Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things.

—Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

*Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street* (1928) by John Sloan. Oil on canvas (30" x 40").
The Moderns
by John Leggett and
John Malcolm Brinnin

I had a world, and it slipped away from me. The War blew up more than the bodies of men... It blew ideas away—

—Sherwood Anderson, in a letter to his son, November 1929

The so-called Great War (1914–1918) was one of the events that changed the American voice in fiction. Before that clash of armies from the old and new worlds, American fiction had spoken in youthful tones—brash, but not fully original, and at times as uncertain as an adolescent’s. Then, in 1917, the United States entered World War I, a conflict which was fought under the bright banners of humanity and democratic righteousness, but which, in fact, became a bloodbath. In 1916, more than a half-million soldiers were killed in a single, month-long battle near the town of Verdun in northeastern France.

Although America emerged from the war as a victor, something was beginning to change. The country seemed to have lost its innocence. Idealism was turning into cynicism, and a few American writers began to question the authority and tradition that had seemed to be America’s bedrock. The war introduced new moral codes, as well as short skirts, bobbed hair, and even new slang expressions. Americans’ sense of a connection to their past seemed to be deteriorating.
There were other reasons for this change in outlook. The Great Depression that followed the crash of the New York stock market in 1929 brought suffering to millions of Americans—to those same hard-working people who had put their faith in the boundless capacity of America to provide them with jobs and their children with brighter futures.

American writers, like their European counterparts, were also being profoundly affected by the modernist movement. This movement in literature, painting, music, and the other arts—swept along by disillusionment with traditions that seemed to have become spiritually empty—called for bold experimentation and a wholesale rejection of traditional themes and styles.

*World War I was a turning point in American life, marking a loss of innocence and a strong disillusionment with tradition.*

**The American Dream: Pursuit of a Promise**

If we try to identify our uniquely American beliefs, we find three central ideas that we have come to call the **American dream**.

First, there is admiration for America as a new Eden: a land of beauty, bounty, and unlimited promise. Both the promise and the disappointment of this idea are reflected in one of the greatest American novels, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), by F. Scott Fitzgerald (page 584). This work appeared at a time when great wealth and the pursuit of pleasure had become ends in themselves for many people. The title character, Gatsby, is a self-made man whose wealth has mysterious and clearly illegal origins. Moving into a pretentious mansion near New York City, Gatsby tries to woo both society and the woman he loves with a series of lavish parties. His extravagant gestures are in pursuit of a dream. Unfortunately, Gatsby’s capacity for dreaming is far greater than any opportunity offered by the Roaring Twenties, and he meets a grotesquely violent end. But Gatsby’s greatness is bound up with his tragedy: He believes in an America that has virtually disappeared under the degradations of modern life.

It is left to Nick Carraway, the narrator, to reflect at the end of the novel on the original promise of the American dream:

... gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, from *The Great Gatsby*

*Eaton’s Neck, Long Island* (1872) by John Frederick Kensett. Oil on canvas (18” × 36”).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Thomas Kensett, 1874. (74.29)
Photograph © 1979 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
The Moderns 1900–1950

Literary Events

England’s Joseph Conrad publishes the psychological novel *Heart of Darkness*, 1902

Frank Norris publishes *The Octopus*, a naturalistic novel about California wheat farmers fighting the railroad, 1901

*William Carlos Williams*’s first collection of poems published, 1909


*Jack London* publishes *The Call of the Wild*, 1903

*Carl Sandburg* publishes *Chicago Poems*, 1916

*Edgar Lee Masters* publishes *Spoon River Anthology*, 1915

*Willa Cather* publishes *O Pioneers!* 1913

*Robert Frost* publishes his first poetry collection, 1913

*Edna St. Vincent Millay* wins Pulitzer Prize in poetry, 1923

*T. S. Eliot* publishes *The Waste Land*, 1922

Irish writer *James Joyce* publishes *Ulysses*, 1922

*Sinclair Lewis* publishes *Main Street*, a novel about small-town Minnesota, 1920

1900–1909

Queen Victoria of England dies, 1901

South African (or Boer) War ends in costly British victory, 1902

Einstein formulates his theory of relativity, 1905

Earthquake and fire ravage San Francisco, 1906

Freud lectures on psychoanalysis in U.S., 1909

1910–1919

British ocean liner *Titanic* sinks after striking an iceberg off Newfoundland, 1912

Armory Show in New York City introduces modern art to U.S., 1913

Panama Canal opens, 1914

World War I begins in Europe, 1914

U.S. enters World War I, 1917

Russian Revolution ends czarist regime, 1917

1920–1929

Harlem Renaissance begins, 1920

19th Amendment to Constitution grants U.S. women the right to vote, 1920

Charles A. Lindbergh completes first transatlantic solo flight by airplane, 1927

Albert Einstein. The Granger Collection, New York.

Charles Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis.*
Ernest Hemingway publishes noted World War I novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, 1929
- Langston Hughes publishes his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, 1926
- The novels *An American Tragedy*, by Theodore Dreiser, and *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, are published, 1925

John Steinbeck publishes *The Grapes of Wrath* and wins the Pulitzer Prize, 1939
- Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* opens and wins Pulitzer Prize, 1938
- Zora Neale Hurston publishes *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937
- Eugene O'Neill's dramatic trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* opens, 1931
- Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* opens, 1945
- Richard Wright publishes *Native Son*, 1940

The play *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller, opens, 1949
- William Faulkner publishes *Intruder in the Dust*, 1948
- William Carlos Williams publishes first part of his long poem *Paterson*, 1946

1920–1929
- *The Jazz Singer*, one of the first sound films with dialogue, opens, 1927
- U.S. stock market crashes, leading to Great Depression, 1929

1930–1939
- Mohandas Gandhi leads protest against British salt tax in India, 1930
- Franklin D. Roosevelt becomes U.S. president; New Deal program to counter Great Depression begins, 1933
- Nazi leader Adolf Hitler comes to power in Germany, 1933
- Nationalist forces of Francisco Franco win Spanish civil war, 1939
- Germany invades Poland; World War II begins in Europe, 1939

1940–1950
- U.S. enters World War II after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, 1941
- *Oklahoma!*, a groundbreaking musical play by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, opens, 1943
- Allies begin final drive against German forces on D-day, June 6, 1944
- Germany surrenders, 1945
- U.S. explodes atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan; Japan surrenders, 1945
- United Nations established, 1945
- India gains independence from British rule, 1947
- State of Israel established, 1948
- Communist forces under Mao Zedong win control of mainland China, 1949
- Korean War begins, 1950
- U.S. population is about 151 million, 1950

Franklin D. Roosevelt.

United Nations Building, New York City.
The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

The era of the 1930s in the United States was marked by triumph and tragedy, growth and hardship. Between 1890 and 1940, the U.S. population more than doubled, rising from 63 million to 132 million. African Americans made up about 10 percent of the population, and other ethnic groups about 0.5 percent. Families were slightly larger than they are today, but people died younger—on average, around age sixty.

By 1933, the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. Anywhere from one fourth to one third of American workers were unemployed. People waited in bread lines, foraged for food in garbage dumps, and slept in sewer pipes. Homeless families lived in tents and shacks in camps called Hoovervilles, named for President Herbert Hoover. In 1933, the new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), ignited a spark of hope with his promise to help

It is true to his word, FDR launched a blizzard of agencies, such as the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, that put millions of Americans back to work. Despite hard times, human and technological marvels were a hallmark of the

The second element in the American dream is optimism, justified by the ever-expanding opportunity and abundance that many people have come to expect. Most of the time, Americans have believed in progress—that life keeps getting better and that we are moving toward an era of prosperity, justice, and joy that always seems just around the corner.

Finally, the third important element in the American dream has been the importance and ultimate triumph of the individual—the independent, self-reliant person. This ideal of the self-reliant individual was championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 216), who probably deserves most of the credit for defining the essence of the American dream, including its roots in the promise of the “new Eden” and its faith that “things are getting better all the time.” Trust the universe and trust yourself, Emerson wrote. “If the single man plant himself indomitable on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him.”

era. Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic (1932). Three famous structures were built during this decade: the Empire State Building in New York City (1931), Boulder (now Hoover) Dam on the Arizona-Nevada border (1936), and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco (1937).

Happily, during a decade of severe shortages, there was no shortage of entertainment. Mystery fans devoured whodunits featuring Dashiell Hammett’s hard-boiled investigator, Sam Spade, while both young and old listened to the Dorsey’s jazz orchestra and danced to the swing music of Count Basie.

By the late 1930s, the Depression had eased, and people could again afford one of the most popular entertainments: movies. The golden age of motion pictures had begun. Each week, over a hundred million Americans flocked to watch cartoons, newsreels, and feature films at elaborate movie palaces with names such as the Bijou, the Roxy, and the Ritz. Audiences loved slapstick comics like Laurel and Hardy or the Marx brothers. Lines spoken by Mae West, such as “Come up and see me sometime,” became household phrases. To top off the decade, audiences in 1939 thronged to behold the long-awaited blockbuster movie epic, Gone with the Wind.

But perhaps the most popular form of entertainment during the 1930s was the radio. By 1933, two thirds of American households owned at least one radio, and families gathered together to listen to comedies like Fibber McGee and Molly and adventures like The Shadow. People also relied on radios for news, as was demonstrated by a famous Halloween broadcast of 1938. Six million listeners tuned in to Orson Welles’s radio play “Invasion from Mars”—a series of convincing but fictional news bulletins about a Martian invasion near New York City, based on H. G. Wells’s science fiction novel War of the Worlds. At the time, some people feared that the German dictator Adolf Hitler might actually invade the United States. Believing that the broadcast was describing a real invasion, hundreds of people clogged eastern highways, fleeing for their lives.
ideal. In fact, the center of American literary life now finally started to shift away from New England, which had been the native region of America’s most brilliant writers during the nineteenth century. Many of the modernist writers you will read in the collections that follow were born in the South, the Midwest, or the West.

In the postwar period, two new intellectual trends or movements, Marxism and psychoanalysis, combined to increase the pressure on traditional beliefs and values. In Russia during World War I, a Marxist revolution had toppled and even murdered an anointed ruler, the czar. The socialist beliefs of Karl Marx (1818-1883) that had powered the Russian Revolution in 1917 were in direct opposition to the American system of capitalism and free enterprise, and Marxists threatened to export their revolution everywhere. From Moscow, the American writer John Reed sent back the alarming message: “I have seen the future and it works.”

In Vienna, there was another unsettling movement. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, had opened the workings of the unconscious mind to scrutiny and called for a new understanding of human sexuality and the role it plays in our unconscious thoughts. Throughout America, there was a growing interest in this new field of psychology, and a resultant anxiety about the amount of freedom an individual really had. If our actions were influenced by our subconscious, and if we had no control over our subconscious, there seemed to be little room left for “free will.”

One literary result of this interest in the psyche was the narrative technique called stream of consciousness. This writing style abandoned chronology and attempted to imitate the moment-by-moment flow of a character’s perceptions and memories. The Irish writer James Joyce (1882–1941) radically changed the very concept of the novel by using stream of consciousness in Ulysses (1922), his monumental “odyssey” set in Dublin. Soon afterward, the American writers Katherine Anne Porter (page 702) and William Faulkner (page 713) used the stream-of-consciousness technique in their works.

**Two important trends, Marxism and psychoanalysis, were noteworthy factors in the breakdown of traditional beliefs and values.** Psychoanalysis led to the literary technique of stream-of-consciousness narration.

**At Home and Abroad: The Jazz Age**

In 1919, the Constitution was amended to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol, which was singled out as a central social evil. But far from shoring up traditional values, Prohibition ushered in an age characterized by the bootlegger, the speakeasy, the cocktail, the short-skirted flapper, the new rhythms of jazz, and the dangerous
but lucrative profession of the gangster. Recording the Roaring Twenties
and making the era a vivid chapter in our history, F. Scott Fitzgerald gave
it its name: the Jazz Age. Other writers also became emblems of the era.
The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (page 697)—"Vincent" to her friends—
became a symbol of the liberated woman of the era. Her bold, carefree
public identity as a romantic, extravagant female Casanova made her a
national celebrity while she was still in her twenties. In 1920, women
had finally won the right to vote, and Millay's poems, as well as her pub-
lic persona, assigned women social, intellectual, and romantic roles that
society had previously reserved for men.

As energetic as the Roaring Twenties were in America, the pursuit of
pleasure abroad was even more attractive to some than its enjoyment at
home. F. Scott Fitzgerald was among the many American writers and
artists who abandoned their own shores after the war for the expatriate
life in France. After World War I, living was not only cheap in
Paris and on the sunny French Riviera, but also somehow bet-
ter; it was more exotic, more filled with grace and luxury, and
there was no need to go down a cellar stairway to get a drink.
This wave of expatriates was another signal that something had
gone wrong with the American dream—with the idea that
America was Eden, with our notion of inherent virtue, and es-
ppecially with the conviction that America was a land of heroes.

*The Jazz Age at home was racy and unconventional. The same decade of the 1920s witnessed the flight of many American authors to an expatriate life abroad, especially in France.*

**Grace Under Pressure: The New American Hero**

Disillusionment was a major theme in the fiction of the time. In
1920, Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) lashed out satirically at the

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*The United States...is a country the right age to have been born in and the wrong age to live in.*
—Gertrude Stein,
transition magazine,
Fall 1928
narrow-mindedness of small-town life in his immensely popular novel, *Main Street*. In 1925, Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) produced a literary landmark with his prototype of the realistic novel, *An American Tragedy*, the story of an ambitious but luckless man who takes a path that leads him not to the success he seeks, but to the execution chamber.

The most influential of all the post–World War I writers, however, was Ernest Hemingway (page 650). Hemingway is perhaps most famous for his literary style, which affected the style of American prose fiction for several generations. Like the Puritans who strove for a “plain style” centuries earlier, Hemingway reduced the flamboyance of literary language to a minimum, to the bare bones of the truth it must express.

Hemingway also introduced a new kind of hero to American fiction, a character type that many readers embraced as a protagonist and a role model. This Hemingway hero is a man of action, a warrior, and a tough competitor; he has a code of honor, courage, and endurance. He shows, in Hemingway’s own words, “grace under pressure.” But the most important trait of this Hemingway hero is that he is thoroughly disillusioned, a quality that reflected the author’s own outlook. For Hemingway feared, a little like Herman Melville (page 311), that at the inscrutable center of creation lay nothing at all.

Hemingway found his own “answer” to this crisis of faith in a belief in the self and in such qualities as decency, bravery, competence, and skill. He clung to this conviction in spite of what he saw as the absolutely unbeatable odds ranged against us all. A further part of the Hemingway code was the importance of recognizing and snatching up the rare, good, rich moments that life offers before those moments elude us.

**Hemingway summed up the values of many post–World War I writers, both in his sphere, plain style and in his creation of a new kind of hero, disillusioned but also honorable and courageous.**

**Modernist Voices in Poetry: A Dazzling Period**

After the deaths of Emily Dickinson (page 372) and Walt Whitman (page 348), American poetry went into something of a decline. But time would show that the comparatively uneventful period between 1890 and 1910 was but the trough of a wave that was about to break. The force of this wave, when it arrived, would be strong enough to wash away the last traces of British influence on American poetry and to carry our poets into their most dazzling period of variety and experimentation.

During this period, many poets began to explore the artistic life of Europe, especially Paris. With other writers, artists, and composers from all over the world, they...
Literature is news that stays news.
—Ezra Pound


absorbed the lessons of modernist painters like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, who were exploring new ways to see and represent reality. In the same way, poets sought to create poems that invited new ways of seeing and thinking. Ezra Pound (page 773) and T. S. Eliot (page 661) used the suggestive techniques of 

**Symbolism** to fashion a new, modernist poetry (see page 770).

Pound also spearheaded a related poetic movement called **Imagism**. Exemplified by brilliant poets like William Carlos Williams (page 778), Marianne Moore (page 787), E. E. Cummings (page 796), and Wallace Stevens (page 783), the Imagist and Symbolist styles would prevail in poetry until midway into the twentieth century.

**After an uneventful period between 1890 and 1910, an explosion of modernist poetry, heavily influenced by developments in Europe, began. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, associated with the Symbolist and Imagist movements, were especially important in charting a modernist direction for American poetry.**

The **Elements of Modernism in American Literature**

- Emphasis on bold experimentation in style and form, reflecting the fragmentation of society
- Rejection of traditional themes and subjects
- Sense of disillusionment and loss of faith in the American dream
- Rejection of the ideal of a hero as infallible in favor of a hero who is flawed and disillusioned but shows "grace under pressure"
- Interest in the inner workings of the human mind, sometimes expressed through new narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness
Voices of American Character: Poetry in New England and the Midwest

Meanwhile, other American poets rejected modernist trends. While their colleagues found inspiration in Paris, these poets stayed at home, ignoring or defying the revolution of modernism. These poets preferred to say what they had to say in plain American speech. Their individual accents reveal the regional diversity of American life and character.

Edwin Arlington Robinson (page 644) lightly disguised the people of his own “Down East” home—Gardiner, Maine—as characters representing American “types” whose fates were manifestations of their characters.

The greatest poetic voice in New England, however, was that of Robert Frost (page 558). Frost’s independence was grounded in his ability to handle ordinary New England speech and in his surprising skill at taking the most conventional poetic forms and giving them a twist all his own. In an era when “good” was being equated by many artists with “new,” the only new thing about Robert Frost was old: individual poetic genius. Using this gift to impose his own personality on the iambic line in verse, Frost created a poetic voice that was unique and impossible to imitate.

At the same time, poets of the Midwest brought the American heartland to life in slightly more adventuresome verse forms. They used rougher stanzas and looser lines. Best known of these poets is Edgar Lee Masters (page 692), who assembled a sort of town biography in his Spoon River Anthology (1915). Masters took the lid off sentimentalized small-town life—the coffin lid, to be exact—and allowed the dead of Spoon River to speak their own shocking litanies of greed, frustration, and spiritual poverty. His best-selling collection of poems received the same kind of interest Americans were beginning to give to Freudian case histories.

Poets like Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost from New England and Edgar Lee Masters from the Midwest continued to use traditional verse forms and offered penetrating insights into a variety of American character types.

The Harlem Renaissance: Voices of the African American Experience

African American culture found expression in poetry in two different ways. The works of black poets who wrote in conventional forms, like Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), were most quickly accepted by white readers. These metrically regular and rhymed verse forms tended to make even the most urgent and desperate of African American concerns seem undisturbing. A second
group of black poets, however, focused directly on the unique contributions of African American culture to America. Their poetry based its rhythms on spirituals and jazz, its lyrics on songs known as the blues, and its diction on the street talk of the ghettos.

Foremost among African American lyric poets were James Weldon Johnson (page 736), Claude McKay (page 743), Langston Hughes (page 760), and Countee Cullen (page 746). These poets brought literary distinction to the broad movement of artists known as the **Harlem Renaissance** (page 734). The geographical center of the movement was Harlem, the section of New York City north of 110th Street in Manhattan. But its spiritual center was a place in the consciousness of African Americans—a people too long ignored, patronized, or otherwise shuffled to the margins of American art. When African American poetry, hand in hand with the music echoing from New Orleans, Memphis, and Chicago, became part of the Jazz Age, it was a catalyst for a new appreciation of the role of black talent in American culture.

*The poets of the Harlem Renaissance revolutionized the African American contribution to American literature by introducing ghetto speech and the rhythms of jazz and blues into their verse.*

**Against the Grain: Poetic Voices of the West and South**

The most distinctive poetic voice from the West in the early twentieth century was that of Robinson Jeffers (page 580), who carved out an isolated and almost hermitlike existence in a California town by the Pacific shore. Jeffers steered a wavering course between convention and experiment: Sometimes he worked in meter and rhyme, but more often he wrote in long lines of free verse. He became widely known less for his craftsmanship than for his unorthodox attitudes toward progress, religion, and the nature of humanity. While his contemporaries celebrated democracy and the rise of the common man, Jeffers took a very dim view of both. After his death, his poems became an inspiration to the Beats and other West Coast literary groups in the 1960s.

The South offered an equally distinctive literary voice in John Crowe Ransom (page 577). Ransom stood for wit, gentility, subtle intellect, and the manners of an earlier century. Ransom’s formal grace and polish intimidated some readers, but others found in him a gentle nature and a passionate concern for the beauty and elegance of the English language.

*Poetic voices of the West and the South included Robinson Jeffers, who was skeptical of social progress, and John Crowe Ransom, a Southerner who wrote with the courtly grace of an earlier age.*
The American Dream Revised

Even though the modernists rejected Emerson's optimism, a belief in self-reliance persisted as the old idea of America as Eden. Hemingway is really telling us about Eden in his *Up in Michigan* stories, where he describes the lakes and streams and woods he knew as a boy and where he extols the restorative power of nature in a way that Emerson might have recognized. This is the same Edenic America that has come down to us through Mark Twain's Mississippi, through Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and through John Steinbeck's Salinas Valley.

As we explore this period of American writing—in some respects, the richest period since the flowering of New England in the first half of the nineteenth century—we stand at the threshold of our own time. Though this part of our own century has seen major changes in American attitudes, you'll recognize many concerns that are consistent with concerns of the past. These writers—some of the best that America has produced—experimented boldly with forms and subject matter. But they were also still trying to find the answers to the basic human questions: Who are we? Where are we going? And what values should guide us on that search for our human identity?

*American modernist writers both echoed and challenged the American dream. They constituted a broader, more resonant voice than ever before, resulting in a second American renaissance. With all the changes, however, writers continued to ask fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence.*

Quickwrite

**What Is Today's American Dream?**

In 1929, Gertrude Stein, a leading modernist literary figure among the American expatriates in Paris, declared, "Everything is the same and everything is different." Apply her remark to the American dream today—and tomorrow. How do you define the American dream now? (Is there even an American dream anymore?) How has it remained the same? How has it changed? What forces might shape it in the future?