

## Essential Questions of the Literary Period

# The Modern Age (1914–1945)



What is the relationship  
between place and *literature*?

### What American places especially affected American life in the first half of the twentieth century?

**Cities** Immigration, land development, and technological advances in telephones, building materials, power generators, and cars turned towns into cities and cities into metropolises. Big business thrived and the Twenties “roared” on city streets and in downtown hotspots. However, city life also came to mean crowding, poverty, crime, racism, and anonymity.

**Towns and Farms** Small-town America changed too, especially after World War I. A popular 1919 song asked, “How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?” Town populations shrank, and many traditions became the subjects of nostalgia. Farmers suffered terribly in the 1930s when severe drought turned the Great Plains into the Dust Bowl.

### What non-American places especially affected American life in the first half of the twentieth century?

**Battlefields and Boulevards** The trenches that scarred Europe’s landscape also scarred Americans’ minds, undercutting cherished beliefs, such as the nobility of Western culture. On the other hand, the artistic life that flourished in the studios and cafes of Paris pushed Americans into the Modern Age. The battlefields of World War II, including Hiroshima, would leave their indelible marks on both the American psyche and its politics.

#### TIMELINE

1921



1922: Ireland James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*. ▶

◀ 1922: T.S. Eliot publishes *The Waste Land*.



1924: The Immigration Act limits the number of immigrants that can enter the United States.

1924: Germany Thomas Mann publishes *The Magic Mountain*.

## How did these places show up in the work of modern American writers?

**Paris and Modernism** After World War I, disenchantment led some American writers to become expatriates, or exiles. Many went to Paris, where they gathered at the home of Gertrude Stein, the writer who dubbed them the “lost generation.” Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E. E. Cummings, Sherwood Anderson, and other Modernist writers, painters, and musicians created a vibrant cultural life in Paris and gave American writing a dynamic European awareness it had never had before.

**Urban Waste Lands** T. S. Eliot, born in St. Louis, went to Europe in 1914 and settled in England. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* (1922), using imagery of a fog-shrouded “Unreal City,” summed up the sterility of the postwar world. In a different way, the glittering city-dwellers of F. Scott Fitzgerald, in New York and Hollywood, faced their own disillusion and emptiness.

**The Harlem Renaissance** A new literary age also dawned in northern Manhattan, in Harlem. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, and Zora Neale Hurston produced prose and poetry that expressed African American experience. They also captured the sights, sounds, and emotions of modern urban life.

**Towns, Farms, and Plains** In sharply satiric novels, Sinclair Lewis took aim at small-town life, particularly in the Midwest. John Steinbeck portrayed the struggles of men and women who work the land, particularly in California and the Southwest. Eudora Welty and William Faulkner used the landscapes of Mississippi in tragicomic tales of family, race, life, and death in the South.

## The American EXPERIENCE

### CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

#### Women Get the Vote

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was a landmark in American social history.

The struggle to grant women the vote, or suffrage, went back many years, but it gathered momentum in the early 1900s. Carrie Chapman Catt organized a state-by-state campaign, and year by year more states in the West and Midwest granted women suffrage, although mostly only in state elections. Gradually, more women called for a voice in national elections, too.

Beginning in 1913, President Woodrow Wilson met with suffragists led by Alice Paul. Wilson, however, did not support a constitutional amendment, and in 1917 suffragists picketed the White House. After several months, police began arresting the protesters. Paul and others went on a hunger strike, but prison officials force-fed them. Upon their release, they resumed picketing.

By early 1918, the tide began to turn. The tireless work of Catt, Paul, and others began to pay off. President Wilson gave his support, and in 1919 Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment. By August 1920, three fourths of the states had ratified it. The amendment doubled the number of eligible voters in the United States and eliminated a long-standing injustice.

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**◀ 1925: England** Virginia Woolf publishes *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**1925:** F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes *The Great Gatsby*.

**◀ 1925:** Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five become a radio headliner.

**1926:** Ernest Hemingway publishes *The Sun Also Rises*.

**1926:** Langston Hughes publishes *The Weary Blues*.



## How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

### What major social and political events affected American writers in the first half of the twentieth century?

The major events listed below affected how writers thought about themselves and the world, and shaped many of the themes of the age:

- **World War I:** The shock and devastation made it clear that a new world, radically different from the past, would have to be created.
- **The Depression and the New Deal:** Poverty was everywhere, but jobs with the Work Projects Administration (WPA) enabled many writers to survive.
- **World War II, the Atomic Bomb, the Holocaust:** The full effects of these horrors would only become more apparent as the century wore on.

### What values, attitudes, and ideas grew from these events?

**Disillusion with Old Ideas and Ideals** The ideas and ideals of the nineteenth century had failed. They had not prevented the slaughter of World War I, and so new beliefs and attitudes had to take their place.

**Wider Cultural Awareness** Wars and new technologies made Americans more aware of other cultures and other artistic traditions.

**Greater Democratization** The middle class continued to expand. Women, African Americans, and immigrants from many countries played increasingly important roles in American cultural life.

**Fragmentation of Experience** War, the stresses of modern urban life, and the sheer speed of change enmeshed many people in feelings of uncertainty, imbalance, and a sense of discontinuity.

### How were these forces expressed in literature?

**Out with the Old** Above all, Modernism was a desire for the new. Modernist



#### TIMELINE

## 1927

**1927:** Charles Lindbergh flies solo and nonstop from New York to Paris. ▶



**1928: Germany** Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht write and produce *The Threepenny Opera*. ▶

**1928: China** Chiang Kai-shek becomes head of Nationalist government.

**1928: Russia** Stalin's Five Year Plan is adopted.

writers experimented with new approaches and techniques. They were out to capture the essence of modern life in both the content and form of their work. Modernists looked for new solutions. The old ways of telling stories—in a straight narrative line from beginning to middle to end—were out. The old ways of presenting poetry—in repeating meters and rhyme schemes—were out. In general, the new approaches demanded more from readers than earlier works.

**A Global Vision** Windows had been opened to the rest of the world. The art of China, Japan, Africa, India, ancient Greece, medieval Italy, Provençal France—all contributed to the mix that became Modernism.

**More Writers** Women had always played a role in American literary life, but in the twentieth century they became more central than ever. Gertrude Stein shaped Modernist values, and Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, championed its verse. With the Harlem Renaissance, African American writers such as Langston Hughes stepped into the limelight, paving the way for generations of African American writers to follow.

**Literature in Pieces** In previous eras, writers felt obligated to the literary rules and authors who had preceded them. With the onset of Modernism, however, established rules were breakable. Writers and many readers accepted poems and stories in shorter bursts, segments that did not obviously flow from one to the next. Rather than a unified oil painting, a Modernist work was more like a mosaic composed of individual pieces. It required the viewer to organize the pieces into a meaningful picture.

**Rise of Popular Culture** The paperback revolution was both a cause and an effect of growing democratization in the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1930s, books began to be available as paperbacks, which were cheap and portable. This made more literature available to more people more easily. It also led to the merging of “literary” works and “popular” works into one larger cultural stream. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan adventures, Zane Grey’s bestselling westerns, Dashiell Hammett’s mysteries—Americans ate them up. Radio also made electronic storytelling enormously popular; many families never missed an episode of *The Shadow* or *Superman*. Movies, too, began to tell stories in more and more spectacular ways. For some, movies even began to replace literature.



**1933**

**1929: Japan** Collapse of American silk market hurts workers and farmers.



**▶ 1931: Spain** Salvador Dalí paints *The Persistence of Memory*.

**1929: Stock market crashes in October, followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. ▼**



**▲ 1930: India** Mahatma Gandhi leads famous march to the sea to protest British tax on salt.



**◀ 1931: The Empire State Building is completed, becoming the world's tallest building.**



# The American EXPERIENCE

## CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

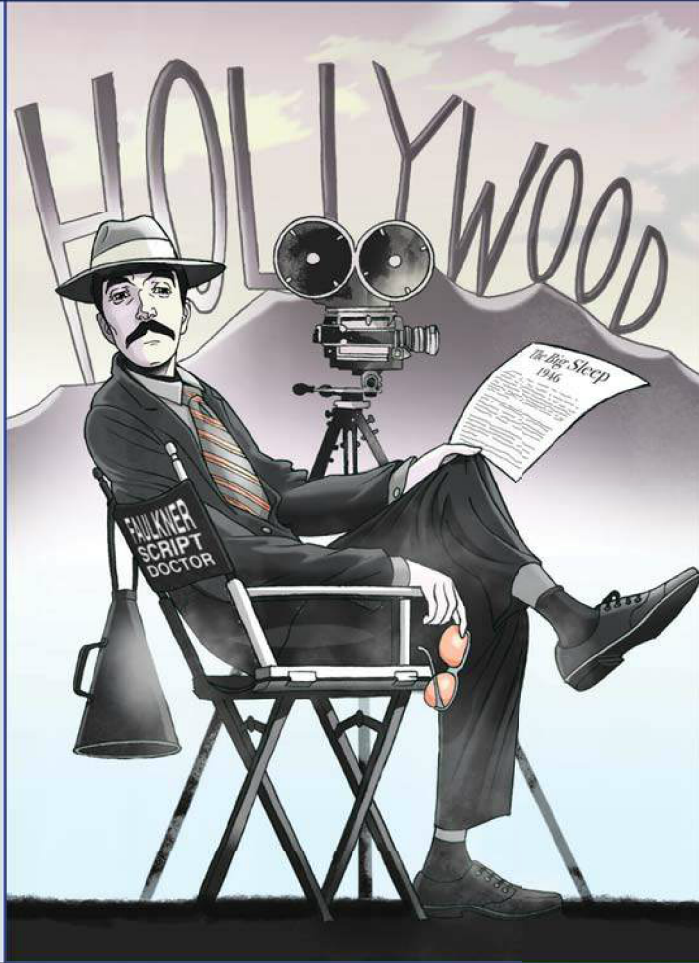
### William Faulkner: Hollywood Script Doctor

William Faulkner's legacy as a Nobel-Prize-winning literary giant certainly outshines his lesser-known role as a Hollywood screenwriter.

It was a need for money, not a love of the movies, that drew Faulkner to Hollywood in 1932. In April of that year, he signed a six-week contract with Metro Goldwyn Mayer and began writing a screen adaptation of his own story, "Turn About." Faulkner quickly learned about making artistic concessions—MGM had him write a new character into the film to showcase Joan Crawford, one of their major stars. For the next thirteen years, Faulkner would work intermittently writing screenplays for various studios.

Faulkner did not believe that his screenplays were worthy of any special admiration. However, during his stints in Hollywood, he earned screen credit on films both major and minor, including *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Gunga Din* (1939).

Though Faulkner once said, "Hollywood is a place where a man can get stabbed in the back while climbing a ladder," he did have alliances there. Howard Hawks, one of the foremost directors of the time, was a friend and ally. Faulkner associated with some actors, as well, and stood up for them, saying, "I know very few actors, but the ones with whom I did come in contact were normal, hard-working people, leading much saner lives than we are led to believe."



## TIMELINE

1933

**1933:** President Roosevelt closes banks; Congress passes New Deal laws.

**1933:** Germany Adolf Hitler becomes German Chancellor.

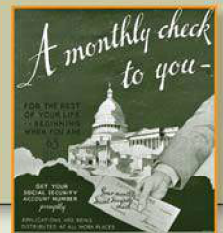


▲ **1935:** Alfred Hitchcock's mystery *The 39 Steps* is released in theaters.

**1935:** Howard Hughes reaches 352 mph in his Hughes Racer, breaking the landplane speed record. ▶



**1935:** The Social Security Act is passed to provide retirement and unemployment benefits. ▶





## What makes American literature *American*?

### What changes in literary elements contributed to American Modernism?

**Narrative Conventions** Modernist storytellers paid close attention to *how* they told their stories. They often left out transitions between events, and omitted the detailed expositions and explanations that readers found in older literature. Sometimes they left plotlines unresolved, refusing to tie up every thread. Readers had to interpret on their own.

Modernists shifted time in their stories, moving among past, present, and future. They also shuttled between inner and outer realities. Influenced by developments in psychology, particularly those of Sigmund Freud and William James, Modernist writers wove characters' dreams and fantasies into their narratives. They tried to create the natural flow of thoughts, memories, and insights—the “stream of consciousness” connected only by associations.

**Forms** Modernists also broke formal boundaries. Two European giants led the way: Irish writer James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) revolutionized the novel with multi-layered chapters based on Homer's *Odyssey*, and French writer Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) recaptured his own past in seven free-flowing volumes. Modernists invented new structures, some expansive and encompassing, others compressed. At the small end of the scale, Imagist poets—including Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle—created miniatures of hard, clear expression in concrete images.

**Themes** Most often, works of fiction, poetry, and drama have implied themes. In Modernist works, themes are even more indirect. Readers of modern literature need to pay closer attention, ask more questions, forge more connections for themselves. In addition, the challenging theme of the nature of art itself often dominated the Modernist imagination.

**Tone** An overall tone of irony marks many Modernist works. Writers such as Eliot, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner were painfully aware of the gap between the world as it was and the world as it ought to have been.

**1936: Spain**  
Spanish Civil War begins.



**1937:** Amelia Earhart takes off from Miami for a flight around the world; she disappears over the Pacific Ocean. ▲

**1937: Japan** invades China, beginning the Second Sino-Japanese War.

**1938:** The Fair Labor Standards Act establishes a national minimum wage.

**1939**

**1937:** Zora Neale Hurston publishes *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. ►



They were not satirists, mocking the world in order to improve it. They were ironists, dissecting the world simply to make it possible to live in it.

**Style** In prose, journalism brought a news style into fiction. Most obvious in Hemingway, American style strove for shorter, harder-edged sentences. Snappier dialogue, less flowery descriptions, and everyday American vocabulary gave modern American works a recognizable style. In poetry, free verse enabled such poets as Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and E. E. Cummings to create new rhythms of variety and surprise.

**Imagery** High culture and low, domestic and exotic, elegant and vulgar, common and bizarre and everything in between—the twentieth century opened the biggest box of images that writers had ever had. For Ezra Pound, a crowd in a subway could be blossoms on a tree. For F. Scott Fitzgerald, a pair of eyes painted on a billboard could watch a tragedy unfold. For Langston Hughes, a dream could explode. Modernists saw the world with new eyes and helped their readers see it newly too.

**Allusion** The range of possible allusions grew, wider too. T.S. Eliot quoted the Indian Upanishads; Ezra Pound quoted Latin and ancient Greek. Hemingway referred to African tribal customs; Marianne Moore invoked both baseball and basilisks. The reader's familiarity was no longer assumed or even required. The end result was a world-embracing awareness in American literature, a breadth of vision that still amazes us today.

### How did the relationship between writers and the public change during the Modernist period?

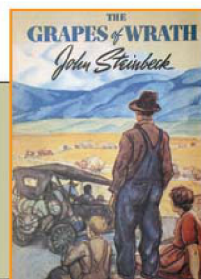
Modernism began an overall distancing of serious writers from the general reading public. With the rise of mass communication and popular culture, Modernist works were sometimes seen as obscure or elitist. There was no doubt that they made greater demands on readers than Romantic or Realist works. More mental and imaginative effort was required to read Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Stevens's *Harmonium* than to read the Fireside Poets. As a result, some of the literary audience turned away.

Many writers believe that great literary works teach their readers how to read them. In this sense, Modernist writers also became teachers. In time,

#### TIMELINE

1939

**1939:** John Steinbeck writes *The Grapes of Wrath* in his California home. ▶



**1939: Poland** German blitzkrieg invasion of Poland sets off World War II.

**1939:** *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* appear in movie theaters. ▶

**1940:** Civil Aeronautics Board is created to regulate U.S. commercial air traffic.

**1940: France** French government signs armistice with Germany.



Many writers believe that great literary works teach their readers how to read them. In this sense, Modernist writers also became teachers. In time, people learned how to read Modernist works—how to make the connections, fill in the blanks, listen to new rhythms, and appreciate new images. Modernism gave people new ways to be delighted, and many Modernist devices are now taken for granted in the twenty-first century.

### By 1945, what identities had emerged in American literature?

During the Modernist period, the American profile included these varied identities and character types:

- **Denizen of the Waste Land:** wanderer through a war-wearied landscape, spiritually exhausted, in search of new values, defined by T. S. Eliot
- **Member of the Lost Generation:** disillusioned, self-indulgent, escapist, expatriated, embodied by Fitzgerald and Hemingway
- **Triumphant Commoner:** believer in the innate strength of those who remain close to the land, led by Faulkner, Welty, and Steinbeck
- **Poetic Maker:** believer in the saving power of art and imagination, championed by Pound, Stevens, Williams, Cummings, Moore, and Frost
- **African American Artist:** creator of art drawn from the African American experience, represented by Hughes, McKay, Cullen, and Hurston

## The American EXPERIENCE

### DEVELOPING AMERICAN ENGLISH

#### Sliding with Slang by Richard Lederer

Slang is hot and slang is cool. Slang is nifty and slang is wicked. Slang is the bee's knees and the cat's meow. Slang is far out, fresh, fly, and phat. Slang is awesome, copacetic, and totally tubular.

Slang is the spice of language. It has added its spice to American literature as American writers, particularly in the Modern Age, have increasingly written in an American voice, using the words and rhythms of everyday American discourse. Listen to the poet Langston Hughes:

Good morning, daddy!

Ain't you heard

The boogie-woogie rumble

Of a dream deferred?

**Defining the Lingo** The *Dictionary of American Slang* defines slang as "the body of words and expressions frequently used by or intelligible to a rather large portion of the general American public, but not accepted as good, formal usage by the majority." In other words, it is vagabond language that prowls the outskirts of respectable speech, yet few of us can get along without it.

**What's in This Name?** The word *slang* may have developed from an erroneous past tense (*sling-slang-slung*) or from thieves' LANGUAGE or beggars' LANGUAGE. Jargon and slang originate with a particular group, but slang gets slung around by the whole population. In fact, slang may now make up a fifth of the American wordscape.

**1944:** Roosevelt is reelected president for an unprecedented fourth term.

**1941:** Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, bringing U.S. into World War II.



**1945:** United Nations Charter signed at end of World War II.

**1945**

**1945:** Atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**1945:** Germany Dresden is hit by Allied firebombing raid. Firestorm virtually destroys city.

