**Literature in the Modern Period of America**

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Whereas previous American literary periods were best defined by certain stylistic conventions or popular schools of thought, the modern period of American literature is better defined by the traditions it broke rather than any traditions it created. Set into motion by rapid changes in the fabric of American life, it produced literature fraught with tension, struggling with deep universal questions yet never coming up with fully reliable answers. It was during this period of drastic change and drastic art that American literature finally came into its own in academia. The works of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and other major American authors were finally being taught in universities as subjects of scholarly study. This newfound interest in American writing, along with the intriguing nature of the country’s literature at the time, helped cement America’s literary reputation as an important artistic tradition the world over.

The early 20th century saw many American writers rebelling against long held social norms to an unheard of degree, abandoning many of the value systems and tightly held worldviews that had influenced American society and art since the birth of the nation. Change was the norm of the time as new advances in technology, radical new social theories, and two brutal world wars changed the face of the world forever. The violence of both World War I and World War II was unprecedented and terrible, and these two conflicts help to shatter all illusions of the romanticism of war. Industrialization and urbanization became even larger factors in American society as the nation moved further from its agricultural roots into a new existence as a large factory nation that lived by the products it produced rather than the food it grew. Social theorists, seeking to understand this new, urban world, began to apply Darwin’s theories of natural selection to social systems. Science developed at an exponential rate, teaching humanity more about themselves and the world around them. Such swift, unbounded changes disoriented Americans, sowing a deep distrust in the old institutions that had guided American life for so long. Many of America’s artists began to question what they could trust in this new world. The church, the family, the government, nothing seemed to give sufficient answers to the horrible questions that had been raised by the changes of this time. It was this new uncertainty, this complete ambiguity that became the true style of this time.

No literary genre typified the Modern period as much as poetry, and no phrase summed up Modernist poetry so well as Ezra Pound’s poetic command “Make it New!” Perhaps drawn to poetry's impromptu nature and its emotionally dense language, many of the era’s greatest writers were poets, and they gave modern American poetry as distinct a voice as Walt Whitman had given it decades before. The modern poets, in some way or another, all sought to make their poetry something new, something different that the literature that had come before them. From the intricate poetic constructions of Robert Frost to the challenging stylistic innovations of such experimental writers as e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, Modernist poetry showed a deep dissatisfaction with tradition. Frost’s poems, such as “The Road Not Taken” and “Design," wrestled with the question of a seemingly hostile world and the issue of free will versus determinism, all in the form of strict verse and elaborate nature imagery. Focusing more on stylistic exploration, e.e. cummings’ poems challenged readers by intentionally subverting the very rules of grammar that the English language was built upon, presenting a new style of poetry that dealt less with conscious topics and more with associations and dreamlike images. William Carlos Williams, a former pediatrician, became a celebrated poet. His poems such as “This Is Just to Say” and “The Red Wheel Barrow," with their simple styles and seemingly absent subject matter, set the stage for a quiet poet’s revolt against unquestioning convention, be it literary, social, or logical.

Other poets of the time sought to make their poems intentionally difficult reading in an attempt to draw the reader into the work. T.S. Eliot, along with Pound, turned to ancient Greek and Latin texts for inspiration as they attempted to understand their very modern world around them while maintaining a connection to the classics of the past. Eliot's most famous work, *The Waste Land*, expressed a bleak view of the post-World War I world in puzzling language, rich with obscure allusions, attempting to force the reader to be an active part of the poetry process. Similarly, Wallace Stevens, the insurance salesman turned acclaimed poet, rejected even the artist’s life, despite writing some of the most acclaimed poetry of this time. His poems, such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” were written in his own idiosyncratic, intricate, precisely phrased inner language of symbols and metaphors, making for both challenging and stunning reading.

Prose underwent a similar revitalization, as novelists and short story writers felt the same need to create new modes of communication that had pushed poets to such artistic heights. The anti-heroic war tales of Ernest Hemingway were both controversial yet wildly acclaimed by the reading public. One of the most famous prose writers of the period, Hemingway had served as an ambulance driver during World War I before he began his literary writing career. Through novels such as *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway brought the many bloody battlefields that he had seen firsthand to American readers. His novels and short stories often dealt frankly with the gross realities of war, while he subtly manipulated his simple, journalistic prose style to express his own bleak view of the world around him, a world outside of simple cause and effect relationships, lacking both logic and philosophy. Similarly, the novels and prose works of William Faulkner reflected the Modernist movement, showcasing disjointed images, multiple points of view, complex sentences, and stream-of-consciousness narration as newly accepted literary tools to describe the world. His most famous novel, the complex The Sound and the Fury, featured as one of its narrators a mentally handicapped man-child, Benji. The work of these writers and their contemporaries expressed a new view of the post-war world, a world capable of both amazing technology and incomprehensible cruelty. It was a world of newfound ambiguities, a world with no clear center and no clear distinction between good and evil, black or white. However, the rebellion of the period was not limited simply to the realms of philosophy or art. Social change was also a very powerful force during this time, as minorities who had previously stood silent seized this rebellious time as an opportunity to speak up and be heard. This new social consciousness worked its way quickly into literature. The so-called “Harlem Renaissance” of the 1920’s was a powerful movement of New York-based African-American writers who attempted to create for their race, so recently enslaved, a powerful literary tradition in this new America. Led by two very different young men--Countee Cullen, the classically trained and British influenced “proper” poet, and Langston Hughes, raised on jazz music and black spirituals--the Harlem Renaissance sought to give African-Americans a strong, clear voice with which they could express themselves. Its effects can still be felt in all urban poetry to this day. Others challenged gender biases, as female writers such as Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Willa Cather shattered stereotypes of women as second-class citizens, either directly through their work or indirectly by their sheer presence on the literary scene. Still other writers saw class issues as paramount and wrote about the complications of America’s new financial landscape, both for the new elite and the newly poor. John Steinbeck’s novels, such as *Cannery Row* and *Of Mice and Men*, were stern examinations of the hardships of tenant farmers in California, while F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic American novel The Great Gatsby laid bare the wide gap between society’s wealthy elite and everyone else.

Americans literature’s discontentment with all of the old facets of life was rapid in growing and comprehensive in scope. Out of this distrust of society’s institutions, a new focus on the individual was born. Indeed, it now seemed as if one’s own reason, untouched by society’s influence, was the only reliable authority on any question of importance, a theme that can be seen over and over again in the literature of the time. Writers now looked inside themselves to answer their own question about religion, sexual mores and any other issue. In a period in danger of dissolving itself into generality, with its vast blending of literary styles and dealings with a variety of topics, this introspection is the true hallmark of the modern period. By attempting to rethink their relationship to society and social institutions, the artists shifted the focus of the art from merely recording the world in which they lived to saying something about that world, as well.