Research Guide to American Literature

American Modernism 1914–1945

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Boundaries of the Period

The period covered by this volume is defined by the two most destructive wars in human history. The year 1914 marks the beginning of World War I; the conflict resulted from entangling international alliances in Europe, with the precipitating cause being the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June. The guns began to sound in August as Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers) sided against Britain, France, and Russia (the Allies). The year the war began, America was little involved with world affairs. Although the opening of the Panama Canal that year demonstrated that the United States was interested in trade, President Woodrow Wilson declared America's neutrality in what was seen as a wholly European conflict. The new books Americans were reading in that first year of the Great War included Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*, a wild tale of the son of an English lord being adopted and raised by giant apes in Africa, and Booth Tarkington's novel *Penrod*, about the misadventures of a mischievous eleven-year-old boy. Much less read was *North of Boston*, the second book by the obscure poet Robert Frost. The first poem in this collection, “Mending Wall,” spoke to American ambivalence about neighbors: “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down,” one neighbor tells the other; he is dismayed when the man he wants to befriend continues mending the stone wall that uselessly separates their properties:

... I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Many Americans wanted to be left alone, to cling to the nineteenth century and its values, but the world and the relentless pace of change would not allow the nation to wall itself off from its future. In the next thirty-one years the United States experienced tumultuous social upheavals: it went through a period of unprecedented economic growth, followed by the longest and deepest depression in its history, and it fought at terrible cost in both world wars. The last year this volume covers is 1945—the year in which World War II ended in Europe with Germany's capitulation on 8 May and in the Pacific with Japan's surrender on 10 August, days after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An era of unprecedented carnage had ended with the prospect of human self-annihilation.

Through the study of the period from 1914 to 1945—years that many people still alive remember—the concerns that beset contemporary society are not-so-distantly mirrored. After World War I, the United States was entering the modern era. It is significant that this period was defined in large measure
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by world events—not only the world wars but also the Great Depression, which affected all industrialized economies and played a major role in the rise of fascism in Europe. Although removed by oceans from Europe, Africa, and Asia, the United States was becoming a leader on the global stage; consequently, its own destiny was being shaped more and more by its interaction with other nations. At home, Americans worried about such issues as the new prominence of the youth culture, signifying a gap between the values of the generations that had been sharpened in the wake of the war; the rise of crime in the cities, intensified by Prohibition, bootlegging, and gangsters; the effects of immigration and the fear that outsiders—Communists (“Reds”) or anarchists—wanted to destroy the country; and the continuing problem of race relations, so evident in the 1920s with public parades of the Ku Klux Klan, race riots, and lynchings. On a deeper level, though, Americans may have been just as apprehensive about the signs of progress, for the 1920s, with its movies and radio, its automobiles and airplanes, had been unimaginable at the beginning of the century. The great mark of living in the modern world is the accelerated, unpredictable pace of change. Unlike the parents of children born in the year 1800, parents in the years 1900 or 2000 could have little idea of the future their children would face.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the iconic images that define the 1920s and 1930s—flappers dancing and smoking cigarettes, Norman Rockwell covers for The Saturday Evening Post, the “strange fruit” of a lynched corpse pictured on a postcard, gangsters warring with Thompson submachine guns from the running boards of sedans, American citizens standing in bread lines during the Depression—seem distant and yet still resonate. Having been winnowed by time, they reach deeply into the national psyche, telling us not only who we were but who we are. Trying to understand Americans living in the interwar period, then, allows us to gain perspective on ourselves and our own culture.

Directly or indirectly, a work of literature opens a window on the culture in which it is produced. Whether the work is T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) or Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie (1935), the study of its author, of the circumstances of its composition, of the work itself, of its audiences, and of its reception and critical interpretation allows the student to see more deeply into the cultural moment in which it was written. For some authors, of course, the direct revelation of the experience of living within their culture is their main purpose for writing. In a letter to his daughter, who was attempting to begin a writing career, F. Scott Fitzgerald advised, “But when in a freak moment you will want to give the low-down, not the scandal, not the merely reported but the profound essence of what happened at a prom or after it, perhaps that honesty will come to you—and then you will understand how it is possible to make even a forlorn Laplander feel the importance of a trip to Cartier’s!” Twenty-first-century readers may often feel themselves to be akin to Fitzgerald’s Laplander when they pick up a work of literature from earlier times, but such is the skill of many of the writers discussed in this volume that they may yet come to appreciate the experience.

The best reason for studying the writers of this period, or any other, is that they provide pleasure as well as offer insight. The years between the wars produced some of America’s greatest authors, and they created enduring works of
art. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Azar Nafisi recounts beginning her teaching career in 1979 at the University of Tehran during the Iranian Revolution and struggling to introduce her Iranian students to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). “The idea or ideas behind the story must come to you through the experience of the novel,” she told them, “and not as something tacked on to it.” She had a student read aloud the scene in which Tom Buchanan realizes that his wife, Daisy, is in love with Jay Gatsby; Nafisi then commented, “Fitzgerald does not tell you—he takes you inside the room and re-creates the sensual experience of that hot summer day so many decades ago, and we, the readers, draw our breath along with Tom as we realize what has just happened between Gatsby and Daisy.” In a recollection that suggests how far Nafisi’s students had to travel to Fitzgerald, she describes the ending of that class meeting:

In retrospect it appears strange to me only now, as I write about it, that as I was standing there in that classroom talking about the American dream, we could hear from outside, beneath the window, the loudspeakers broadcasting songs whose refrain was “Marg bar Amrika!”—“Death to America!”

A novel is not an allegory, I said as the period was about to come to an end. It is the sensual experience of another world. If you don’t enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience. So start breathing.

If, like Nafisi’s students, we open our hearts, our senses, and our minds and breathe in the world an author presents in a poem, play, or novel, we are enriched in our own world.
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Dominant Genres and Literary Forms

All literary genres thrived during the years between the world wars, but the achievements of the novelists were, arguably, the most impressive. Novelists who had established themselves before World War I continued to produce important works. Edith Wharton, who had achieved her first real success with *The House of Mirth* (1905), brought out her most acclaimed novel of manners, *The Age of Innocence*, in 1920. The great Naturalist Theodore Dreiser, whose first novel, *Sister Carrie*, had been published in 1900, enhanced his reputation with his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, in 1925. Willa Cather, who had brought the Great Plains to vivid life in *O Pioneers!* (1913), explored the same landscape in *My Ántonia* (1919) before turning to Southwestern settings in *The Professor’s House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In the 1920s younger generations of authors infused the American novel with new vigor: Sinclair Lewis with his satirical examinations of society in *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927); F. Scott Fitzgerald with his quintessential novel of the Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby* (1925); John Dos Passos with the boldly experimental *Manhattan Transfer* (1925); Ernest Hemingway with his terse, innovative style in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929); Thomas Wolfe with *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929); and Dashiell Hammett with his hard-boiled detective novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1929). In the 1930s and 1940s these authors produced more exciting novels—notably, Fitzgerald’s most profound work, *Tender Is the Night* (1934); Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935); Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy (1928–1936); and Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940)—and were joined by novelists whose works added to the distinction of the American canon: John O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939), and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). The greatest and most prolific novelist of this remarkable period was William Faulkner, a writer who did not achieve widespread recognition until after World War II. He followed *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), a novel merging Regionalist and Modernist sensibilities, with a succession of books that continued the exploration of his mythical “postage stamp of native soil,” Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, including *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

Although considered novels by many critics, *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* can also be read as short-story cycles (collections of closely linked stories)—a form that was most famously practiced by Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Other admired cycles include Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), a work made up of poetry and drama, as well as stories, and John Steinbeck’s novella *The Red Pony* (1945). The fact that Faulkner first wrote the chapters of *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* as short stories he tried to sell commercially before revising them into episodic novels suggests how the lucrative magazine market for short stories played an important role in the careers of some authors. The outstanding example of a career shaped, for good and ill, by the necessity
of writing stories for the commercial market was Fitzgerald, who relied on the money he earned from selling pieces to *The Saturday Evening Post* to fund his work as a novelist. But in addition to the high-paying “slicks”—so called for their glossy, high-quality paper—such as *The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's Weekly, Cosmopolitan,* and *Ladies' Home Journal,* in which the short story was a commodity, the literary marketplace for short fiction was diversified by literary magazines such as *The American Mercury, Harper's Magazine,* and *Scribner's Magazine.* Writers could also publish their stories in the many smaller magazines—low-budget, noncommercial periodicals with small circulations that proliferated after the Great War—such as *The Little Review, The Transatlantic Review, This Quarter,* and *Transition* in the expatriate community in Paris and stateside journals such as *The Dial, The Double Dealer, The Southern Review,* and *Story.* Another market for short stories was provided by the many “pulps”—so called because of the cheap paper on which they were printed—that catered to genre fiction, including *Black Mask, Amazing Stories,* and *Weird Tales.* With such a wide-open market, the short story flourished. A few of the other writers who made notable contributions to the short story were Ring Lardner, Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Langston Hughes, John O'Hara, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty.

Like the novel and the short story, American poetry was invigorated after World War I. Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson—two poets who, in Frost’s phrase, were “content with the old way to be new”—continued to write in established forms such as the sonnet and used rhyme and traditional meters. Other major figures in American poetry were more willing to experiment. Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920) and Eliot's *The Waste Land* were landmarks of the post–World War I world, for in form and content they showed a new sensibility that signified a profound break with the past. In their own ways such poets as Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore were able—in Pound’s phrase—to “make it new.” In a related art, songwriting, the lyricists of Tin Pan Alley—Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, Yip Harburg, Dorothy Fields, Leo Robin, Johnny Mercer, and many more—made the years between the wars a golden era for the popular song.

In drama the towering figure who transformed a moribund American theater was Eugene O’Neill. From his early one-act plays, such as *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), to his provocative and innovative full-length plays of the 1920s and 1930s, such as *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), to his posthumously produced masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), O'Neill brought an energy and lyricism to the stage that captured the attention of the world and made him the first American playwright to win the Nobel Prize in literature. O'Neill's groundbreaking efforts prepared the way for the achievements of playwrights such as Lillian Hellman, Thornton Wilder, and Tennessee Williams.

With the advent of the talking motion picture and the success of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, Hollywood began to recruit playwrights to provide dialogue for its movies. In the 1930s screenwriters—most of whom continued to come to the movies from a theater background—began to come to grips with their new
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Hollywood money also attracted novelists such as Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Raymond Chandler, who attempted to adapt to a system of collaboration imposed by the studios even as they struggled with the screenplay as a new literary genre.

MOVEMENTS AND SCHOOLS

The major movement associated with the years 1914 to 1945 was Modernism—a term associated with innovative or experimental authors intent on breaking sharply with the past in form, substance, or both. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—with its incorporation of fragments from many languages and times, its various voices and use of slang, its mix of allusions to myth and contemporary imagery—is regarded as the signature text of American Modernism. *Modernism* is also more broadly used to label the sensibility of the era between the world wars and to encompass all literary authors writing during these years. Within this so-called Modernist era, however, there are writers who might better be described as adherents of earlier movements. Realism, which developed as a literary movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the United States, was an approach adopted by writers who sought to portray in a straightforward way recognizable, representative characters, situations, and settings. Social Realists were concerned with the behaviors of characters interacting within a closely observed society, while psychological Realists were primarily interested in describing the interior experience of a particular individual. Naturalism, in which writers depicted characters whose fates were determined by genetic, social, and economic forces beyond their control, was another important nineteenth-century movement that continued as a strong current in twentieth-century literature. The influence of these earlier movements is particularly notable in certain kinds of writing, as Realism is dominant in war fiction, Regionalist works, and novels of manners, and Naturalism is evident in hard-boiled and proletarian writing. But none of these larger movements in literature are exclusive terms when they are used in describing particular works. Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, is considered a Modernist work because of its structure and stream-of-consciousness technique, but it also might be called a work of psychological Realism and certainly has a Naturalistic theme, as it seems that Caddy’s illegitimate daughter, Miss Quentin, is fated to follow in her mother’s footsteps.

Many other labels have been used to classify writers between the wars. Some are associated with particular aesthetic practices. The “School of Imagism,” a descriptive phrase coined by Pound, referred to a significant approach to poetry that flourished through the World War I years. Seeking a break with the past, Pound in a 1913 article in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* called for the “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” suggesting that the focus of poems should be concrete images, rendered in common language rather than in the flowery diction of Romantic poetry and in the natural rhythms of speech rather than in the strict meters of traditional verse—or, as he called it, “the sequence of a metronome.” Poets such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Amy Lowell, and William Carlos Williams adopted these aims. In the 1930s Williams developed an approach to poetry he
called objectivism, in which the poem itself was viewed as an object and its formal structure became as important as the images it presented. The objectivist poets included Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, and Charles Reznikoff.

Some schools and movements were associated with particular magazines, frequently one of the little magazines, in which an editor was able to create a niche for a recognizable style or type of writing. One notable little magazine that subscribed to an identifiable artistic agenda was Alfred Kreymborg’s Others: A Magazine of the New Verse (1915–1919). Publishing such poets as Eliot, Williams, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Conrad Aiken, as well as many lesser-known writers, Others encouraged experiments in free verse. A Nashville-based group of poets calling themselves the Fugitives, including John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Laura Riding, created their own forum, The Fugitive (1922–1925), a magazine of poetry and criticism, which Warren described as providing “a battleground for debating modernism and traditionalism.” In the late 1920s and early 1930s The New Masses (1926–1948) attempted to shape the development of what editor Michael Gold called “proletarian literature”—writing that gave voice to the concerns and aspirations of the working classes. A mainstream magazine that was associated with a particular brand of fiction was The New Yorker, founded in 1925 by Harold Ross. Writers for the magazine include James Thurber, S. J. Perelman, Dorothy Parker, and E. B. White. John O’Hara and Irwin Shaw, among others, developed a style of fiction known as “the New Yorker story,” which focused on character and the establishment of mood, not on heavy plotting. The pulp magazine Black Mask, edited by Joseph T. Shaw, played an important role in the development of the so-called hard-boiled school of fiction practiced by writers such as Hammett and Chandler.

The little theater movement, inspired by the European free-theater movement, promoted noncommercial drama in regional theater groups, including the Chicago Little Theatre, the Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit, the Washington Square Players and the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, and the Carolina Playhouse at the University of North Carolina. One of the most important groups associated with the little theater movement was the Provincetown Players (1915–1929), founded by George Cram Cook and his wife, Susan Glaspell. This group performed Glaspell’s feminist play Trifles (1916) and many early works by O’Neill. New York audiences were introduced to such O’Neill plays as The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape (1922), and All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1924) at a Greenwich Village brownstone the group renovated into a theater. Other writers whose work the Provincetown Players performed included Djuna Barnes, Paul Green, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edna Ferber, and Floyd Dell. Theatre Arts Magazine was the main periodical associated with the movement. A later organization that exerted a powerful influence on American drama was The Group Theatre (1931–1941), founded in New York by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford. Inspired in part by the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavsky, this avant-garde company advocated ensemble productions of socially progressive dramas. Clifford Odets wrote such plays as Waiting for Lefty (1935) and Awake and Sing! (1935) for the Group. Other works performed by the company included
Paul Green’s *The House of Connelly* (1931), Sidney Kingsley’s *Men in White* (1933), Irwin Shaw’s *The Gentle People* (1939), and William Saroyan’s *My Heart’s in the Highlands* (1939).

Certainly one of the most important movements of the era was the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the Negro Renaissance and the New Negro Movement. With the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities in the wake of World War I, the Harlem section of New York City became what James Weldon Johnson called a “city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world.” The creation of journals such as *The Crisis* (1910– ), *The Messenger* (1917–1928), and *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (1923–1949), and the generally increased interest by publishers in the African American experience during the boom times of the 1920s, afforded new writers unprecedented opportunities to make their voices heard. Such authors as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston made Harlem a vibrant literary community in the 1920s and into the 1930s.
THE GREAT WAR YEARS

In February 1915, as the Great War was being fought in Europe, Americans in Los Angeles were going to see The Clansman, a movie adapted by director D. W. Griffith from Thomas Dixon's drama set in the South during Reconstruction that glorified the Ku Klux Klan and vilified African Americans. Three months later, retitled The Birth of a Nation, Griffith's three-hour movie premiered in New York and proved the commercial viability of the feature-length motion picture. Despite protests from the newly formed National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), race riots in some major cities, being banned in eight states, and an unprecedented $2.00 admission charge, The Birth of a Nation became the first movie blockbuster, grossing more than $10 million in 1915 (the equivalent of $200 million today) and becoming the most profitable movie of the silent-film era. The Birth of a Nation is cited by historians for increasing the visibility and growth of the NAACP, as well as for the resurgence of the Klan. The controversy the movie entailed—which occurred during the early stages of the so-called Great Migration of millions of African Americans from the oppressiveness of the Jim Crow South to the perceived opportunity of a better life in the urban North—suggests something of the swirling tensions that existed beneath the surface in America before the country became involved in World War I.

Although President Woodrow Wilson had vowed to keep the United States out of war, the country entered the conflict on the side of the Allies on 2 April 1917, after several American ships had been sunk by German submarines and the deciphering of a coded German telegram—the “Zimmerman telegram,” from the German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico—revealed that Germany wanted to offer United States territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. Wilson characterized U.S. involvement as making “the world safe for democracy,” and his administration portrayed the Germans as barbarous “Huns” out to destroy civilization. With volunteers and the institution of a draft, the U.S. Army reached a peak of four million soldiers; two million went overseas in the American Expeditionary Forces before the Armistice on 11 November 1918. More than half of the estimated 116,000 Americans who died in the war succumbed to disease. Many American authors who wrote of the war disparaged the idealism that had been used to promote what was recognized in retrospect as an unnecessary tragedy. In 1919 (1932), the second volume of his U.S.A. trilogy, John Dos Passos, who had earlier written of the devastating effects of the war experience on individuals in Three Soldiers (1921), uses newspaper headlines, song lyrics, biographical notes, and stream-of-consciousness passages to evoke the atmosphere of wartime America. Other important works about the war include e. e. cummings’s The Enormous Room (1922), Thomas Boyd’s Through the Wheat (1923), and Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms. More-ambivalent views of the conflict are offered in Willa Cather’s One of
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*Ours* (1922), Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson’s play *What Price Glory?* (1924), and Hervy Allen’s memoir *Toward the Flame* (1926).

**THE RED SCARE AND THE PALMER RAIDS**

During the war the United States government, empowered by the Espionage Act of 15 June 1917, had stifled its critics by suppressing dozens of publications. For example, because of its strong opposition to American involvement in the war, the little magazine *The Masses* was banned by postal authorities in New York. The government became increasingly concerned with the perceived threat of Communism as the Bolshevik Revolution progressed and ultimately led to the creation of the Soviet Union. Anxiety about the “Reds” reached a peak after the night of 2 June 1919, when a group of anarchists, in a series of coordinated attacks, set off nine bombs within a couple of hours at the homes of U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and others considered hostile to labor interests or immigrants in Washington, D.C.; Boston; Paterson, New Jersey; New York City; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; and Cleveland. Two people, including one of the bombers, died in the attacks. Palmer subsequently began a series of warrantless raids on radicals of all types, especially foreigners. His most notorious action was the roundup of 249 resident aliens, including the anarchist Emma Goldman, who were shipped off to Russia on 21 December 1919. In an essay titled “The Case against the ‘Reds,’” published in *Forum* the following year, Palmer explained the need for his raids and revealed the paranoia that gripped many Americans:

> Like a prairie-fire, the blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order a year ago. It was eating its way into the homes of the American workmen, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.

In the context of the panic over “Reds” the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, self-described as “a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler,” were arrested, on little evidence, in May 1920 for a robbery and murder in Brain-tree, Massachusetts. Their trial became a cause célèbre that galvanized the literary Left and played a role in the evolution of proletarian literature. Another act of terrorism, the explosion of a huge bomb on Wall Street on 16 September 1920 that killed more than thirty people and injured hundreds, was quickly linked to the same anarchist group responsible for the June 1919 bombings. The Red Scare and terrorist acts were important factors in the movement to restrict immigration that culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, effectively shutting the door on immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

**AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION**

In the late 1910s the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution wrought profound changes to American society. Passed by Congress at
the end of 1917 and ratified by the required three-fourths of the state legislatures by January 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes.” It was enforced by the National Prohibition Act, popularly known as the Volstead Act, and put into effect on 17 January 1920. It was the only amendment ever to be repealed: the Twenty-First Amendment brought the “Noble Experiment” to an end on 5 December 1933. During its nearly fourteen years of existence, Prohibition did not create the “dry” society its supporters envisioned; as one can see by reading John O’Hara’s Appointment in Samarra, drinking continued as a ritual of social interaction among every class. The widely flaunted law led to the proliferation of clandestine saloons, known as speakeasies, some of which became literary hangouts. Organized crime, exemplified by gangsters such as Al Capone in Chicago, profited enormously from bootlegging (the illegal sale of alcohol). Local bootleggers became part of the fabric of society in cities big and small. In the 1920s literary culture was so connected to drinking that some expatriate writers claimed that Prohibition played a role in their decision to leave the United States.

The Nineteenth Amendment, stating that “the right of the citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex,” was passed by Congress on 4 June 1919 and ratified on 18 August 1920. The guarantee of the right to vote was symptomatic of an increasing acceptance of women’s roles outside the home. The emerging “new woman” was associated with the iconic image of the flapper, a figure ridiculed by conservative critics as frivolous but that suggested the enlarged cultural possibilities that women were beginning to claim. The August 1922 issue of the Chicago-based magazine The Flapper announced an agenda that spoke to this new freedom: “What the FLAPPER stands for: short skirts, rolled sox, bobbed hair, powder and rouge, no corsets, one-piece bathing suits, deportation of reformers, nonenforcement of Blue Laws, no censorship of movies, stage or the press, vacations with full pay, no chaperons, attractive clothes, the inalienable right to make dates, good times, honor between both sexes.” F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose first volume of stories was Flappers and Philosophers (1920), was the recognized spokesman for the concerns of youth and was typed as a “flapper writer” because of such stories as “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” The unconventional Lady Brett Ashley in Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises is regarded by some critics as an exemplum of a new woman.

THE TWENTIES

The “Jazz Age,” “The Roaring Twenties,” “The Era of Wonderful Nonsense”—these names suggest a sense of excitement and pleasure, feelings no doubt shared by the middle and upper classes who enjoyed increasing prosperity during its long economic boom. President Calvin Coolidge’s famous assertion—“the chief business of the American people is business”—certainly had some validity, for U.S. industrial production rose 50 percent during the decade, and the consumer
culture thrived as the sale of durable goods, especially electrical appliances, radios, and refrigerators, skyrocketed. New products were introduced: Trojan condoms; Baby Ruth, Mounds, and Butterfinger candy bars; the Hertz Drive-Ur-Self System; Drano drain cleaner; Wise Potato Chips; canned tomato juice and Hormel canned ham; Schick electric shavers; Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal; and Wonder Bread. Coca-Cola sales rose from $4 million in 1920 to $39 million in 1929. Running for president in 1928, Herbert Hoover called for “a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage.” By the end of the decade twenty million telephones were in use, and one in five Americans owned an automobile.

The 1920 census showed that some fifty-four million Americans—more than half of the population—lived and worked in cities, where the forty-eight-hour workweek became standard. With their greater leisure time Americans played mah-jongg and flocked to sporting events and to the movies that were soon transformed by color and sound. Their heroes became athletes—Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Jack Dempsey—and they adored movie stars such as Jean Harlow, Mae West, Clara Bow, and Greta Garbo. Each year brought new developments, new marvels. Charles Lindberg’s nonstop thirty-three-hour flight from New York to Paris in the *Spirit of St. Louis* seemed a symbol of the age, and Irving Berlin wrote the lyrics that many sang to themselves, for all of the blue days had been left behind:

“Nothing but blue skies
From now on.”

But while the rich got richer—the share of disposable income enjoyed by the top 5 percent of the population rose from about one-quarter to one-third—those at the bottom of the economic scale, including workers in textiles and coal, unorganized labor, Southern farmers, the elderly, single women, and most African Americans, enjoyed little benefit from the general rise in prosperity. And when billions of dollars in capital disappeared in the stock-market crashes of Black Thursday, 24 October 1929, and Black Tuesday, 29 October, formerly wealthy Americans, like the character Charlie Wales in Fitzgerald’s story “Babylon Revisited” (1931), “suddenly realized the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something.”

THE THIRTIES AND THE NEW DEAL

The dominant American figure of the 1930s was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, elected president for the first of his unprecedented four terms in 1932, as the Great Depression was at its deepest. In May of that year a “Bonus Expeditionary Force” of some eleven thousand impoverished World War I veterans and their families had marched on Washington, D.C., to petition for a second loan on the bonus that Congress had voted in 1924 to give them but that was not due to be paid until 1945. Most of the protesters, who were living in shacks below the Capitol and in shanties and tents along the Anacostia River, returned home when Congress failed to act, but a few thousand remained and continued to engage in protests. On 28 July President Herbert Hoover ordered that the
men be dispersed. General Douglas MacArthur and his second in command, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, used troops, tanks, and tear gas to drive the veterans from the city and destroy their encampments. The spectacle of the army routing former soldiers further damaged the reputation of the already unpopular Hoover. When a second “Bonus Army” arrived in Washington, D.C. in May 1933, the new president sent his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, to meet with its leaders. Although no specific legislation was enacted for the veterans, many of them found employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of several major “New Deal” programs—including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the Tennessee Valley Authority—passed in the first one hundred days of the Roosevelt administration to provide immediate relief to those in need.

Roosevelt’s policies did not end the misery of the Depression, and the country suffered through bank failures, railway insolvencies, and closed factories throughout the decade. Rural America, plagued by low agricultural prices, floods, and droughts, had already been experiencing depression conditions in the 1920s. By 1932 farm prices had fallen to 40 percent of their 1929 levels, and a drought in 1934 reduced the corn crop by nearly 1 billion bushels. The production of durable goods plunged and did not recover its 1929 peak until 1940. Unemployment rose from four million in 1930 to eight million in 1931, and the rate of unemployment reached 25 percent in 1932. In November 1936 the Commerce Department was pleased to report that unemployment was only nine million, down from eleven million at the beginning of the year. The sense of betrayal of the American dream of hard work earning rewards was evident in the “proletarian” literature that protested the plight of workers and even in popular songs. In his lyrics for one of the seminal songs of the decade, Yip Harburg wrote of the iconic American worker who had built the railroad and “made it race against time”:

Once I built a railroad; now it’s done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?

Perhaps more than the works of any other author, John Steinbeck’s novels, including *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), provide enduring images of Depression America.

**THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND WORLD WAR II**

In what was recognized by many as a likely precursor to a wider conflict, the Spanish Civil War began in 1936 when the Spanish Republic was attacked by the Nationalist forces led by General Francisco Franco, backed by the fascist dictators Adolf Hitler of Germany and Benito Mussolini of Italy. The Republicans, or Loyalists, were backed by the Communist dictator Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union. While the United States remained neutral, a few thousand American Leftists volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the losing Republican cause. American writers, including Dos Passos and Hemingway, wrote anti-Franco books. Robert Jordan, the protagonist of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is an idealistic American who fights for the Republic.
World War II began when Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. For more than two years the United States remained officially neutral, though its Lend-Lease program and other policies supported Britain and France, and later the Soviet Union, in their conflict with Germany and Italy, as well as China in its struggle against Japan. The United States entered the war after the 7 December 1941 Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. In the European theater American and Allied forces fought in North Africa and Italy before invading German-occupied France at Normandy on D day, 6 June 1944. Paris was liberated on 25 August. After a fierce German counteroffensive was overcome in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium in December 1944, American, British, French, Canadian and Polish troops entered Germany from the west while the Soviets were invading from the east; Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945. In the Pacific the United States suffered early defeats, losing the Philippines before beginning an offensive against Japan in the summer of 1942. That year more than one hundred thousand Japanese Americans, principally on the West Coast and in Hawaii, were rounded up and placed in internment camps on the mistaken belief that they were a security threat. American soldiers fought the Japanese on a series of islands—Guadalcanal, Saipan, Guam, and Iwo Jima—leading toward the Japanese mainland; the campaign culminated in the taking of Okinawa in June 1945. General Douglas MacArthur, true to his famous pledge to return to the Philippines, led the invasion there in January 1945. The conflict with Japan concluded shortly after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and on Nagasaki three days later.

Depression conditions continued into the 1940s. The unemployment rate was 14.6 percent in 1940, a year in which the government allocated $1.8 billion of its total budget of $8.4 billion for defense. As the country gained its war footing—rationing tires and gasoline and converting the automobile industry to military purposes—government expenditures increased dramatically, and unemployment all but disappeared, even as women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers and African Americans were enlisted in the war effort. In 1943 Roosevelt earmarked for defense $100 billion of his $109 billion budget. By 1945, the final year of the war, twelve million American men and women were in uniform. Most of the literature to emerge from the war was written after 1945, but important reporting was done by such war correspondents as Martha Gellhorn, John Hersey, A. J. Liebling, and Ernie Pyle.
Literary Influences

Notable developments in American literature as a cultural endeavor occurred as publishing, book buying, and the recognition of American literary achievement became more diversified. While American writers continued to be inspired by European authors, thinkers, and artists, they also began to be recognized by Europeans for their contributions to literature. Five American authors who established their reputations in the 1920s and 1930s were awarded the Nobel Prize in literature: Sinclair Lewis in 1930, Pearl S. Buck in 1938, Eugene O’Neill in 1936, William Faulkner in 1950, and Ernest Hemingway in 1954.

NEW PUBLISHING HOUSES

Significant literary publishing houses were established in the years following World War I and in the 1920s and 1930s. The Alfred A. Knopf firm (1915– ), founded by husband and wife Alfred and Blanche Wolf Knopf, published the works of such authors as Willa Cather, Langston Hughes, and H. L. Mencken; it also published Mencken’s literary magazine *The American Mercury* from 1924 to 1934. Blanche Knopf was responsible for developing a list of crime and detective authors that included Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The house of Boni & Liveright (1917–1933) produced the Modern Library series, reprinting classic works of literature in attractive, inexpensive editions. In the 1920s the firm, under the direction of Horace Liveright, also made its name by publishing new authors and experimental or controversial works. It published T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, Hemingway’s first American book, *In Our Time* (1925), and Faulkner’s first novel, *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926), in addition to works by O’Neill, Ezra Pound, Djuna Barnes, e. e. cummings, Hart Crane, and Sherwood Anderson. Harcourt, Brace (1919– ) enjoyed its first major success with Lewis’s *Main Street* and later brought out works by John O’Hara, John Dos Passos, James Gould Cozzens, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Penn Warren. Random House (1927– ), using the purchase of the Modern Library series from Liveright as its foundation, became a powerful publisher and made history by defeating censors and winning the legal battle to have James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) declared publishable in the United States. New Directions (1936– ), founded by James Laughlin, promoted the reputations of many noncommercial authors and published such writers as Pound, William Carlos Williams, Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, and Dylan Thomas. Viking Press (1925– ), which included John Steinbeck, Dorothy Parker, and Ernest Caldwell on its list, launched the Viking Portable Library series in 1943. These single volumes, which were made up of a generous selection of an author’s best work, advanced the reputations of writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Faulkner.

BOOK CLUBS AND THE PAPERBACK REVOLUTION

Book clubs developed into an important factor influencing how Americans bought and read books. Founded by Harry Scherman in 1926, the Book-of-the-Month Club sent a book chosen by its board of literary judges to its members through the
mail. By the end of the 1920s the club had more than a million members and had spawned similar enterprises, including the Literary Guild and clubs sponsored by publishers such as Doubleday. Membership in book clubs increased to such a degree that in the 1950s they may have accounted for nearly one-third of all book sales in the United States. American reading habits were also affected by the so-called paperback revolution, pioneered in the United States by Pocket Books in 1939. Priced at only twenty-five cents and marketed at nontraditional venues such as drugstores, cheap paperbacks changed the way Americans regarded book buying. Other paperback publishers, including Avon (1941), Popular Library (1942), Dell (1943), and Bantam (1945), soon copied the successful Pocket Books model.

THE RECOGNITION OF THE AMERICAN WRITER

The growing recognition of American writing was shown by the increasing attention paid to American books by reviewers in newspapers. The New York Times Book Review, which began as a Saturday supplement to the newspaper in 1896 and became a section in the Sunday paper in 1911, developed into the most influential newspaper review section in the country, often setting the tone for the national response to a book. A prominent positive review in The New York Times Book Review could increase the sales of a book, while a negative review or lack of coverage could undermine a book’s appeal.

Beginning in 1917 Pulitzer Prizes, established by newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer through the Columbia School of Journalism, were awarded annually to outstanding works of American literature. The following year the Yale University Press began awarding a prize to encourage achievement by a poet under forty by publishing his or her first book in its Yale Series of Younger Poets. In 1922 the Newbery Medal was established to recognize and encourage authors writing for children.

The practice of American academic institutions offering support to writers began in 1917, when Robert Frost accepted an appointment at Amherst College; he later held appointments at the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and Dartmouth College before returning to Amherst in 1949. In 1936 the University of Iowa, which in 1922 had become the first major school to establish a creative-writing program, created the Writers’ Workshop, in which distinguished visiting authors worked with selected students. After World War II, universities became much more widely involved with the support of professional writers through writers-in-residence programs. In the late 1920s the teaching of classic nineteenth-century American literature was becoming established in universities. The scholarly journal American Literature began publication in 1929. The academic study of contemporary American literature did not become widespread until the 1950s.

AMERICANS IN PARIS

By the twentieth century American literature had matured to the point that writers were looking to American predecessors as well as to European authors as influences. Edith Wharton, for example, following the example of her good
friend Henry James, explored the clash of American and European attitudes and cultures in her novels. Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920) can be read as something of a literary rejoinder to James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). At the beginning of his career Faulkner sought out Sherwood Anderson as a mentor. Walt Whitman was clearly an influence on poets as different as Sandburg and Robinson Jeffers, for both used long, irregular Whitmanesque lines. Hemingway looked back to Mark Twain in his suggestion that all of American literature flowed from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

While many European authors might also be cited as necessary predecessors of individual American writers, the most important foreign influence on American literature in the post–World War I years was not a person but a place: Paris, the center of the literary and artistic world in the 1920s. Some American writers may have traveled to Europe to escape the perceived puritanism and commercialism of American culture. Many were no doubt drawn by the favorable exchange rates that made living in France—even in Paris—comparatively cheap. But the most important reason for American writers and artists to flock to Paris was the sense that the city, with its mix of established and young artists, musicians, and writers, afforded opportunities for rich, meaningful experiences in a community that placed art and expression at the center of existence.


Paris was the center of the literary and artistic world during the Twenties. In addition to the French, there were notable figures from all over Europe—including those who had left Russia after the Revolution. The assemblage of these geniuses attracted and stimulated American writers, painters, composers, dancers, and musicians. Writers: Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Jean Cocteau, Paul Morand, Blaise Cendrars, Jules Romains, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault. Artists: Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Fernand Léger, Jules Pascin, Joan Miró, Georges Braque, André Derain, Henri Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Juan Gris, Natalia Goncharova. Composers: Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Igor Stravinsky, Nadia Boulanger. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suèdois were based in Paris. The Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (which provided the name for Art Deco) opened in Paris in July 1925.

For many American writers, the presence of James Joyce may have been reason enough to travel to the French capital.

The expatriate experience in Paris was particularly important to the development of Modernism, for the time and place encouraged experimentation in technique and form and for many writers provided a necessary distance to achieve perspective on the American experience. Among the many American writers for whom their Paris sojourn was decisive in one way or another were Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Pound, Barnes, cummings, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Kay Boyle, Robert McAlmon, Henry Miller, Anais Nin, and Gertrude Stein.
Evolution of Critical Opinion

Many of those who contributed to the development of literary criticism in America after World War I did not restrict themselves to literature but ranged more broadly as cultural critics, delving into considerations of society, politics, history, language, philosophy, and other arts. The period after the war was a time of reevaluation, and a general dissatisfaction with post–World War I American culture is evident in *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans* (1922), edited by Harold E. Stearns, which includes his essay “The Intellectual Life,” as well as H. L. Mencken’s “Politics,” Conrad Aiken’s “Poetry,” Ring Lardner’s “Sport and Play,” George Jean Nathan’s “The Theatre,” and Lewis Mumford’s “The City.”

Some critics were considering fundamental questions about the purpose of literature, especially as the Great Depression shook society to its foundations. Marxist critics such as Mike Gold and Granville Hicks were trying to define what “proletarian literature” should become. The question of the purpose of literature was also considered by African American writers, as when Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was attacked by Richard Wright for its depiction of African American folk culture. At the same time that independent critics such as Mencken, Mumford, Kenneth Burke, and Edmund Wilson were examining the relationship of literature to culture, a new and narrower focus on the work itself, which came to be known as New Criticism, was attracting adherents.

LITERARY JOURNALISTS

The most influential critic of contemporary literature after the war and through the 1920s was Henry Louis (H. L.) Mencken. Although his formal education ended with his graduation from high school, Mencken distinguished himself as a journalist, philologist, political commentator, and literary critic and came to be regarded as the country’s greatest man of letters. In his newspaper columns for *The Baltimore Sun* he wrote for what he called the “civilized minority,” satirizing everything from the hysteria surrounding World War I and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan to the Scopes “Monkey” Trial in Tennessee and the residual puritanism he believed infected American life. In all of his writing Mencken enjoyed “stirring up the animals.”

Mencken began to make his name as a literary critic before World War I. His early books include *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (1905) and *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908), the first studies on these authors to be published in America. He also edited and wrote introductions for Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and *Little Eyolf* in 1909 and was an early champion of the work of Joseph Conrad. In 1908 Mencken began to review books for *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness*, which he edited with George Jean Nathan from 1914 to 1923. From November 1908 to December 1923 he wrote 182 monthly articles on all manner of books, American and foreign—some 2,000 in all. Although for most of his years as a reviewer Mencken generally regarded American literature
as inferior to European literature—an argument he makes in his 1920 essay “The National Letters”—he had begun to see signs of hope for advancement when he wrote his last essay for The Smart Set. In 1923 Mencken and Nathan left that magazine to found The American Mercury, which they edited together for two years before Mencken became the sole editor from 1925 to 1933. At The Smart Set Mencken and Nathan promoted Realism in fiction and drama, publishing work by Eugene O’Neill, Dorothy Parker, Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather; the first commercial story by F. Scott Fitzgerald; and the first publication in the United States by James Joyce. Authors whose work appeared in The American Mercury included Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Carl Sandburg.

A much less combative literary journalist, Henry Seidel Canby, began his professional career as a professor of English at Yale University. He served as an assistant editor at the Yale Review from 1911 until becoming the editor of the Literary Review, a weekly supplement to the New York Evening Post, in 1920; in 1924 he founded The Saturday Review of Literature, which he edited until 1936. As the guiding hand of what became the most influential literary weekly in the United States and as the first chairman of the editorial board for the Book-of-the-Month Club, Canby exercised enormous influence on the American reading public. He was criticized both as too much of an elitist and as too much of a panderer to bourgeois tastes. Malcolm Cowley’s parody in the journal Aesthete 1925—“Editor Outlines Middle Course between Heaven and Hell. Solution Deemed Acceptable to Both Modernists and Fundamentalists”—suggests Canby’s difficult position in negotiating between his audiences while certainly overstating his success in pleasing everyone. Canby strove to broaden as well as deepen the discussion of American literature, writing in his American Memoir (1947) of “the Jeffersonian belief in the necessity of education for a successful democracy” that animated his career: “I wanted to go in for adult education in the value of books—all kinds of books, foreign as well as native, but particularly the current books of our own country. I wished to make criticism first of all a teaching job, backed up by explorations and estimates of new ideas.”

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Two critics who brought attention to the cultural contributions by African Americans were Alain Locke and Sterling Brown; the latter was also a respected poet. Locke edited The New Negro: An Interpretation (1925), the anthology that initiated the movement that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Locke also edited Four Negro Poets (1927), which brought attention to the work of Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. In Negro Art: Past and Present (1936) and The Negro and His Music (1936) Locke provided more support for his belief that African Americans were making a distinctive contribution to American culture. Brown’s criticism included The Negro in American Fiction (1937) and Negro Poetry and Drama (1937). He also edited the anthology The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes (1941).
A USABLE PAST

Some of the most influential literary criticism published between the wars focused on the American literary past, including Van Wyck Brooks’s *America’s Coming of Age* (1915), F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), and Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939). In his three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–1930) Vernon L. Parrington offered an overarching interpretation of American literature as the expression or representation of political, social, and economic forces. His concentration on historical background and the material conditions of society and lack of concern for aesthetics were faulted by the New Critics.

T. S. ELIOT AND THE NEW CRITICISM

The New Criticism, which became the dominant school of literary criticism in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, was influenced by Eliot, the formidable American poet living in England who was also one of the most important literary theorists of the twentieth century. In *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920), which includes book reviews as well as several longer essays, Eliot discusses the work of Algernon Swinburne, William Blake, Dante, Philip Massinger, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare, and defines terms and concepts that have entered into critical discourse. In his essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” for example, Eliot provides a famous formulation for how poetry communicates emotion to the reader or listener: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” As this rather abstract description suggests, Eliot was interested in moving beyond “aesthetic” or “impressionistic” criticism that depended on the interpretations of “a sensitive and cultivated mind” toward a surer, less subjective footing for criticism. In the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood* he articulated the idea that unified his collection of essays: “It is an artificial simplification, and to be taken only with caution, when I say that the problem appearing in these essays, which gives them what coherence they have, is the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing.”

In the United States such critics as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks agreed with Eliot that literary criticism should be a largely autonomous endeavor, distinct from biography, psychology, philosophy, and other disciplines. Brooks described this critical approach as “formalist” because it was centered on a close reading and an analysis of the elements—metaphor, imagery, symbolism, and so forth—of a poem or other piece of literature and not on its cultural context. The emphasis of this approach was well tailored to the complexity of Modernist literature, particularly poetry, which seemed to require literary critics to explain the work to the reader. Brooks and Warren spread the methodology of New Criticism through their textbooks *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), in which they stressed that a great work
of literature has multiple meanings. While not denying the importance of social, moral, cultural, or religious contexts in the study of literature, they believed that such considerations were subordinate to the study of the organic nature of a poem or novel: the way the elements combine to produce a living work of art.

CRITICISM TODAY OF THE 1914–1945 PERIOD

To indulge in gross oversimplification, in the first half of the twentieth century the focus of literary criticism generally shifted from the author’s biography and supposed intention in writing a work—an approach that might be suggested by the question “What did the author mean to communicate?”—to the formal aspects of the literary object in the New Criticism, an approach perhaps best suggested by the question “How does the text work?” After the crest of the influence of the New Critics in the post–World War II years, the focus shifted again in the latter half of the twentieth century, toward the critic and the meaning he or she could find in—or make out of—the literature examined: “What is the significance of this literary work?” A variety of reader- or critic-oriented theories—from psychoanalytic, feminist, and reader-response to deconstruction, new historicist, and cultural or Marxist approaches—have flourished since the 1960s.

Literary fashions and opinions change. Contemporary judgments of the most important or the best writers are often reversed by later generations. While Eugene O’Neill was recognized as a towering figure in the American theater by his contemporaries—a judgment time has not changed—many of the novelists and poets who were regarded as major figures in their own time have faded from memory, and writers who were ignored then have come to be regarded as significant only in retrospect. In the 1920s, for example, many critics might have chosen Joseph Hergesheimer—a largely forgotten novelist whose name appears only a few times in this volume—as among the first rank of American writers. And many of the novelists who are now regarded as major figures of the interwar years—F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, to name only a few—were, for different reasons, undervalued by their contemporaries.

In the twenty-first century readers and critics have a rich variety of ways to approach literary texts. As Lois Tyson suggests in her readable introduction, Critical Theory Today (1998), “theory can help us learn to see ourselves and our world in valuable new ways”; but no single critical approach can exhaust the meaning of a literary text, particularly when that text is an enduring work of art. The greatest of the novels, stories, plays, and poems of the interwar years continue to speak to us as readers and to provide a not-so-distant mirror in which to contemplate our reflection.

—George Parker Anderson