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USA

**LITERATURE**

in Brief

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# EARLY AMERICAN WRITING

**The foundation of American literature** begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. Native American oral tradition is quite diverse. Indian stories glow with reverence for nature as a spiritual, as well as physical, mother. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual.

The Indian contribution to America is greater than is often believed. The hundreds of Indian words in everyday American English include “canoe,” “tobacco,” “potato,” “moccasin,” “moose,” “persimmon,” “raccoon,” “tomahawk,” and “totem.” Contemporary Native American writing also contains works of great beauty.

The first European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian language. The Old Norse Vinland Saga recounts how the adventurous Leif Eriksson and a band

of wandering Norsemen settled briefly somewhere on the northeast coast of America—probably Nova Scotia, in Canada—in the first decade of the 11th century.

The first known and sustained contact between the Americas and the rest of the world, however, began with the famous voyage of an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, funded by the Queen of Spain, Isabella. Columbus's journal in his "Epistola," printed in 1493, recounts the trip's drama.

Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters. The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared. The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured starvation, brutality, and misrule. However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity. Accounts of the colonizations became world-renowned.

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen's tools. The early literature of exploration



"The First Thanksgiving, 1621," by J.L.G. Ferris, depicts America's early settlers and Native Americans celebrating a bountiful harvest.

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is made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships' logs, and reports to the explorers' financial backers. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best known and most anthologized colonial literature is English.

It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans, most of them of English or Dutch origin. Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern

section of the United States, known as New England, as in England. The self-made and often self-educated Puritans wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England.

Puritan style varied enormously—from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history. Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant. Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss. This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises.

Scholars have long pointed out the link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success. Although individual Puritans could not know, in strict theological terms, whether they were “saved” and among the elect who would go to heaven, Puritans tended to feel that earthly success was a sign of election. Wealth and status were sought not only for themselves, but as welcome reassurances of spiritual health and promises of eternal life.



Moreover, the concept of stewardship encouraged success. The Puritans felt that in advancing their own profit and their community's well-being, they were also furthering God's plans. The great model of writing, belief, and conduct was the Bible, in an authorized English translation. The great antiquity of the Bible made it authoritative to Puritan eyes.

As the 1600s wore on into the 1700s, religious dogmatism gradually dwindled, despite sporadic, harsh Puritan efforts to stem the tide of tolerance. The spirit of toleration and religious freedom that gradually grew in the American colonies was first established in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, home of the Quakers. The humane and tolerant Quakers, or "Friends," as they were known, believed in the sacredness of the individual conscience as the fountainhead of social order and morality. The fundamental Quaker belief in universal love and brotherhood made them deeply democratic and opposed to dogmatic religious authority. Driven out of strict Massachusetts, which feared their influence, they established a very successful colony, Pennsylvania, under William Penn in 1681.



# LITERARY INDEPENDENCE

**The hard-fought American Revolution** against Britain (1775-1783) was the first modern war of liberation against a colonial power. The triumph of American independence seemed to many at the time a divine sign that America and her people were destined for greatness. Military victory fanned nationalistic hopes for a great new literature. Yet, with the exception of outstanding political writing, few works of note appeared during or soon after the Revolution.

Americans were painfully aware of their excessive dependence on English literary models. The search for a native literature became a national obsession. America's literary independence was slowed by a lingering identification with England, an excessive imitation of English or classical literary models, and difficult economic and political conditions that hampered publishing.



James Fenimore Cooper  
1789-1851

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**James Fenimore Cooper**, like Washington Irving, was one of the first great American writers. Like other Romantic writers of the era, he evoked a sense of the past (in his day, the American wilderness that had preceded and coincided with early European settlement). In Cooper, one finds the powerful myth of a “golden age” and the poignance of its loss.

While Irving and other American writers before and after him scoured Europe in search of its legends, castles, and great themes, Cooper helped create the essential myth of America: European history in America was a re-enactment of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The cyclical realm of nature was glimpsed only in the act of destroying it: The wilderness disappeared in front of American eyes, vanishing before the oncoming pioneers like a mirage. This is Cooper’s basic tragic vision of the ironic destruction of the wilderness—the “new Eden” that had attracted the colonists in the first place.

The son of a Quaker family, he grew up on his father's remote estate at Otsego Lake (now Cooperstown) in central New York State. Although this area was relatively peaceful during Cooper's boyhood, it had once been the scene of an Indian massacre. Young Fenimore Cooper saw frontiersmen and Indians at Otsego Lake as a boy; in later life, bold white settlers intruded on his land.

Natty Bumppo, Cooper's renowned literary character, embodies his vision of the frontiersman as a gentleman, a Jeffersonian "natural aristocrat." Early in 1823, in *The Pioneers*, Cooper had begun to imagine Bumppo. Natty is the first famous frontiersman in American literature, and the literary forerunner of countless fictional cowboy and backwoods heroes. He is the idealized, upright individualist who is better than the society he protects. Poor and isolated, yet pure, he is a touchstone for ethical values, and prefigures Herman Melville's Billy Budd and Mark Twain's Huck Finn.

Based in part on the real life of American pioneer Daniel Boone—who was a Quaker like Cooper—Natty Bumppo, an outstanding woodsman like Boone, was a peaceful man adopted by an Indian tribe. Both Boone and the fictional

Bumppo loved nature and freedom. They constantly kept moving west to escape the oncoming settlers they had guided into the wilderness, and they became legends in their own lifetimes.

The unifying thread of the five novels collectively known as the *Leather-Stocking Tales* is the life of Natty Bumppo. Cooper's finest achievement, they constitute a vast prose epic with the North American continent as setting, Indian tribes as major actors, and great wars and westward migration as social background. The novels bring to life frontier America from 1740 to 1804. Cooper's novels portray the successive waves of the frontier settlement: the original wilderness inhabited by Indians; the arrival of the first whites as scouts, soldiers, traders, and frontiersmen; the coming of the poor, rough settler families; and the final arrival of the middle class, bringing the first professionals—the judge, the physician, and the banker. Each incoming wave displaced the earlier: Whites displaced the Indians, who retreated westward; the “civilized” middle classes who erected schools, churches, and jails displaced the lower-class individualistic frontier folk, who moved further west, in turn displacing the Indians

who had preceded them. Cooper evokes the endless, inevitable wave of settlers, seeing not only the gains but the losses.

Like Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Herman Melville, and other sensitive observers of widely varied cultures interacting with each other, Cooper was a cultural relativist. He understood that no culture had a monopoly on virtue or refinement.





# NEW ENGLAND ROMANTICISM

**The Romantic movement**, which originated in Germany but quickly spread, reached America around the year 1820. Romantic ideas centered around the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of nature, and the importance of the individual mind and spirit. The Romantics underscored the importance of self-expressive art for the individual and society.

The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness a primary method. If, according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead-end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of "self," which suggested selfishness to earlier generations, was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance."

As the unique, subjective self became important, so did the realm of psychology. Exceptional artistic effects and techniques were developed to evoke heightened psychological states. The “sublime”—an effect of beauty in grandeur (for example, a view from a mountaintop)—produced feelings of awe, reverence, vastness, and a power beyond human comprehension.

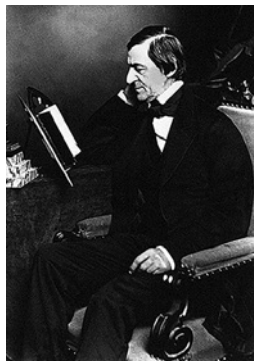
Romanticism was affirmative and appropriate for most American poets and creative essayists. America’s vast mountains, deserts, and tropics embodied the sublime. The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy: It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values.

## **TRANSCENDENTALISM**

The Transcendentalist movement, embodied by essayists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, was a reaction against 18th-century Rationalism, and closely linked to the Romantic movement. It is closely associated with Concord, Massachusetts, a town near Boston, where Emerson, Thoreau, and a group of other writers lived.

In general, Transcendentalism was a liberal philosophy favoring nature over formal religious structure, individual insight over dogma, and humane instinct over social convention. American Transcendental Romantics pushed radical individualism to the extreme. American writers—then or later—often saw themselves as lonely explorers outside society and convention. The American hero—like Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab, or Mark Twain’s Huck Finn—typically faced risk, or even certain destruction, in the pursuit of metaphysical self-discovery. For the Romantic American writer, nothing was a given. Literary and social conventions, far from being helpful, were dangerous. There was tremendous pressure to discover an authentic literary form, content, and voice.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**, the towering figure of his era, had a religious sense of mission. Although many accused him of subverting Christianity, he explained that, for him “to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the church.” The address he



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
1803-1882

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delivered in 1838 at his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School, made him unwelcome at Harvard for 30 years. In it, Emerson accused the church of emphasizing dogma while stifling the spirit.

Emerson is remarkably consistent in his call for the birth of American individualism inspired by nature. In *Nature* (1836), his first publication, the essay opens:

*Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we [merely] through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs. Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past...?*

Much of his spiritual insight comes from his readings in Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islamic Sufism.

**Henry David Thoreau** was born in Concord and made it his permanent home. From a poor family, like Emerson, he worked his way through Harvard. Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), is the result of two years, two months, and two days (from 1845 to 1847) he spent living in a cabin he built at Walden Pond, near Concord.

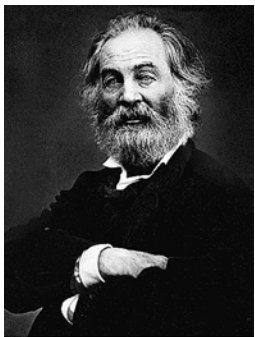


Henry David Thoreau  
1817-1862

This long poetic essay challenges the reader to examine his or her life and live it authentically.

Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," with its theory of passive resistance based on the moral necessity for the just individual to disobey unjust laws, was an inspiration for Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement and Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle for black Americans' civil rights in the 20th century.

Born on Long Island, New York, **Walt Whitman** was a part-time carpenter and man of the people, whose brilliant, innovative work expressed the country's democratic spirit.



Walt Whitman  
1819-1892

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Whitman was largely self-taught; he left school at the age of 11 to go to work, missing the sort of traditional education that made most American authors respectful imitators of the English. His *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which he rewrote and revised throughout his life, contains “Song of Myself,” the most stunningly original poem ever written by an American.

The poem’s innovative, unrhymed, free-verse form, open celebration of sexuality, vibrant democratic sensibility, and extreme Romantic assertion that the poet’s self was one with the universe and the reader permanently altered the course of American poetry.

**Emily Dickinson** is, in a sense, a link between her era and the literary sensitivities of the 20th century. A radical individualist, she was born and spent her life in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small village. She never married, and she led an unconventional life that was outwardly uneventful but was full of inner intensity.

She loved nature and found deep inspiration in the birds, animals, plants, and changing seasons of the New England countryside. Dickinson spent the latter part of her life as a recluse, due to an extremely sensitive psyche and possibly to make time for writing.

Dickinson's terse, frequently imagistic style is even more modern and innovative than Whitman's.

She sometimes shows a terrifying existential awareness. Her clean, clear, chiseled poems, rediscovered in the 1950s, are some of the most fascinating and challenging in American literature.



Emily Dickinson  
1830-1886

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# THE FIRST GREAT NOVELISTS

**Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson**—as well as their contemporaries, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe—represent the first great literary generation produced in the United States. In the case of fiction writers, the Romantic vision tended to express itself in the form Hawthorne called the “Romance,” a heightened, emotional, and symbolic form of the novel. As defined by Hawthorne, Romances were not love stories, but serious novels that used special techniques to communicate complex and subtle meanings.

Instead of carefully defining realistic characters through a wealth of detail, as most English or continental novelists did, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe shaped heroic figures larger than life, burning with mythic significance. The typical protagonists of the American Romance are haunted, alienated individuals. Hawthorne’s Arthur Dimmesdale or Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville’s Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and the many isolated and

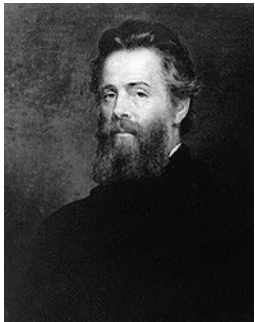
obsessed characters of Poe's tales are lonely protagonists pitted against unknowable, dark fates that, in some mysterious way, grow out of their deepest unconscious selves. The symbolic plots reveal hidden actions of the anguished spirit.

One reason for this fictional exploration into the hidden recesses of the soul was the absence at the time of settled community. English novelists—Jane Austen, Charles Dickens (the great favorite), Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, William Thackeray—lived in a complex, well-articulated, traditional society and shared, with their readers, attitudes that informed their realistic fiction.

American novelists were faced with a history of strife and revolution, a geography of vast wilderness, and a fluid and relatively classless democratic society. Many English novels show a poor main character rising on the economic and social ladder, perhaps because of a good marriage or the discovery of a hidden aristocratic past. But this plot does not challenge the aristocratic social structure of England. On the contrary, it confirms it. The rise of the main character satisfies the wish fulfillment of the mainly middle-class readers of those days in England.

In contrast, the American novelist had to depend on his or her own devices. America was, in part, an undefined, constantly moving frontier populated by immigrants speaking various languages and following strange and crude ways of life. Thus, the main character in an American story might find himself alone among cannibal tribes, as in Melville's *Typee*, or exploring a wilderness like James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, or witnessing lonely visions from the grave, like Poe's solitary individuals, or meeting the devil walking in the forest, like Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown. Virtually all the great American protagonists have been "loners." The democratic American individual had, as it were, to invent himself. The serious American novelist had to invent new forms as well: hence the sprawling, idiosyncratic shape of Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* and Poe's dreamlike, wandering *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

**Herman Melville** was a descendant of an old, wealthy family that fell abruptly into poverty upon the death of the father. Despite his upbringing, family traditions, and hard work, Melville found himself with no college education. At 19, he went to sea. His interest in sailors' lives grew naturally out of his own experiences, and most



Herman Melville  
1819-1891

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of his early novels grew out of his voyages. His first book, *Typee*, was based on his time spent among the Taipis people in the Marquesas Islands of the South Pacific.

*Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, Melville's masterpiece, is the epic story of the whaling ship *Pequod* and its captain, Ahab, whose obsessive quest for the white whale, Moby-

Dick, leads the ship and its men to destruction. This work, a seemingly realistic adventure novel, contains a series of meditations on the human condition.

Whaling, throughout the book, is a grand metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge. Although Ahab's quest is philosophical, it is also tragic. Despite his heroism, Ahab is doomed and perhaps damned in the end. Nature, however beautiful, remains alien and potentially deadly. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville challenges Emerson's optimistic idea that humans can understand nature. Moby-Dick, the great white whale, is an inscrutable, cosmic existence that dominates the novel, just as he obsesses Ahab. Facts

about the whale and whaling cannot explain Moby-Dick; on the contrary, the facts themselves tend to dissolve into symbols. Behind Melville's accumulation of facts is a mystic vision—but whether this vision is evil or good, human or inhuman, is not explained.

Ahab insists on imaging a heroic, timeless world of absolutes. Unwisely, he demands a finished “text,” an answer. But the novel shows that just as there are no finished texts, there are no final answers except, perhaps, death. Certain literary references resonate throughout the novel. Ahab, named for an Old Testament king, desires a total, Faustian, god-like knowledge. Like Oedipus in Sophocles' play, who pays tragically for wrongful knowledge, Ahab is struck blind before he is finally killed.

Ahab's ship *Pequod* is named for an extinct New England Indian tribe; thus the name suggests that the boat is doomed to destruction. Whaling was in fact a major industry, especially in New England: It supplied whale oil as an energy source, especially for lamps. Thus the whale does literally “shed light” on the universe. The book has historical resonance. Whaling was inherently expansionist and linked with the historical idea of a “manifest destiny”

for Americans, since it required Americans to sail round the world in search of whales (in fact, the present state of Hawaii came under American domination because it was used as the major refueling base for American whaling ships). The *Pequod's* crew members represent all races and various religions, suggesting the idea of America as a universal state of mind, as well as a melting pot. Finally, Ahab embodies the tragic version of democratic American individualism. He asserts his dignity as an individual and dares to oppose the inexorable external forces of the universe.

# THE RISE OF REALISM

**The U.S. Civil War** (1861-1865) between the industrial North and the agricultural, slave-owning South was a watershed in American history. Before the war, idealists championed human rights, especially the abolition of slavery; after the war, Americans increasingly idealized progress and the “self-made man.” This was the era of the millionaire manufacturer and the speculator, when the Darwinian theory of biological evolution and the “survival of the fittest” species was applied to society and seemed to sanction the sometimes unethical methods of the successful business tycoon.

Business boomed after the war. The new intercontinental rail system, inaugurated in 1869, and the transcontinental telegraph, which began operating in 1861, gave industry access to materials, markets, and communications. The constant influx of immigrants provided a seemingly endless supply of inexpensive labor as well. Over 23 million foreigners—German, Scandinavian, and Irish in

the early years, and increasingly Central and Southern Europeans thereafter—flowed into the United States between 1860 and 1910. In 1860, most Americans had lived on farms or in small villages, but by 1919 half of the population was concentrated in about 12 cities.

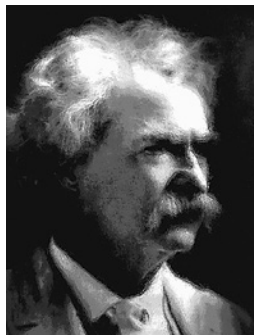
Problems of urbanization and industrialization appeared: poor and overcrowded housing, unsanitary conditions, low pay (called “wage slavery”), difficult working conditions, and inadequate restraints on business. Labor unions grew, and strikes brought the plight of working people to national awareness. Farmers, too, saw themselves struggling against the “money interests” of the East. From 1860 to 1914, the United States was transformed from a small, agricultural ex-colony to a huge, modern, industrial nation. A debtor nation in 1860, by 1914 it had become the world’s wealthiest state. By World War I, the United States had become a major world power.

As industrialization grew, so did alienation. The two greatest novelists of the period—Mark Twain and Henry James—responded differently. Twain looked South and West into the heart of rural and frontier America for his



defining myth; James looked back at Europe in order to assess the nature of newly cosmopolitan Americans.

**Samuel Clemens**, better known by his pen name of **Mark Twain**, grew up in the Mississippi River frontier town of Hannibal, Missouri. Ernest Hemingway said that all of American literature comes from one great book, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Early 19th-century American writers tended to be too flowery, sentimental, or ostentatious—in



Samuel Clemens  
(Mark Twain) 1835-1910

part because they were still trying to prove that they could write as elegantly as the English. Twain's style, based on vigorous, realistic, colloquial American speech, gave American writers a new appreciation of their national voice. Twain was the first major author to come from the interior of the country, and he captured its distinctive, humorous slang and iconoclasm.

For Twain and other American writers of the late 19th century, realism was not merely a literary technique:

It was a way of speaking truth and exploding worn-out conventions. Thus it was profoundly liberating and potentially at odds with society. The most well-known example is his story of Huck Finn, a poor boy who decides to follow the voice of his conscience and help a Negro slave escape to freedom, even though Huck thinks this means that he will be damned to hell for breaking the law.

Twain's masterpiece, which appeared in 1884, is set in the Mississippi River village of St. Petersburg. The son of an alcoholic bum, Huck has just been adopted by a respectable family when his father, in a drunken stupor, threatens to kill him. Fearing for his life, Huck escapes, feigning his own death. He is joined in his escape by another outcast, the slave Jim, whose owner, Miss Watson, is thinking of selling him down the river to the harsher slavery of the deep South. Huck and Jim float on a raft down the majestic Mississippi, but are sunk by a steamboat, separated, and later reunited. They go through many comical and dangerous shore adventures that show the variety, generosity, and sometimes cruel irrationality of society. In the end, it is discovered that Miss Watson had already freed Jim, and a respectable family is taking care of the wild boy Huck. But Huck grows

impatient with civilized society and plans to escape to “the territories”—Indian lands.

The ending gives the reader another version of the classic American “purity” myth: the open road leading to the pristine wilderness, away from the morally corrupting influences of “civilization.” James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, Walt Whitman’s hymns to the open road, William Faulkner’s *The Bear*, and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* are other literary examples.

**Henry James** once wrote that art, especially literary art, “makes life, makes interest, makes importance.” James’s fiction is the most highly conscious, sophisticated, and difficult of its era. James is noted for his “international theme”—that is, the complex relationships between naïve Americans and cosmopolitan Europeans.



Henry James  
1843-1916

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What his biographer Leon Edel calls James’s first, or “international,” phase encompassed such works as *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1879), and a masterpiece,

*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In *The American*, for example, Christopher Newman, a naïve but intelligent and idealistic self-made millionaire industrialist, goes to Europe seeking a bride. When her family rejects him because he lacks an aristocratic background, he has a chance to revenge himself; in deciding not to, he demonstrates his moral superiority.

James's second period was experimental. He exploited new subject matters—feminism and social reform in *The Bostonians* (1886) and political intrigue in *The Princess Casamassima* (1885). In his third, or “major,” phase James returned to international subjects, but treated them with increasing sophistication and psychological penetration. The complex and almost mythical *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) (which James felt was his best novel), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) date from this major period. If the main theme of Twain's work is the often humorous difference between pretense and reality, James's constant concern is perception. In James, only self-awareness and clear perception of others yields wisdom and self-sacrificing love.

# MODERNISM AND EXPERIMENTATION

**Many historians** have characterized the period between the two world wars as the United States' traumatic "coming of age," despite the fact that U.S. direct involvement was relatively brief (1917-1918) and its casualties many fewer than those of its European allies and foes. Shocked and permanently changed, American soldiers returned to their homeland, but could never regain their innocence. Nor could soldiers from rural America easily return to their roots. After experiencing the world, many now yearned for a modern, urban life.

In the postwar "big boom," business flourished, and the successful prospered beyond their wildest dreams. For the first time, many Americans enrolled in higher education—in the 1920s college enrollment doubled. The middle class prospered; Americans began to enjoy the world's highest national average income in this era.

Americans of the “Roaring Twenties” fell in love with modern entertainments. Most people went to the movies once a week. Although Prohibition—a nationwide ban on the sale of alcohol instituted through the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—began in 1919, illegal “speakeasies” (bars) and nightclubs proliferated, featuring jazz music, cocktails, and daring modes of dress and dance. Dancing, moviegoing, automobile touring, and radio were national crazes. American women, in particular, felt liberated. They cut their hair short (“bobbed”), wore short “flapper” dresses, and gloried in the right to vote assured by the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1920. They boldly spoke their mind and took public roles in society.

In spite of this prosperity, Western youths on the cultural “edge” were in a state of intellectual rebellion, angry and disillusioned with the savage war, as well as the older generation they held responsible. Ironically, difficult postwar economic conditions in Europe allowed Americans with dollars—like writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound—to live abroad handsomely on very little money, and to soak up the postwar disillusionment, as well as other European

intellectual currents, particularly Freudian psychology and to a lesser extent Marxism.

Numerous novels, notably Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920), evoke the extravagance and disillusionment of what American expatriate writer Gertrude Stein dubbed "the lost generation." In T.S. Eliot's influential long poem "The Waste Land" (1922), Western civilization is symbolized by a bleak desert in desperate need of rain (spiritual renewal).

## MODERNISM

The large cultural wave of Modernism, which emerged in Europe, and then spread to the United States in the early years of the 20th century, expressed a sense of modern life through art as a sharp break from the past. As modern machinery had changed the pace, atmosphere, and appearance of daily life in the early 20th century, so many artists and writers, with varying degrees of success, reinvented traditional artistic forms and tried to find radically new ones—an aesthetic echo of what people had come to call "the machine age."



T.S. Eliot  
1888-1965

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**Thomas Stearns Eliot** received the best education of any major American writer of his generation at Harvard College, the Sorbonne, and Oxford University. He studied Sanskrit and Oriental philosophy, which influenced his poetry. Like his friend, the poet Ezra Pound, he went to England early and became a towering figure in the literary world there. One of the most respected poets of his day, his modernist, seemingly illogical

or abstract iconoclastic poetry had revolutionary impact.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), the ineffectual, elderly Prufrock thinks to himself that he has “measured out his life in coffee spoons”—the image of the coffee spoons reflecting a humdrum existence and a wasted lifetime. The famous beginning of Eliot’s “Prufrock” invites the reader into tawdry urban alleyways that, like modern life, offer no answers to the questions of life:

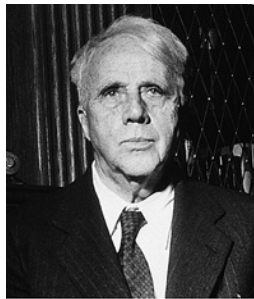


*Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table...*

Similar imagery pervades “The Waste Land” (1922), which echoes Dante’s “Inferno” to evoke London’s thronged streets around the time of World War I:

*Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many  
I had not thought death had undone so many...*

**Robert Lee Frost** was born in California, but raised on a farm in the northeast until the age of 10. Like Eliot and Pound, he went to England, attracted by new movements in poetry there. He wrote of traditional farm life in New England (part of the northeastern United States), appealing to a nostalgia for the old ways. His subjects are universal—apple picking, stone walls, fences, country roads. Although his approach



Robert Frost  
1874-1963

was lucid and accessible, his work is often deceptively simple. Many poems suggest a deeper meaning. For example, a quiet snowy evening by an almost hypnotic rhyme scheme may suggest the not entirely unwelcome approach of death. From “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923):

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

Although American prose between the wars experimented with viewpoint and form, Americans wrote more realistically, on the whole, than did Europeans. The importance of facing reality became a dominant theme in the 1920s and 1930s: Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and the playwright Eugene O’Neill repeatedly portrayed the tragedy awaiting those who live in flimsy dreams.

**Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald’s** life resembles a fairy tale. During World War I, Fitzgerald enlisted in the U.S. Army and fell in love with a rich and beautiful girl, Zelda Sayre, who lived near Montgomery, Alabama, where he

was stationed. After he was discharged at war's end, he went to seek his literary fortune in New York City in order to marry her.

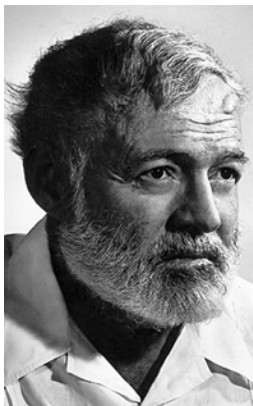
His first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), became a best-seller, and at 24 they married. Neither of them was able to withstand the stresses of success and fame, and they squandered their money.

They moved to France to economize in 1924, and returned seven years later. Zelda became mentally unstable and had to be institutionalized; Fitzgerald himself became an alcoholic and died young as a movie screenwriter.

Fitzgerald's secure place in American literature rests primarily on his novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a brilliantly written, economically structured story about the American dream of the self-made man. The protagonist, the mysterious Jay Gatsby, discovers the devastating cost of success in terms of personal fulfillment and love. More than any other writer, Fitzgerald captured the glittering, desperate life of the 1920s.



F. Scott Fitzgerald  
1896-1940



Ernest Hemingway  
1899-1961

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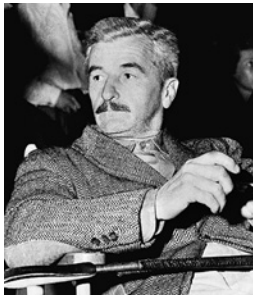
Few writers have lived as colorfully as **Ernest Hemingway**, whose career could have come out of one of his adventurous novels. Like Fitzgerald, Dreiser, and many other fine novelists of the 20th century, Hemingway came from the U.S. Midwest. He volunteered for an ambulance unit in France during World War I, but was wounded and hospitalized for six months. After the war, as a war correspondent based in Paris, he

met expatriate American writers Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein. Stein, in particular, influenced his spare style.

After his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) brought him fame, he continued to work as a journalist, covering the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the fighting in China in the 1940s. On a safari in Africa, he was injured when his small plane crashed; still, he continued to enjoy hunting and sport fishing, activities that inspired some of his best work. *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), a

short, poetic novel about a poor, old fisherman whose huge fish, caught in the open ocean, is devoured by sharks, won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1953; the next year he received the Nobel Prize. Discouraged by a troubled family background, illness, and the belief that he was losing his gift for writing, Hemingway shot himself to death in 1961. Hemingway is arguably the most popular American novelist. His sympathies are basically apolitical and humanistic, and in this sense he is universal.

Like Fitzgerald, Hemingway became a spokesman for his generation. But instead of painting its fatal glamour as did Fitzgerald, who never fought in World War I, Hemingway wrote of war, death, and the “lost generation” of cynical survivors. His characters are not dreamers, but tough bullfighters, soldiers, and athletes. If intellectual, they are deeply scarred and disillusioned. His hallmark is a clean style devoid of unnecessary words. Often he uses understatement: In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) the heroine dies in childbirth saying “I’m not a bit afraid. It’s just a dirty trick.” He once compared his writing to icebergs: “There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows.”



William Faulkner  
1897-1962

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Born to an old southern family, **William Harrison Faulkner** was raised in Oxford, Mississippi, where he lived most of his life. Faulkner re-creates the history of the land and the various races who have lived on it. An innovative writer, Faulkner experimented brilliantly with narrative chronology, different points of

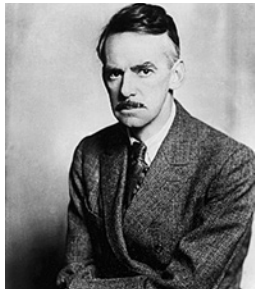
view and voices (including those of outcasts, children, and illiterates), and a rich and demanding baroque style, built of extremely long sentences.

The best of Faulkner's novels include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), two modernist works experimenting with viewpoint and voice to probe southern families under the stress of losing a family member; *Light in August* (1932), about complex and violent relations between a white woman and a black man; and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), perhaps his finest, about the rise of a self-made plantation owner and his tragic fall.

## 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA

American drama imitated English and European theater until well into the 20th century. Not until the 20th century would serious American plays attempt aesthetic innovation.

**Eugene O'Neill** is the great figure of American theater. His numerous plays combine enormous technical originality with freshness of vision and emotional depth. O'Neill's earliest dramas concern the working class and poor; later works explore subjective realms, and underscore his reading in Freud and his anguished attempt to come to terms with his dead mother, father, and brother.



Eugene O'Neill  
1888-1953

His play *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) recreates the passions hidden within one family. His later plays include the acknowledged masterpieces *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), a stark work on the theme of death, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956)—a powerful, extended autobiography in dramatic form focusing on his own family and their physical and psychological deterioration, as witnessed in the course of one night.





# THE FLOWERING OF THE INDIVIDUAL

**The Great Depression** of the 1930s had virtually destroyed the American economy. World War II revived it. The United States became a major force on the world stage, and post-World-War-II Americans enjoyed unprecedented personal prosperity and individual freedom.

Expanded higher education and the spread of television throughout America after World War II made it possible for ordinary people to obtain information on their own and to become more sophisticated. A glut of consumer conveniences and access to large, attractive suburban houses made middle-class families more autonomous. Widespread theories of Freudian psychology emphasized the origins and the importance of the individual mind. The birth control “pill” liberated women from rigid subservience to biological norms. For the first time in human history, many ordinary people could lead vastly satisfying lives and assert their personal worth.

The rise of mass individualism—as well as the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s—empowered previously muted voices. Writers asserted their deepest inner nature, as well as personal experience, and the importance of the individual experience implied the importance of the group to which it was linked. Homosexuals, feminists, and other marginalized voices proclaimed their stories. Jewish American and black American writers found wide audiences for their variations of the American dream, or nightmare. Writers of Protestant background, such as John Cheever and John Updike, discussed the impact of postwar culture on lives like theirs. Some modern and contemporary writers are still placed within older traditions, such as realism. Some may be described as classicists, others as experimental, stylistically influenced by the ephemera of mass culture, or by philosophies such as existentialism, or socialism. Many are more easily grouped according to ethnic background or region. However, on the whole, modern writers always lay claim to the worth of the individual identity.

**Sylvia Plath** lived an outwardly exemplary life, attending Smith College on scholarship, graduating first in her

class, and winning a Fulbright grant to Cambridge University in England. There she met her charismatic husband-to-be, poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had two children, and settled in a country house in England.



Sylvia Plath  
1932-1963

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Beneath the fairy-tale success festered unresolved psychological problems evoked in her highly readable novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Some of these problems were personal, while others arose from her sense of repressive attitudes toward women in the 1950s. Among these were the beliefs—shared by many women themselves—that women should not show anger or ambitiously pursue a career, and instead find fulfillment in tending their husbands and children. Professionally successful women like Plath felt that they lived a contradiction.

Plath's storybook life crumbled when she and Hughes separated and she cared for the young children in a London apartment during a winter of extreme cold. Ill,

isolated, and in despair, Plath worked against the clock to produce a series of stunning poems before she committed suicide by gassing herself in her kitchen. These poems were collected in the volume *Ariel* (1965), two years after her death. The poet Robert Lowell, who wrote the introduction, noted her poetry's rapid development from the time she had attended his poetry classes in 1958.

Plath's early poetry is well crafted and traditional, but her late poems exhibit a desperate bravura and proto-feminist cry of anguish. In "The Applicant" (1966), Plath exposes the emptiness in the current role of wife (who is reduced to an inanimate "it"):

*A living doll, everywhere you look.*

*It can sew, it can cook.*

*It can talk, talk, talk.*

The "Beat poets" emerged in the 1950s. The term "beat" variously suggests musical downbeats, as in jazz; angelical beatitude or blessedness; and "beat up"—tired or hurt. The Beats (beatniks) were inspired by jazz, Eastern religion, and the wandering life. These were all depicted in the famous novel by Jack Kerouac *On the*

*Road*, a sensation when it was published in 1957. An account of a 1947 cross-country car trip, the novel was written in three hectic weeks on a single roll of paper in what Kerouac called “spontaneous bop prose.” The wild, improvisational style, hipster-mystic characters, and rejection of authority and convention fired the imaginations of young readers and helped usher in the freewheeling counterculture of the 1960s.

Most of the important Beats migrated to San Francisco from America’s East Coast, gaining their initial national recognition in California. The charismatic **Allen Ginsberg** became the group’s chief spokesman. The son of a poet father and an eccentric mother committed to Communism, Ginsberg attended Columbia University, where he became fast friends with fellow students Kerouac (1922-1969) and William Burroughs (1914-1997), whose violent, nightmarish novels about the underworld of heroin



Allen Ginsberg  
1926-1997

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addiction include *The Naked Lunch* (1959). These three were the nucleus of the Beat movement.

Beat poetry is oral, repetitive, and immensely effective in readings, largely because it developed out of poetry readings in “underground” clubs. Some might correctly see it as a great-grandparent of the rap music that became prevalent in the 1990s. Beat poetry was the most anti-establishment form of literature in the United States, but beneath its shocking words lies a love of country. The poetry is a cry of pain and rage at what the poets see as the loss of America’s innocence and the tragic waste of its human and material resources.

Poems like Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1956) revolutionized traditional poetry:

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed  
by madness, starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at  
dawn looking for an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient  
heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in  
the machinery of night...*

**Tennessee Williams**, a native of Mississippi, was one of the more complex individuals on the American literary scene of the mid-20th century. His work focused on disturbed emotions within families—most of them southern. He was known for incantatory repetitions, a poetic southern diction, weird gothic settings, and Freudian exploration



Tennessee Williams  
1911-1983

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of human emotion. One of the first American writers to live openly as a homosexual, Williams explained that the longings of his tormented characters expressed their loneliness. His characters live and suffer intensely.

Williams wrote more than 20 full-length dramas, many of them autobiographical. He reached his peak relatively early in his career—in the 1940s—with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949). None of the works that followed over the next two decades and more reached the level of success and richness of those two pieces.



Eudora Welty  
1909-2001

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Born in Mississippi to a well-to-do family of transplanted northerners, **Eudora Welty** was guided by novelists Robert Penn Warren and Katherine Anne Porter. Porter, in fact, wrote an introduction to Welty's first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green* (1941). Welty modeled her nuanced work on

Porter, but the younger woman was more interested in the comic and grotesque. Like fellow southern writer Flannery O'Connor, Welty often took subnormal, eccentric, or exceptional characters for subjects.

Despite violence in her work, Welty's wit was essentially humane and affirmative. Her collections of stories include *The Wide Net* (1943), *The Golden Apples* (1949), *The Bride of the Innisfallen* (1955), and *Moon Lake* (1980). Welty also wrote novels such as *Delta Wedding* (1946), which is focused on a plantation family in modern times, and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972).

**Ralph Ellison** was a midwesterner, born in Oklahoma, who studied at Tuskegee Institute in the southern



United States. He had one of the strangest careers in American letters—consisting of one highly acclaimed book and little more.

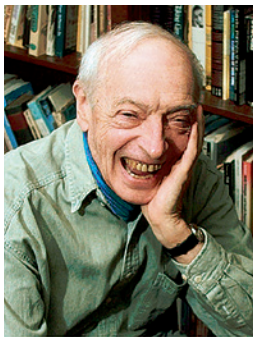
The novel is *Invisible Man* (1952), the story of a black man who lives a subterranean existence in a cellar brightly illuminated by electricity



Ralph Ellison  
1914-1994

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stolen from a utility company. The book recounts his grotesque, disenchanting experiences. When he wins a scholarship to an all-black college, he is humiliated by whites; when he gets to the college, he witnesses the school's president spurning black American concerns. Life is corrupt outside college, too. For example, even religion is no consolation: A preacher turns out to be a criminal. The novel indicts society for failing to provide its citizens—black and white—with viable ideals and institutions for realizing them. It embodies a powerful racial theme because the “invisible man” is invisible not in himself but because others, blinded by prejudice, cannot see him for who he is.



Saul Bellow  
1915-2005

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Born in Canada and raised in Chicago, **Saul Bellow** was of Russian-Jewish background. In college, he studied anthropology and sociology, which greatly influenced his writing. He once expressed a profound debt to the American realist novelist Theodore Dreiser for his openness to a wide range of experience and his emotional engagement with it. Highly respected, Bellow received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976.

Bellow's early, somewhat grim existentialist novels include *Dangling Man* (1944), a Kafkaesque study of a man waiting to be drafted into the army, and *The Victim* (1947), about relations between Jews and Gentiles. In the 1950s, his vision became more comic: He used a series of energetic and adventurous first-person narrators in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)—the study of a Huck Finn-like urban entrepreneur who becomes a black marketeer in Europe—and in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), a brilliant and exuberant serio-comic novel about

a middle-aged millionaire whose unsatisfied ambitions drive him to Africa.

Bellow's later works include *Herzog* (1964), about the troubled life of a neurotic English professor who specializes in the idea of the romantic self; *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970); *Humboldt's Gift* (1975); and the autobiographical *The Dean's December* (1982). Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956) is a brilliant novella centered on a failed businessman, Tommy Wilhelm, who is so consumed by feelings of inadequacy that he becomes totally inadequate—a failure with women, jobs, machines, and the commodities market, where he loses all his money. Wilhelm is an example of the schlemiel of Jewish folklore—one to whom unlucky things inevitably happen.

**John Cheever** often has been called a “novelist of manners.” He is also known for his elegant, suggestive short stories, which scrutinize the New York business world through its effects on the businessmen, their wives, children, and friends.



John Cheever  
1912-1982

A wry melancholy and never quite quenched but seemingly hopeless desire for passion or metaphysical certainty lurks in the shadows of Cheever's finely drawn, Chekhovian tales, collected in *The Way Some People Live* (1943), *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* (1958), *Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel* (1961), *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* (1964), and *The World of Apples* (1973). His titles reveal his characteristic nonchalance, playfulness, and irreverence, and hint at his subject matter. Cheever also published several novels—*The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), *Bullet Park* (1969), and *Falconer* (1977)—the last of which was largely autobiographical.



John Updike  
1932-2009

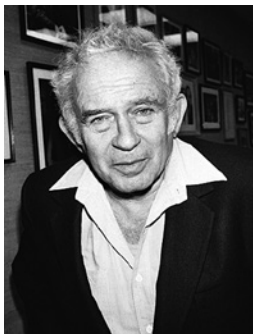
**John Updike**, like Cheever, was also regarded as a writer of manners with his suburban settings, domestic themes, reflections of ennui and wistfulness, and, particularly, his fictional locales on the eastern seaboard of the United States, in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

Updike is best known for his five *Rabbit* books, depictions of the life of a man—Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom—through

the ebbs and flows of his existence across four decades of American social and political history. *Rabbit, Run* (1960) is a mirror of the 1950s, with Angstrom an aimless, disaffected young husband. *Rabbit Redux* (1971)—spotlighting the counterculture of the 1960s—finds Angstrom still without a clear goal or purpose or viable escape route from the banal. In *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), Harry has become a prosperous businessman during the 1970s, as the Vietnam era wanes. The final novel, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), glimpses Angstrom's reconciliation with life, before his death from a heart attack, against the backdrop of the 1980s.

Updike possessed the most brilliant style of any writer today, and his short stories offer scintillating examples of its range and inventiveness.

**Norman Mailer** made himself the most visible novelist of the 1960s and 1970s. Co-founder of the anti-establishment New York City weekly *The Village Voice*, Mailer publicized himself along with his political views. In his appetite for experience, vigorous style, and a dramatic public persona, Mailer followed in the tradition of Ernest Hemingway. To gain a vantage point on the



Norman Mailer  
1923-2007

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assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Vietnam War protests, black liberation, and the women's movement, he constructed hip, existentialist, macho male personae (in her book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett identified Mailer as an archetypal male chauvinist). The irrepressible Mailer went on to marry six times and run for mayor of New York.

From such New Journalism exercises as *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), an analysis of the 1968 U.S. presidential conventions, and his compelling study about the execution of a condemned murderer, *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Mailer turned to writing such ambitious, if flawed, novels as *Ancient Evenings* (1983), set in the Egypt of antiquity, and *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), revolving around the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

African-American novelist **Toni Morrison** was born in Ohio to a spiritually oriented family. She attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., and has worked

as a senior editor in a major Washington publishing house and as a distinguished professor at various universities.

Morrison's richly woven fiction has gained her international acclaim. In compelling, large-spirited novels, she treats the complex identities of black people in a universal manner. In



Toni Morrison  
1931-

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her early work *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a strong-willed young black girl tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, who is driven mad by an abusive father. Pecola believes that her dark eyes have magically become blue and that they will make her lovable. Morrison has said that she was creating her own sense of identity as a writer through this novel: "I was Pecola, Claudia, everybody."

*Sula* (1973) describes the strong friendship of two women. Morrison paints African-American women as unique, fully individual characters rather than as stereotypes. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) has won several awards. It follows a black man, Milkman Dead, and his

complex relations with his family and community. *Beloved* (1987) is the wrenching story of a woman who murders her children rather than allow them to live as slaves. It employs the dreamlike techniques of magical realism in depicting a mysterious figure, Beloved, who returns to live with the mother who has slit her throat. *Jazz* (1992), set in 1920s Harlem, is a story of love and murder. In 1993, Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

## CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

As the 20th century ended and the 21st century began, mass social and geographic mobility, the Internet, immigration, and globalization only emphasized the subjective voice in a context of cultural fragmentation. Some contemporary writers reflect a drift towards quieter, more accessible voices. For many prose writers, the region, rather than the nation, provides the defining geography.

One of the most impressive contemporary poets is **Louise Glück**. Born in New York City, Glück, the U.S. poet laureate for 2003-2004, grew up with an abiding sense of guilt due to the death of a sister born before her. At Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University, she studied with poets Leonie Adams and Stanley Kunitz. Much of her



poetry deals with tragic loss. Each of Glück's books attempts new techniques, making it difficult to summarize her work.

In Glück's memorable *The Wild Iris* (1992), different kinds of flowers utter short metaphysical monologues. The book's title poem, an exploration of resurrection, could be an epigraph for Glück's work as a whole. The



Louise Glück  
1943-

wild iris, a gorgeous deep blue flower growing from a bulb that lies dormant all winter, says: "It is terrible to survive / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth."

*From the center of my life came  
a great fountain, deep blue  
shadows on azure seawater.*

The poetry of **Billy Collins** is refreshing and exhilarating. Collins uses everyday language to record the myriad details of everyday life, freely mixing quotidian events (eating, doing chores, writing) with cultural references.



Billy Collins  
1941-

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His humor and originality have brought him a wide audience. Though some have faulted Collins for being too accessible, his unpredictable flights of fancy open out into mystery.

Collins's is a domesticated form of surrealism. His best poems quickly propel the imagination up a stairway of increasingly surrealistic situations, at the end offering an emotional landing, a mood one can rest on. The short poem "The Dead," from *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001), gives some sense of Collins's fanciful flight and gentle settling down, as if a bird had come to rest.

*The dead are always looking down on us, they say,  
while we are putting on our shoes or making a  
sandwich,  
they are looking down through the glass-bottom  
boats of heaven  
as they row themselves slowly through eternity.*

The striking stylist **Annie Proulx** crafts stories of struggling northern New Englanders in *Heart Songs* (1988). Her best novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), is set even further north, in Newfoundland, Canada. Proulx has also spent years in the West, and one of her short stories inspired the 2006 movie *Brokeback Mountain*.



Annie Proulx  
1935-

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Mississippi-born **Richard Ford** began writing in a Faulknerian vein, but is best known for his subtle novel set in New Jersey, *The Sportswriter* (1986), and its sequel, *Independence Day* (1995). The latter is about Frank Bascombe, a dreamy, evasive drifter who loses all the things that give his life meaning—a



Richard Ford  
1944-

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son, his dream of writing fiction, his marriage, lovers and friends, and his job. Bascombe is sensitive and intelligent—his choices, he says, are made “to deflect

the pain of terrible regret”—and his emptiness, along with the anonymous malls and bald new housing developments that he endlessly cruises through, mutely testify to Ford’s vision of a national malaise.



Amy Tan  
1952-

Northern California houses a rich tradition of Asian-American writing, whose characteristic themes include family and gender roles, the conflict between generations, and the search for identity. One Asian-American writer from California is novelist **Amy Tan**, whose best-selling *The Joy Luck Club* became a hit film in 1993. Its interlinked story-like

chapters delineate the different fates of four mother-and-daughter pairs. Tan’s novels spanning historical China and today’s United States include *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), about half-sisters, and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), about a daughter’s care for her mother.

A Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, **Sherman Alexie** is the youngest Native-American novelist to achieve national

fame. Alexie gives unsentimental and humorous accounts of Indian life with an eye for incongruous mixtures of tradition and pop culture. His story cycles include *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which inspired the effective film of reservation life *Smoke Signals* (1998), for which Alexie wrote the screenplay. Alexie's recent story collection is *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000).



Sherman Alexie  
1966-

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