorned the popular writers and desired their fame, but accused commercially successful writers, like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, of selling out. Occasionally, writers could blur the divide between middlebrow culture and serious high art, as in the case of Kay Boyle and Raymond Chandler.

Though modernism began as a self-consciously international and apolitical aesthetic, many American modernists attempted to use the movement to promote national literary and political ambitions. The United States had been introduced to the audacity of modernism through the Armory Show of Cubist paintings in 1913 in New York City and events like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, both of which caused uproars, and indeed most major American proponents of modernism were permanent expatriates, like Gertrude Stein, Eliot, Ezra Pound, and H.D., or lived abroad for part of the period. But some writers employed modernist principles to write ambitious American works; Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* were poetic examples, as was John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy in prose. Others, like Robert Frost, William Faulkner, and Willa Cather, brought modernism to bear on regional concerns, introducing an international style to a specific locale and idiom. When modernism was used for political ends, its effects were often subtle. The efforts of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston incorporated blues rhythms and folk culture into their texts, but focused on the vitality of black culture or upbeat assessments of racial justice rather than angry denunciations of the status quo. And modernists like Marianne Moore, H.D., Katherine Anne Porter, and Nella Larsen depicted women's thoughts and experiences without explicitly advocating feminist positions.

A last major development was the maturity of American drama during the interwar years thanks to experiments by playwrights reacting to Broadway and successful mixtures of American theatrical elements. Broadway, the center of American theatrical activity in the late nineteenth century, had begun premiering shows and plays in New York City and then sending them to tour the rest of the United States. In reaction to these largely commercial and conservative ventures, Susan Glaspell and others formed the Provincetown Players in 1915 to premier small, experimental works. Smaller houses like Glaspell's often showed changes before Broadway, as O'Neill with elements of German Expressionism, Maxwell Anderson with blank verse, George Kaufman with jokey domestic farces, and Rogers and Hammerstein with musical comedies. Many of these experiments incorporated earlier vaudevillian and burlesque songs and dances, as well as new formal and stylistic conventions. As many modernists realized the potential of plays to speak to a larger audience, drama moved into the literary mainstream.

Overview: Since 1945

After World War II, the United States emerged as the strongest world power and assumed the role of speaking on behalf of liberal democratic ideals. Having fought until Germany and Japan had unconditionally surrendered, the triumphant Allies attended to their war-ravaged economic infrastructures, but only the United States had the wherewithal to build on its success in the conflict. The overseas empires of Britain and France began to dissolve, often violently. And the Soviet Union, weakened by the German assault of 1941, eventually could not sustain the investment necessary to vie militarily with the Americans. The Cold War (1946–89) between the United States and the USSR involved an ideological struggle between capitalist and communist states worldwide, which erupted into proxy fights in Korea and Vietnam, but eventually confirmed American military preeminence. At home, these political struggles resulted in three major aesthetic reactions. First, the period immediately following World War II was characterized by cultural conformity and nationalist ambition, as artists responded to the Cold War by closing ranks and writing on behalf of an assumed collective identity. Second, in the 1960s and 1970s, the unfulfilled promise of the Kennedy administration along with the turmoil of the Vietnam War prompted cultural introspection, as more and more artists rejected conformity and searched for ways to represent previously excluded minority voices. Third, from the 1980s to the present, artists consolidated the progress made in the previous years, until diversity and inclusivity became aesthetic ideals as well as political goals.

In the aftermath of the economic and cultural reorganizations of World War II, American society became fascinated by cultural homogeneity and political unity. The war effort had shifted industrial production to military ends and recruited women to replace factory workers fighting overseas. When those workers came

home, many women found returning to domesticity only temporarily acceptable. Similarly, African Americans who had been drafted into a fully integrated army found their return to second-class citizenship difficult to accept. But for the majority of the 1950s, most Americans dedicated themselves to stability at home in order to bolster the American cause abroad. During the Cold War, American competition with the Soviet Union took the form of political "containment" of the Russians, Chinese, and their satellite states through international organizations like the United Nations (for the Korean War) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (in the case of the Eastern European Warsaw Pact). Once the USSR developed nuclear weapons, both sides formulated policies that favored deterring their adversaries economically rather than deploying the weapons. In light of the struggle between capitalist and socialist economies, Americans treated materialism (which valued wealth as a good in itself) as patriotic. The G.I. Bill, which granted college educations to returning soldiers, ensured a highly skilled workforce, and the developing network of American-owned international corporations resulted in prosperity and the creation of a managerial class. Interstate highways connected suburbs with urban hubs to allow businessmen to shuttle between work and home, but this increased mobility underscored the homogeneity of these interchangeable zones of commerce.

The literature of the 1950s reflects the cultural preoccupations of stability and conformity as it responded to the aesthetic project of modernism. Many artists sought to depict what they took to be common or essential to all Americans regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or regional identity. Such striving for representativeness derived in part from the grand ambitions of modernist novelists like Ernest Hemingway, whose lingering macho challenge to write the "Great American Novel" pushed writers to universalize or generalize so that their works could speak to any reader. Other novelists were inspired by William Faulkner to use regional specificity to make major statements about race, history, and national identity. By the end of the decade, fiction writers began to suspect that novelistic conventions were inadequate to the task of representing essential Americana, much less contemporary reality. The "Death of the Novel" controversy, as it was called, pointed to the dependence of novels on stable assumptions about character, plot development, and symbolism. During the 1960s, novelists like Philip Roth were increasingly skeptical of such assumptions. Poetry followed a course similar to that of prose in these years. Starting with finely wrought, intricate, personal lyric meditations, which were stylistic holdovers from modernist influences, poets in the Fifties began to experiment with formal openness and thematic inclusiveness of non-mainstream perspectives. Two books that symbolized poetry's break with modernist form are Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), with its wandering, oral rhythms and energetic rejections of conformity, and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), featuring a less difficult, more direct style and an autobiographical intensity. Ginsberg's and Lowell's works helped prepare for the "confessional" poetry of the 1960s, which stressed the distinctiveness rather than the representativeness of the lyric voice.

The inevitable collision of conformity and individuality was foreshadowed in the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. Kennedy's "New Frontier" challenged the prosperous and complacent to provide for the underprivileged and socially marginalized through the desegregation of the South and government programs like the Peace Corps. Many of Kennedy's civil and voting rights proposals were realized by Lyndon Johnson in the late 1960s as part of his "Great Society." The assassination of Kennedy in 1963 began a dozen years of cultural revolution in which intellectual unrest over the Vietnam War resulted in urban and campus violence, but also gave rise to movements for the betterment of women, blacks, and Native Americans. The feminist movement, which encouraged women to promote their collective legal, political, and cultural interests, made strides in equality for women not seen since suffrage; similarly, the civil rights movement made advances in awareness and combating racial discrimination, unfinished business since Reconstruction one hundred years earlier. But the good will earned by the Great Society was largely squandered by escalation in Vietnam under Johnson and Nixon and the government's often deceitful handling of information about Southeast Asia. Cynicism and activism in universities resulted in riots on campuses and deaths at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970; unrest did not cease until Nixon resigned in 1974 under threat of impeachment for abuse of power during the Watergate scandal and American troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1975.

The political divisions, disruptions, and uncertainties of the 1960s were mirrored in the literature of the decade, in which writers came to terms with changing attitudes

toward social involvement, government and corporate power, individual and minority rights, drug use, and technological advances like television and consumer air travel that lent themselves to a global perspective but disrupted normal ways of thinking about time and space. The Death of the Novel debates in fiction and the increasingly provisional, momentary nature of poetry emphasized the fragility of language. In literary theory, the school of deconstruction, starting in about 1966, examined the fundamentally unstable quality of all utterances and how any statement depends on often unspoken and arbitrarily constructed assumptions. Still, some writers like the novelists John Updike and Ann Beattie and poets like Elizabeth Bishop and Stanley Kunitz remained committed to realistic description and traditional connections between text and represented world. Others, like those in the “Minimalist” school of prose fiction, labored to create a rigorously believable and philosophically acceptable aesthetic. While some mainly white voices responded to the 1960s by accounting for their aesthetic privilege, others took the decade as an opportunity to add their voices to American ideas of distinctive identity. Large platforms like literary feminism and the Black Arts Movement allowed individual authors to render particular experiences without having to feel they spoke for their race, ethnicity, or gender: Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud were American writers participating in this trend, and Adrienne Rich and Ursula Le Guin are good examples of powerful women writers. In the case of Native American literature, for which historical and cultural contexts did not exist to combat lingering stereotypes, the 1960s saw a parallel movement of critical writings to supplement creative works by Native authors.

After the Vietnam War, Americans voted on their cynicism about government intervention and nostalgia for traditional values by electing Ronald Reagan president in 1980. Reagan presided over the demise of the Soviet Union thanks to a massive buildup in American military spending that the Russians could not match. His economic policies hearkened back to the personal quest for wealth of the 1950s rather than the social activism of the early 1960s. Under Reagan and Clinton, industries downsized and were made more efficient for competition in a globalized marketplace. Instead of a monolithic communist threat, the United States faced a succession of smaller challenges in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and Iraq that it could dispatch handily. The new shape of American influence materialized with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; instead of large states, Americans now face radical fundamentalist cells, and U.S. culture has only begun to respond to this antagonist.

As the Cold War ended, writers worked to broaden the cultural achievements of the 1960s, widening the scope of American experience and casting diversity and plurality as aesthetic ideals. African American women like Toni Morrison, Lucille Clifton, and Rita Dove wrote in national, racial, and ethnic terms; likewise, Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich succeeded in writing in the often ignored or suppressed tradition of Native American literature. Immigrant writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Jhumpa Lahiri augmented national dialogues of assimilation and ethnic identity for Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian Americans. Perhaps the most telling emblem of this contemporary acceptance of new perspectives into conceptions of American experience is the Internet. Online, new hypertext realities need only be imagined to exist virtually, all users may join online communities, and writing exists in open-ended and interactive relationships with its readers.