

## Essential Questions of the Literary Period

# The Post-War Era (1945–1970)



How does literature  
shape or reflect *society*?

### What social and political events affected Americans in the quarter-century after World War II?

**The Holocaust and the Atomic Bomb** As the war ended, concentration camps were liberated and journalists reported, in shocking words and images, the horrific facts of the Holocaust. In addition, the reality of the atomic bomb gave people all over the world a new fear and a new responsibility for managing international conflict.

**Wars, Both Cold and Hot** With the rise of the Soviet Union, the Cold War—competition between Eastern bloc countries and the West—became intense. Fear of unchecked Soviet aggression marked the period. Espionage, economic sanctions, treaties, defense measures, and diplomatic conflicts were constantly in the news. In Korea and in Vietnam, many Americans fought and died facing Communist forces.

**Civil Rights Struggles and the Women's Movement** During the Sixties, protests against racism gave way to riots. Many cities seethed as African Americans demanded change, and television brought the anguish into every living room. During these years, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert F. Kennedy underscored the violence of the decade. At the same time, women struggled for greater economic and social power, changing the American work force and the political landscape.

## TIMELINE

1950

**1950: Korea** North Korean troops invade South Korea, marking the start of the Korean War.

**1950:** Thousands are falsely accused of treason following McCarthy's claims of Communist spies infiltrating the government. ►

**1951:** Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are sentenced to death for conspiracy to commit espionage. ►



**1951:** J.D. Salinger publishes *The Catcher in the Rye*.



## What values and attitudes grew from these events?

**Age of Anxiety vs. Age of Aquarius** The fear and violence of the postwar period characterized it as an Age of Anxiety. Americans seemed unable to stop thinking about terrible things that could or might happen. Schools regularly held air-raid drills, and Communists were hunted everywhere. By the late Sixties, however, some Americans put forth an alternative set of idealistic values that called for an "Age of Aquarius"—an era of universal peace and love.

**Seeking Conformity** During the 1950s, the nation enjoyed widespread prosperity, suburbs expanded, and the consumer society flourished. As a result, many Americans relished, and even demanded, social conformity. Beneath the surface, however, anxiety lurked. For example, in 1954, the United States Information Agency banned Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* from American embassy libraries for being "downright socialistic."

**Protesting Conformity** As the Sixties wore on, more and more Americans made strong assertions of their individuality. People resisted living with conformity and fear. This new spirit of independence energized the passions for justice and equality that swept the nation.

## The American EXPERIENCE

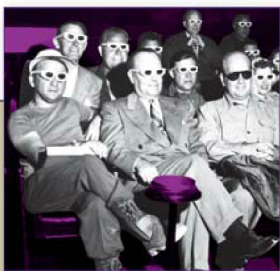
### ART IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

#### The Landscapes of Richard Diebenkorn

After World War II, Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock created paintings that drew attention to the process of how they were made. Their abstract forms emphasized a complex inner reality over a straightforward representation of the outer world. In the 1960s, however, Richard Diebenkorn combined the dynamic energy of abstract forms with shapes that evoked sunny California landscapes.

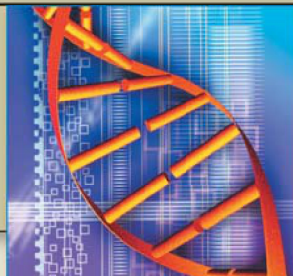
Diebenkorn captured vibrant West Coast color and light in his pictures. He was able to suggest the land, the sky, the ocean, and the buildings that fragment a scene into blocks of color and yet, at the same time, present a unified, humanized landscape. His 1963 painting *Cityscape I (Landscape No. 1)* fully achieves this blend of abstract thought and warm feeling.

Later in his career Diebenkorn shifted to an even more abstract approach. However, his long series of paintings called *Ocean Park* continued to suggest landscape-like images. Ocean Park is a community near Santa Monica, California, and this particular American place seems to have provided the artist with a firm ground for his stunning abstract visions.



◀ **1952:** Hollywood produces its first feature-length 3D movie to compete with the rising popularity of television.

**1952:** Ralph Ellison publishes *Invisible Man*.



**1953:** The heart-lung machine is invented, creating treatment options for patients with heart defects.

◀ **1953: England**  
Francis Crick and James Watson discover DNA.

**1954:** Supreme Court rules public school segregation to be unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

**1954: England**  
*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding is published.

**1955**

## The American EXPERIENCE

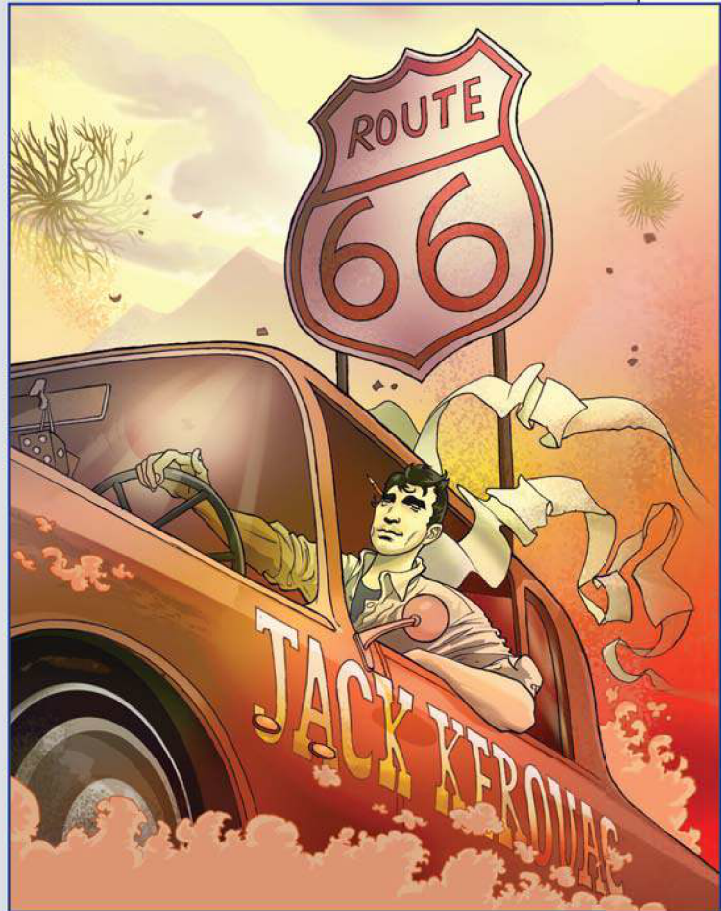
### CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

#### Jack Kerouac: King of the Road Trip

Jack Kerouac was one of the original Beats—a group of cutting edge writers and artists that emerged during the 1950s. Daring, rebellious, intelligent, and mobile, the Beats gave voice to a new generation. Kerouac's best-known work is *On the Road*, a novel inspired by cross-country road-trips. The book was reputedly written in a full-throttle three-week creative frenzy. In fact, the original manuscript of *On the Road* is a continuous scroll made by taping tracing paper end to end. The scroll is typewritten, has no margins, no paragraph indents, and is single-spaced. It still exists; it was purchased by a private collector in 2001, and can be viewed by the public whenever it is on tour. It was displayed at the New York Public Library in 2007 and at the University of Texas at Austin in 2008.

Once Kerouac typed the scroll in 1951, it was not snapped up by publishers. That was not to happen until 1957. After it was published, though, *The New York Times* called *On the Road* "the most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance" of Kerouac's generation.

On the fiftieth anniversary of *On the Road*'s publication, fellow Beat figure Lawrence Ferlinghetti said, "The road doesn't exist anymore in America; there is this huge nostalgia for it. That's one of the reasons *On the Road* is more popular than ever."



### TIMELINE

## 1955

**1955:** Flannery O'Connor publishes *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

**1955: Argentina** Jorge Luis Borges publishes *Extraordinary Tales*.

**1955:** Rosa Parks is arrested, triggering the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. ▶



*"We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

## How did these values and attitudes emerge in literature?

**From Anxiety to Irony** In the years just after World War II, literature dealt with the grief and shock of the conflict. Journalist John Hersey's *Hiroshima* appeared in 1946, graphically depicting the effects of the atomic bomb on the lives of ordinary Japanese citizens. In 1948, Randall Jarrell published *Losses*, intense poems that captured the feeling of postwar emptiness. By the 1960s, however, some writers were treating the war with tragicomic irony. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in 1962 and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969 mixed bitterness with absurdity and fantasy that helped to distance readers from the mid-century violence.

**Literature with Purpose** The fight for racial equality generated powerful literary statements, including the autobiographical fiction of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright; the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden; the plays of Lorraine Hansberry; and the speeches and essays of Martin Luther King, Jr.

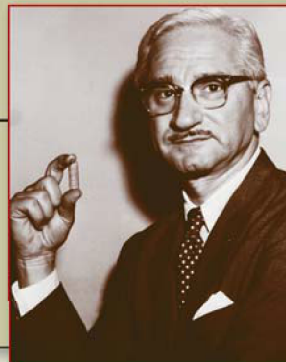
Equality for women was one of the purposes that drove the poems of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov. A general spirit of protest underlay the achievements of Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, while folk musician Bob Dylan produced lyrics that asked piercing social questions. Perhaps the finest socially purposeful literature of the time was Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*—the 1953 play that attacked the anti-Communist Congressional hearings chaired by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy.

**Popular Culture Sails Along** On a very different note, the two decades after World War II were high times for the Broadway musical. All over America people were humming tunes from *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *The Music Man*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, and many other sparkling shows. Fans went crazy with Beatlemania, and families gathered every night around the electronic hearth—the television—to enjoy sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, westerns like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*, and the science fiction tales of *The Twilight Zone*.



◀ **1957: USSR** The first space satellite, *Sputnik 1*, is launched by the Soviet Union.

**1957:** Dr. Albert Sabin develops an oral vaccine for polio. ▶



**1959:** Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is produced.

**1959:** Alaska and Hawaii are admitted to the Union as the 49th and 50th states.

**1960**



## What makes American literature *American*?

### What themes did American writers consider important?

**Prosperity** While the conspicuous consumption of consumer goods seemed to make people's lives easier, it also raised questions about the national character. Writers wondered about the realities of the American Dream. What did "the pursuit of happiness" really mean? The theme of success and its steep price was an important strand in postwar literature.

**Rebellion** During the 1960s, themes of rebellion ran through American writings. These were not the kinds of rebellious thoughts that Americans had expressed two hundred years earlier. Americans were not rebelling against a colonial government; they were rebelling against a culture they had themselves created. Counterculture movements gave rise to a variety of avant-garde artistic accomplishments with rebellion at their core.

**Race** After World War II, issues of race took on enormous urgency. When Martin Luther King, Jr., said "I have a dream," many Americans realized that the American Dream itself still needed work. This theme asserted itself in literature just as the civil rights struggle unfolded in American streets.

### What roles did American writers play at this time?

**The Witness** In the literature that looked back at World War II, the writer's role was that of witness to history. Like Randall Jarrell, the writer was the one who had seen the horrors and lived to tell about them. Like John Hersey, the writer was the journalist or historian who could describe what had happened. The writer was also the witness to what was currently happening to the country. When Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible*, he took on the role of witness to the effects of the rampant fear of Communism.

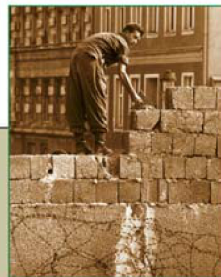
**The Nonconformist** Throughout history, writers have often set themselves apart from the mainstream of society. In the 1960s, however,

### TIMELINE

## 1960

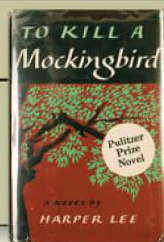
**1961: Cuba** The United States supported Bay of Pigs Invasion fails at overthrowing Fidel Castro.

**1961: Germany**  
East Germany builds Berlin Wall. ▶



**1962:** Environmental protection movement is spurred by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*.

**1961:** Harper Lee wins the Pulitzer Prize for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. ▶



**1961:** The first American astronaut, Alan Shepard, is launched into space from Cape Canaveral Space Center in Florida. ▶



**1962: USSR** *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn is published.

they began to stand apart in greater numbers. These men and women were not “rebels without a cause.” They had causes galore. They were anti-war, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-materialism, anti-conformity. Earlier in the century, Modernists had usually confined their rebellions to *artistic* norms. By mid-century, many writers sought to alter *social* norms as well.

**The Standard-Bearer** Writers took on the vital task of articulating the principles that drove many social movements. They fulfilled this role directly in nonfiction and indirectly in fiction and poetry. Wielding the weapon of words, African American writers such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison gave definition to the Black experience, inspiring commitment and change. In the works of Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, and many others, the women’s movement in America found not only high literary art but also deep pride and energy.

### At mid-century, how did writers build on the past?

**Enlightening the Present** American writers mined American history for parallels to their own era. In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller shed light on the 1950s by examining a fearful incident of colonial history. In “Frederick Douglass,” Robert Hayden looked back to the fight for freedom during the Civil War years to inspire the fight for freedom in the 1960s.

**Continuing Forms and Styles** Poets such as Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Richard Wilbur composed sonnets and sestinas, framing modern views in traditional forms. Novelists such as John Steinbeck continued to tell realistic stories, and the tradition of the Southern Gothic lived on in the work of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and others.

**Keeping Modernism Alive** The Modernist impulse that had revolutionized literature earlier in the century marched on into the 1950s. During these years, Modernist artists produced some of their greatest works, including William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*, Wallace Stevens’ *The Auroras of Autumn*, and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*.

“We need men who can dream of things that never were.”

— John F. Kennedy



◀ **1964:** 73 million people tune in to watch the Beatles perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

**1963:** President John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas. ▶



**1964: South Africa**  
Anti-Apartheid leader Nelson Mandela is sentenced to life imprisonment.

**1964:** IBM produces OS-360, the first mass-produced computer operating system. ▶

**1965**





## What is the relationship between place and *literature*?

### How did World War II settings appear in American writing?

The battlefields of Europe, the jungles of the Pacific islands, and the devastated cities of Japan provided settings for great American writing after the war. Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Norman Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead*, and John Hersey's *Hiroshima* made readers feel they were standing amid the bloody landscapes. The tone of post-World War II writing, however, did not echo the despair of the literature that had emerged from World War I. War writing in the 1940s and 1950s was filled with pain, but still seemed to hold out the possibility of meaningful courage and even heroism.

### How did urban life inspire post-war American literature?

**Fiction and Drama** In novels, stories, and plays, American writers used the lives of city-dwellers to explore a wide range of twentieth-century issues. The strivings of the middle-class for success, the struggles of immigrants to survive, the uncertainties of adolescents searching for love and independence—these themes and many more grew out of the modern cityscape. In the novels of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, James Agee, and Philip Roth, and in plays such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, urban life had powerful, even fatal, effects on characters.

**Poetry** The imagery of the city—its steel and glass beauties, its overarching bridges and underground tunnels, its smoke, speed, and noise—appeared often in poems. Brilliant collections by William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Allen Ginsberg define modern America as an increasingly urban place.

### How did literature respond to the growth of suburbia?

**Selling the American Dream** After World War II, a "baby boom" created the need for more new homes. Developers across the nation

#### TIMELINE

1965

1966: *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath's last collection of poems, is published in the United States.

1966: China Mao Zedong launches Cultural Revolution. ▶



1967: Israel Israel gains territory from Arab states in Six-Day War.

1967: South Africa Christiaan Barnard performs the world's first heart transplant; the patient dies 18 days later.

1967: Thurgood Marshall becomes the first black U.S. Supreme Court justice. ▶



built new suburbs and expanded existing ones. Partly urban and partly pastoral, suburbs seemed to make the American Dream accessible for more people, at least for the middle class. Advertising, television, and movies sold the suburbs as the best chance for families to escape urban crowding and the pace and pressure of city life. Literature, however, explored both sides of the coin.

**Dissecting the American Dream** Many American writers recognized that, for some people, the dream could turn into a nightmare. A popular song of 1962 warned about what happens to people who all live in “little boxes” that “all look just the same.” In 1845, Thoreau found peace by building his own house on the shore of a pond. What if, one hundred years later, thousands of people did the same thing, in the same place, at the same time?

Writers such as John Cheever and John Updike saw the dysfunction that could tear apart suburban families. In their novels and stories, they chronicled the symptoms of a new kind of alienation, brought on by too much sameness, too little genuine individuality, too much insistence on “keeping up with the Joneses.” Issues that literature had once explored in small-town life in America now became transferred to suburban life.

## The American EXPERIENCE

### CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

#### Rachel Carson and Environmental Writing

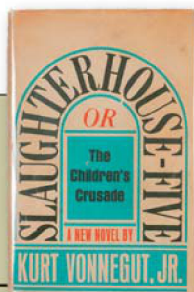
Today, most people are aware of the human impact on the environment. While people may disagree about the severity of environmental problems or how to address them, most feel these issues are important. Yet, even that understanding did not always exist. Americans were alerted to the problems facing the environment by a scientist named Rachel Carson.

In 1962, Carson published *Silent Spring*, the book that made millions of people conscious of the dangers of industrial pollution and of the damage it was doing throughout the natural world. In prose that is both scientifically accurate and passionate, Carson explained humanity's place in the world's ecosystem. She described the environmental consequences of technological progress, the chemical “rivers of death” that people allow to flow into the ocean.

Along with the naturalist Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson sparked the modern environmental movement and also helped found a genre of literature that remains vital today. Writings about the environment—sometimes call eco-literature or green literature—continues to inform contemporary readers.



▲ **1968:** Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader, murdered in Memphis.



▲ **1969:** Kurt Vonnegut publishes his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

#### 1969: Northern Ireland

A long period of violence begins between Catholics and Protestants.

**1969:** Richard Nixon is sworn in as the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

## 1970

**1969:** Astronaut Neil Armstrong becomes the first person to set foot on the moon. ▶

