

AMERICAN
LITERATURE

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A HANDBOOK OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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Teresa Kieniewicz

Introduction

The present volume is designed as a textbook for any student taking a survey course in American literature. It contains the body of knowledge deemed necessary for students graduating from the English Institute of Warsaw University. Hence its authors devote more space and attention to information about American literature than to detailed analyses or interpretations of particular novels or poems. While it is a manual, it tries to avoid extended discussions of works that appear on our syllabus (see Appendix) because we do not want to prejudice classroom discussions. The book is consciously eclectic: it focuses on major writers, trends, and phenomena; it presents well-established, “standard” opinions; it includes different approaches and points of emphasis. For these very reasons it does not offer a uniform and complete account of the development of American literature. Although arranged in chronological order, the book is not really a history of American literature but a survey – a more selective study, narrower in scope yet no less academic and reliable, we hope, because of its instrumental character as a manual.

American writing from the early colonial days through the 1960s is divided into 14 units of more or less equal importance and very unequal length. Some chapters are devoted to single writers (Twain, James) or perhaps two (Melville and Hawthorne, Whitman and Dickinson). Some discuss specific literary genres (drama, poetry) or trends (the realistic and naturalistic tradition, transcendentalism), while others are organized by historical periods or by ethnic categories (colonial, post-World War I, Afro-American literature). This diversity signifies a practical goal – to provide students with a clear indication of the dominant character and relative importance of particular authors and periods.

The volume, however, is more than a collection of essays on American literature: much effort went to making its chapters complementary and continuous. Its unity derives primarily from certain assumptions about literature and literary creativity that the contributors share or subscribe to in their common task. The first and foremost among these tenets is the perception of literature as a continuum. Since each generation contributes its share, the cumulative process is never broken. Whether accepting or rejecting its cultural heritage, each generation enters into a direct and intimate relation with the past; each spins new tales or recreates the old ones, develops new ideas or resolves old dilemmas feeding ceaselessly upon the past. Hence, to understand literature at any point in time, one needs to be familiar with its past – the years and ages of human history that went into its making.

The concern with the past does not diminish the significance of the present moment. It means that every book, whether of poetry or fiction, is marked profoundly by the time and place of its writing. Like any work of art, literature is created by individual talent, and so far as it is individual it is unique: in each case an original talent responds imaginatively to experience. Since writers live in society, their experience is colored, although in varying degrees, by the prevailing mores, institutions, and ideas of their society. No one can ever be absolutely free from the influence of his immediate environment. Thus, to understand literature, one should comprehend its social context – the mainstream of contemporary events and concerns as well as currents of upheld and developing ideas.

The above considerations point out the necessity of providing a comprehensive chronological framework or pattern in which every chapter could be readily placed. The chronology here follows, by and large, that of *The American Tradition in Literature* by Bradley, Beatty and Long. Students, however, should keep in mind that in literature or history no chronological classification is ever final or absolute. The dates indicated as turning points seldom define moments of change, and they should be regarded as referring to periods of transition at least five to ten years long.

By general consent, American literature begins in 1620 with the settling of the Plymouth Plantation. The first period of its development ends with the American Revolution, and the treaty of Paris of 1783, which confirmed the independence of the United States. The term „colonial period,” a political rather than literary one, covers two very different strains. One, the Puritan culture, flourished in New England well into the second half of the 18th century. Nourished by Calvinist theology and supervised by the ministers and the elders of the church, it combined pure, absolute faith with rationality, intellect with emotions, joy of life with rigorous moral conduct, independent study of the Bible with strict communal control, otherworldliness with acute business sense – into a well-balanced, if precarious entity. The main body of Puritan writing is, in fact, only semi-literary (histories, diaries, sermons). If it attracts much interest and discussion it is because the impact of Puritan thinking proved lasting. It continued to color American ideas and attitudes long after their Calvinist doctrine gave way to more liberal forms of Christianity.

The other strain, the Enlightenment (the second half of the 18th century) shared many characteristics with its European counterpart, cultivating rationalism in thought and classicism in taste. The Age of Reason produced little fiction or poetry. Involved in political affairs of the day, the best minds were more likely to write political pamphlets or philosophical tracts than literary works. This non-literary orientation prevailed until the early 1800s, as if only the generation born to independence was able to undertake the task of creating its own, no longer colonial but truly national, literature.

The American Literature of the 19th century aimed at emancipation from the English tradition and English models, although some writers considered native material scarce and impoverished by the lack of historical past. The

prevailing attitude, however, claimed that American literature should present and express the greatness and glory of the land – the vast continent of limitless opportunities, equality and democracy. It should voice American faith in the New World as a Promised Land where one becomes a new Adam and begins a new life – innocent, perfect, and successful.

The early American novelists sought to adopt the current European models of sentimental romance, gothic tale and historical novel to native material. If Charles Brockden Brown's novels (written between 1798 and 1801) are almost forgotten today and only two of the numerous sketches by Washington Irving (*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Vinkle*, 1820) are still read and remembered, it is because their innovations in subject matters fail to redeem the imitativeness of their form and style.

The Romantic movement reached America somewhat belatedly in the 1820s, but continued until the Civil War (1861), i.e. much longer than in most European countries. Chronologically, James Fenimore Cooper opens the line with his "Leather-Stocking Tales" (written between 1823 and 1841) and his romances of the American Revolution. By 1836, when Ralph Waldo Emerson published *Nature*, the Transcendentalists had formulated their fundamental concepts. They affirmed the same supremacy of spirit over matter, individual over society, and beauty over commodity that was voiced by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville in their fiction. The American Romanticism, or the American Renaissance, to use F.O. Matthiessen's term, drew from various sources, nevertheless all its works bear the stamp of intense idealism.

In the United States, unlike many European countries, the Romantic mood found its expression primarily in fiction; idealism is perhaps the only characteristic common to American poetry of the period, whether "traditional" (Longfellow) or innovative in form and language (Poe, Whitman, Dickinson). With their profound differences and true originality, Whitman and Dickinson established two main currents in American poetry.

The upheaval of the Civil War, followed by the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the country, threatened the unity and continuity of the young American culture. Hence the new realistic trend sought to correct faults and reconcile opposites, to promote order and remedy abuses while it exposed personal and social evil of the day. As much a product of home-growth as of foreign influence, American realism was anti-sentimental in handling characters and plots; its preoccupation with current social problems (poverty, labor relations, political corruption, changing family structure) was often progressive, sometimes radical. The greatest writers described their surrounding world with great accuracy of detail in speech and manner (Twain, Howells) and perhaps even greater accuracy in rendering the human psyche (Henry James). Fictional characters are presented as free moral agents responsible for their actions.

The influence of French naturalism is first noticeable in the 1890s in the novels and short stories of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane. After the turn of the century it shaped Theodore Dreiser's fiction and the work of two minor novelists, Jack London and Upton Sinclair. Yet the impact of naturalism was by no means exhausted: in a modified version, the combination of biological, psychological, and social determinism, social criticism, political radicalism and realistic presentation served as a formula for writing fiction well into the 1950s.

In the 20th century no clear-cut divisions and classifications of books and writers into literary trends are possible, first of all because significant changes in human thought, in artistic concerns and style seem to occur at greater speed and frequency than ever before. Hence, most critics talk about distinctive characteristics of decades as if unable to group these diverse tendencies in some broader and chronologically larger units. Thus, the 1920s are the booming years of reevaluation and stylistic experiment in poetry (Pound, Williams) as well as in prose (Hemingway, Dos Passos), while the 1930s are dominated by a new social consciousness and a radicalism bred by the Depression. Terms like "Jazz Age" (Fitzgerald), "the lost generation" (Stein, Hemingway), or "leftist literature" (Steinbeck, Odets) describe, however loosely, certain social attitudes rather than literary creeds. It should be remembered that a good many poets or novelists remain outside such classifications, and that most writers kept publishing for several decades – some ever trying their hand at new styles or subjects (O'Neill), others polishing their distinctive individual idiom with patience and perseverance (Faulkner).

American drama, which begins only after World War I with Eugene O'Neill, became in the 1930s a vehicle of radical opinion (Odets) as much as entertainment. It flourished in the following decade in the hands of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

The difficulty in perceiving pattern of literary events increases after World War II because of our having too short a perspective. Each decade – the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s, is colored by its own political and social problems, involvements, and mood. What seems perhaps more characteristic is the rise of separate currents with regional social, ethnic, or ideological groups – Southern, Black, Jewish, or, more recently, feminist, to name but a few. If some writers seem „to belong together," it is because they articulate similar concerns or probe the same crucial questions or develop their plots in some comparable if not identical setting. At the same time the formal innovations and experiments set much of the writing of the 1960s and 1970s apart from contemporary but more „traditional" fiction. The term „post-modernism" appears to be a conventional label, meaningful in spite of its imprecision.

The above chronology categorizes the body of American literature into smaller units solely for teaching purposes. To close these remarks, let us repeat, however, that American literature as a whole should be treated as a continuum in its development from the early dependence upon English models to the new consciousness of its separate

and distinct identity, to cultural and literary independence and maturity which reversed the process, enabling it to exert a powerful influence over Europe.

Zbigniew Lewicki

Chapter 1: The Beginnings

The Puritan tradition in American literature, and culture in general, is indeed a surprising phenomenon. The Puritans were neither the first nor the largest group of settlers. The French, the Dutch, and the Spaniards also claimed various parts of the American continent as their own, and the British non-Puritan Jamestown Colony was established in 1607. Yet it is the arrival of the *Mayflower* on the American shore (1620), and the creation, by its one hundred and two passengers, of the Plymouth Plantation that has come to signify the beginning of modern America. In order to understand the power of survival displayed both by this handful of courageous people and by their ideology, it is necessary to recall the reasons for the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness."

The Puritans were English Protestants, who followed the teachings of Martin Luther, but who were particularly influenced by the ideas formulated by John Calvin. Luther claimed that men were all wicked and God was all-powerful, so man cannot be considered, in any sense of the term, "an equal partner," who through his good deeds can earn redemption. The Puritans had no quarrel with this, but they were even more attracted by Calvin's furthering of the concept in his doctrine of "predestination" which became the cornerstone of their ontology. The doctrine of predestination held that at the beginning of time God had chosen some people for salvation, while others were headed for eternal damnation. It was also assumed that there were to be only a few "elects," while most people were "preterites," as the doomed came to be called. Needless to say, such design rendered all human attempts at earning salvation totally meaningless.

What is essential for understanding Puritanism (and frequently puzzling to students brought up in a different tradition) is the fact that this doctrine not only did not evoke a sense of helplessness, but actually made the Puritans proud of being a part of God's extraordinary enterprise. They could cherish it without a concept of a "trade-off" in which good deeds are rewarded while bad ones are punished. It was also generally assumed that "the elect" will in their earthly life show signs of their special role, that they will be pious as well as successful in business – they simply could do no wrong. Everybody wanted to believe that he or she was among the chosen and hoped others would notice it, too – and while even the strictest adherence to religious principles could not by itself lead to salvation, it was a natural prerequisite of those who had been selected by God. Consequently, all members of Puritan communities strove to be the most pious, as well as the most prosperous of all. This is the source of Puritan ethics which have so deeply influenced the American moral code: while ostensibly reducing the importance of man's behavior to nil, it actually forced him to be at his best all the time for fear of admitting, or having his neighbors ascertain, his failure to gain a place among God's chosen few. The special significance of succeeding in life has come to characterize the American culture ever since, and the theme of success has been predominant in American literature even when it bore no other features of Puritanism.

The Puritans' sense of being a part of God's great design resulted also in their conviction that it is their duty to make certain that the Christian faith is not distorted by anything not warranted by the Scripture. In the second part of the 16th century they set forth on their mission to "purify" the Church of England of all later changes and additions, and it was this undertaking that earned them their name. They wanted to abolish not only the episcopal hierarchy and the prayer book, but also, for instance, the celebration of Christmas, which obviously was not called for in the Bible. Their uncompromising attitude, however, rendered also an unexpected and unwelcome effect – it made them enemies of the state. The "Elizabethan Settlement" of 1559 accepted a compromise between Protestant and Roman Catholic creeds. Such "impurity" was not possible for the Puritans, and their opposition culminated in the outbreak of open warfare in 1642. The subsequent beheading of King Charles I and the rule of Cromwell changed the course of world history, but American history was decided some decades earlier, when English Puritans, while involved in a bitter controversy with the state, discovered a surprising and irreconcilable division in their own camp.

The rift is not surprising to an impartial student of the multitude of possible meanings of the Bible, yet it must have been shocking to the Puritans who, as all fundamentalists, believed that returning to the original lessons of the Scripture can render only one, unambiguous meaning. As it happened, the Puritan scrutiny of the Bible resulted in their disagreement concerning the organization of the earthly church. The majority believed in imitating Calvin's system which substituted the hierarchy of clergy (from the pope to a parish-priest) with a hierarchy of ruling bodies (from the national assembly to the council of elders in a parish church), while maintaining the principle of the pyramidal model with a broad base and only one element at the top.

This view was vehemently opposed by a very vocal minority, called Congregationalists, and since the original American Puritans came from this group, their views are of a particular interest to us. The Congregationalists fully endorsed such basic concepts as the doctrine of predestination, but they differed from the rest of the Puritans, called Presbyterians, in their idea of church organization and church membership. First of all, they rejected all structures higher than individual churches – in their view, the national church was a work of Antichrist. Even more importantly, each of these churches was to be independent not only in administrative matters, but also in matters of faith, and each was to be individually founded on a separate covenant entered into by its members.

The term “covenant” describes a relationship between God and Christians. God agrees to enter it and abide by its terms, even though, being infinitely powerful and absolute, he is under no such obligation to finite and limited man. The term was used to describe agreements offered by God to man in the Bible (the Covenant of Works, based on obedience, and entered by God with Adam, who failed it; or the Covenant of Grace, extending from Abraham, in which God offered not to rule against the human concept of justice, subsequently supplemented by the Covenant of Redemption, made with Christ), but it also came to denote the principle on which individual churches of Puritan Congregationalists were related directly to God. In turn, they offered church membership only to those who had the power to make a public confession of their faith (frequently referred to as *conversion*), and swear to the covenant. They were called “visible saints” and would presumably be also among the elect, though it bears repeating that that decision had been made by God at the beginning of time and no amount of human effort could change it. A false confession of faith could do a man no good but only bring about God’s increased wrath. Membership in the church was thus a sign of God’s blessing yet if it was based on an insincere testimony it guaranteed damnation. We should not thus be surprised at agonizing hours spent by people like Edward Taylor before each sermon as he looked for a renewed spiritual assurance that he was in fact in a position to meet his congregation in good faith. Nor should we be surprised that so many members of New England Puritan communities were not full members of the church as they could not find enough will power and conviction in themselves to declare their membership.

The Congregationalists were thus the most exacting of Puritans, but even more important is the fact that because of their opposition to any national church they were contradicting broader political goals of the whole Puritan movement. The double pressure exerted by Presbyterians as well as by the government frequently led to outright persecution and some of the Congregationalists, rather than risk beheading, chose to leave England for the Netherlands. In 1620 one such group decided to go on from there to America. Out of 102 people aboard the *Mayflower* only one-third were “Saints,” while others were a separate group referred to as “Strangers.” On arrival, however, almost all of them jointly signed the so-called “Mayflower Compact,” which established the foundations of their life in the Plymouth Plantation. Later on, all *Mayflower* settlers came to be referred to as “Pilgrims” or “Forefathers.” In 1630 a much larger expedition of over four hundred people, led by John Winthrop on his flagship *Arbella*, arrived in Massachusetts Bay, and during the Great Migration (which began in 1630 and lasted till the outbreak of the Revolution in 1642) almost twenty thousand people settled around the Bay. The Puritan colonization of New England became a fact.

While, however, the arrival of the *Mayflower* Pilgrims in America was a result of their flight from – from persecution, intolerance, and the domination of political enemies, John Winthrop’s group, and many subsequent ones, embarked on a journey towards: towards the land not yet dominated by any hostile faction, towards new economic possibilities, but also towards the New World in the original, religious sense of the term. This element of the myth of America is crucial for understanding not only the reasons for the early migration, but also numerous literary realizations of the myth of America as the Promised Land.

In the predominantly secular contemporary vocabulary, terms such as apocalypse or chiliasm came to denote the ultimate end of the world, an event which is to be dreaded and avoided at all costs. Yet the Biblical descriptions of the end of the world (spread throughout the Scripture, and expressed with particular intensity in the Apocalypse of St. John), were meant to convey an altogether different message. When this world is destroyed, and the sinners have been punished, a New World of perfect happiness will appear in which the virtuous (or, in Puritan terminology, “the elect”) will enjoy eternal bliss. The Bible does not specify the location of this land, or even whether it is to be created on the Earth at all, yet the prophecies are vague enough to allow almost any interpretation, and Puritan theologians quickly provided “evidence” that the New World will be created in America. The concept of the covenanted church, which characterized American Puritans (who descended, to repeat, from English Congregationalists), can by itself account for their belief in their special, personal relationship with God. This was strengthened even further by the conviction, frequently expressed, that after the failure of the Jews, the Puritans are now cast in the role of the chosen people, and that America, rather than Israel, will witness God’s new wonders.

The sense of their special role in God’s design entailed, however, a sense of very special and grave responsibility, just as the belief in predestination left Puritans free of efforts to earn salvation only to burden them with a tormenting and unanswerable question of whether one was indeed among the elect. Hope for the New World was invigorating, but it was frequently marred by everyday’s tragedies and difficulties: unreliable climate, Indian wars, and the colonists’ lack of experience decimated them. Willpower, faith, and unrelenting self-discipline were their best defense, which left very little room for enjoyment, sense of humor, and occasional intemperance. This, at least, is the popular image of the Puritan life that was most succinctly expressed by H.L. Mencken in his well-known jocular definition of Puritanism as “haunting fear that somebody, somewhere may be happy.”

Was the life of the 17th and 18th century America really so uniformly grim, sad, and colorless? Our main difficulty in answering the question lies in the lack of reliable, first-hand sources. It would be a mistake, for instance, to treat the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne as faithful renditions of the Puritan way of life. The access to sources and understanding of Puritan ideology was much more limited in the 19th century than it is now because so many early texts were published only recently. Moreover, Hawthorne, like any writer, simplified the background in order to achieve a heightened dramatic sense of the plot. Yet we must remember that there would have been no conflict in *The Scarlet Letter* without Hester and Dimmesdale committing the sin (in this case adultery), the presence of which was far

more common among the Puritans than they cared to admit. Again, the evidence is circumstantial – sermons castigating members of the community for abuse of alcohol, church documents lamenting the failure of colonists to fulfill God’s mission, or a surprisingly high number of children born out of wedlock. Unfortunately, we can never be certain how much of what we read in topical texts portrayed the real life in America, and how much was distorted or exaggerated in order to increase the persuasive power of an argument. What we lack is a large enough body of literary works that could, in all their diversity and complexity, preserve a cultural image of an epoch.

What can be safely assumed is that while American Puritanism dominated the country’s life for a limited time only, it made itself felt in many aspects of American life and its influence can be seen even today. Its power lies in the fact that so many of its ideas have made their way into later systems and thus helped shape the American mind in the centuries to come. The urge to succeed and exceed, the belief that hard work is a necessary ingredient of happiness, the cult of money as the status indicator, and perhaps even a conviction that they are the chosen (or at least very special) people, all these can be said to be among specific features of Americans – to the degree that national features can be accepted as relevant at all. Yet we should remember that while Puritanism and the Puritan ethics survived long enough to attract Hawthorne’s attention in the 19th century, and they can also be considered an important element of such diverse 20th-century novels as Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt* or Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the artistic legacy of the 17th- and 18th-century America is almost limited at best. It is studied for historical reasons, and in order to demonstrate the continuity of American culture, but not necessarily for aesthetic pleasure. At the same time a reader familiar with the superior works of English or French literature of the same period must not forget a delayed beginnings of American culture, as well as the fact that beauty in itself mattered very little to the Puritans who, as William Ames put it, believed that “(t)hat key is to be chosen which doth open best, although it be of wood.”

Another reason why there were no American novels in the 17th and a better part of the 18th century was that the Puritans were opposed to them on ideological grounds as capable of diverting people’s attention away from hard work. The same was not, however, true of poetry and in the 17th century we can speak of three American poets who were of more than a fleeting importance. They were: Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), and Edward Taylor (1645?-1729).

None of them can make a real claim to greatness, and it was not until two hundred years later that poetry written in America was established as American, rather than as English verses that happened to have been written across the ocean. Yet in the case of Anne Bradstreet we can talk about a pure poetic talent who in her own times was widely praised in England, where her poetry was published, as well as in America. As the contemporary poet and feminist Adrienne Rich remarked, Bradstreet’s “individualism lies in her choice of material rather than in her style,” yet individualism should not be mistaken for undue originality, unbecoming of a good Puritan (Bradstreet’s father and husband were both governors of the Bay Colony). She wrote about two realms which coexisted for her on almost equal terms: the reality surrounding her and the world of the Bible. Like Emily Dickinson much later, Anne Bradstreet knew how to notice little things around her and turn them into poetry; unlike Dickinson, however, she never endowed them with a metaphysical quality. She was a poet of daily life, of all those little acts that filled her own days as a housewife: she is described as providing artistic records of domestic chores. Her style was plain, unadorned, perhaps to the point of monotonous directness. Yet there was enough poetic power in this good woman (who came to America on the *Arbella* and devoted her early poetry to public matters as apparently more becoming) to survive for centuries, perhaps not only because she was the first poet of any merit to live and write in America.

The Puritans may not have been great book-lovers, but they did appreciate knowledge and education. The foundation of the Harvard College as early as in 1636 followed between 1693 and 1764 by the creation of William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Dartmouth, and Brown. One of Harvard’s first graduates was William Wigglesworth, who went on to become a well-known public figure, and who was later offered the presidency of Harvard, which honor he declined. It was also Wigglesworth who was more responsible than any other individual for the popularity of a literary work among his fellow Puritans: Wigglesworth’s *The Day of Doom*, published in 1622 became the first American bestseller. It is estimated that a copy of the book was sold for one out of every twenty persons in New England. There were at least seven editions before the end of the seventeenth century, and even though the poem was subsequently reduced to the state of a literary relic, its impact upon the New Englanders cannot be overestimated.

The Day of Doom seems to us a cruel work. Contrary to what could be expected, however, its original readers were not frightened: apparently even children loved it. The reason for such reaction can be found in Wigglesworth’s belief, expressed in the poem, that those who are prepared for the End have nothing to worry about. Needless to say, all of Wigglesworth’s readers considered themselves righteous, and therefore did not feel threatened by the poem’s descriptions: *they* hoped they did not have to fear the Day of Judgement.

Christ appears in *The Day of Doom* while “the Earth is rent and torn,” and his coming causes terror and panic:

The wild Beast flee to the Sea,
so soon as he draws near ...
Amazeth Nature, and every Creature
doth more than terrify.

The Judgement itself is carried out in the same mood. The saints are granted eternal bliss, but when various types of sinners begin to approach the Judge's throne, they encounter what can be best described as vengeance. In an interesting twist of logic, Wigglesworth even suggests that the saints will derive pleasure from witnessing the sinners' punishment and their pain; that such *Schadenfreude* could be reconciled with sainthood was one of the peculiar features of Puritanism:

The Saints behold with courage bold,
and thankful wonderment,
To see all those that were their foes
thus sent to punishment.

Wigglesworth's poem was also largely responsible for the ridicule to which Puritanism was subjected in the following years: the joylessness of its descriptions was hardly made less repulsive by its monotonous reliance on the ballad meter and doggerel rhymes. What is interesting however, is the indisputable fact that Wigglesworth himself was a widely read and highly cultured man, who deliberately stooped to the level of a popular reader – a trick frequently employed by authors who hope to produce a bestseller.

Finally, there was Edward Taylor, certainly the most accomplished, yet also the least known poet of his times, simply because he did not publish any poems in his life-time. The discovery of his manuscripts in the Yale Library in 1937 rendered all previous judgements passed on Puritan literature meaningless, so different and original is his poetry. He is, as Donald E. Stanford, his editor, says, "the last important representative of the metaphysical school." His poetry is full of conceits, his literary taste exquisite, his poetic talent beyond any doubt. Yet he knew better than anybody else how non-Puritan his poetry was and while he did not order his poems to be destroyed, he refrained from publishing even a single one of them. He thus made no impact whatsoever on the development of American literature, and his belated discovery is important only for the scholars of the period who try to understand the mystery of his art that flourished in a most unfavorable environment of American wilderness. What Taylor was known for in his own time were his elaborate sermons that he delivered both to his own congregation of Westfield, Mass., and as guest sermons throughout the colonies. It is also the sermon-writing that became a form of art performed by accomplished preachers in front of interested and, within narrow theological limits, sophisticated audience. A wooden key was acceptable, but a golden one was preferred, even by Ames, and we can indeed treat at least some of the sermons as literary works of considerable merit.

It is quite frequently, and probably just as erroneously assumed by contemporary scholars that the more sophisticated sermons, particularly those prepared by outstandingly knowledgeable preachers such as Edward Taylor, were presented to "uncomprehending audience" of the rank-and-file Puritans. While John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, or Richard Mather were much better educated than an average colonist, and so were the ministers of later generations who frequently profited from their years at Harvard College, it would distort the true picture of New England Puritans if we tried to construct an artificial barrier between them and their clergy. They may have been quite simple and may have specialized in farming rather than the history of civilization, yet what we know about them clearly indicates their familiarity with theological problems and a taste for disputes over more intricate points of Biblical exegesis. At one time the colonists had to be forbidden to attend more than two sermons a week, which were customarily delivered at various locations on given days of the week: land was not cultivated as the faithful moved from one place to another in order to follow subtle differences in interpretation presented by different preachers in their weekly sermons. While New England was never a true theocracy, its unique system was based not only on a very close correlation between clergy and lay officers, but in particular on the dominance of religion and theological disputes of interest to everybody.

The sermons played also other roles in the society. Apart from offering new arguments in ongoing theological debates, they were, for instance, a part of the political process of the colonies ("Election Day sermons"), and they played a crucial role in attempts to scare the congregation back into the religious life ("jeremiads"). Their pattern, however, did not vary much: they consisted of the explanation of the chosen Biblical quotation, its interpretation, and finally its application to the life of the colony. While some of the sermons have been preserved in printed form, they were, of course, meant to be delivered orally, so today's reader may find them repetitive, as repetition is a very effective rhetorical device. They were also meant to be delivered by skillful orators, and reading them silently does them no more justice than a silent reading of an operatic aria. First of all, however, the sermons are among the main sources of our knowledge about a culture long gone, even if they are unlikely to be the topic of everybody's excited comments ever again.

Apart from sermons, it is from various diaries and chronicles that we derive our sense of what life in the 17th century America was like. Chronicles may be quite valuable for that purpose, but in the period under consideration they were perhaps too biased to be considered fully reliable. While early European chronicles were frequently guilty of overpraising the sovereign and his family, early American journals, diaries, and histories were inaccurate insofar as they tended to see and describe the earthly in terms of the eternal. The tendency to perceive the colonists' life as fulfillment of their holy mission frequently resulted in the authors' disregard for literal truth in favor of a potential

symbolic lesson. Nonetheless, these accounts provide us with a sense of what it was like to be present at the birth of American culture and are therefore worth of a closer look.

The first, and perhaps most widely known such chronicle is William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Bradford, one of the two leaders of the *Mayflower* group, was the governor of the Plymouth Plantation for thirty years (re-elected every year). His history was written between 1630 and 1650, and it provides us with two elements that were to become so typical of the New World writing: one was his conviction that America had been chosen as the place for a very special experiment in man's spiritual history, and the other was his growing fear that evil in the man can bring that experiment to ruin. The overall tone of Bradford's chronicle, where the heroic was frequently mixed with the melancholic, is perhaps best exemplified by the famous passage describing the colonists' first impression of America:

Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a
sea of troubles before in their preparation...
they had now no friends to welcome them
nor inns to entertain or refresh their
weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much
less towns to repair to, to seek for
succor... Besides, what could they see
but a hideous and desolate wilderness,
full of wild beasts and wild men...

The toll on the colonists was very heavy indeed: almost half of the *Mayflower* passengers died within a year of arriving in America. Those who came a decade later and founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony were better organized and their arrival was preceded by appropriate preparations made by an advanced guard. Their experience is of a great interest to the scholars because they created a much more complex political and administrative structure. It was an early pattern for the local government which is to this day recognized in some parts of New England as decisive in settling a multitude of problems, not all of them local. There exist quite a few accounts of the life in the settlements written at various points of their early history. John Winthrop's *Journal* was never reworked into a formal history comparable with that by Bradford, yet its value is immense – not only because of the information provided by irregular though always deadly serious entries, but first of all because it came from the pen of the leader of the Great Migration, “the chosen Moses of a new, and even mightier Exodus,” as Perry Miller calls him.

Perhaps the most important historical account of the first period of Puritan colonization of America was produced by Cotton Mather. In his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (*The Great Achievements of Christ in America*, 1702) he collected numerous stories, narratives, and testimonies meant to prove America's special place in God's design. At the same time Mather's opus provided future readers with a well of information, biographies of outstanding citizens, and other kind of historical data without which our knowledge of those times would have been impaired even further. A much more personal account of those times was Samuel Sewall's *Diary* which covered the years 1673-1729, the crucial half-century when life in the colonies was becoming increasingly secularized. It is also worth remembering that Sewall was a member of the special court which pronounced “the witches of Salem” guilty. He had made a grave mistake, but later realized it and was strong enough to admit it in public; the *Diary* provides us with a rare view into the soul of the man tormented by the awareness of the irrevocability of his wrong judgement.

One more text is worth mentioning here, which is Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence*, published in 1654. It is not reliable as an historical source, and has frequently been scorned as simplistic and naive. However, what is interesting about it is that Johnson was not a clergyman, and he did not study at the university; instead, he expressed the views held by less sophisticated, average colonists. His main concern was to portray America as the place of the final battle between Christ and Satan. While he realized that the duel would be a long one, he had no doubts about its outcome, or about the colonists' special role in the events to come. It was precisely this clear sense of their teleology, as well as unflinching conviction about the outcome of their “errand into wilderness” that characterized the early colonists. It is the lack of such certainty and a growing disenchantment with their own imperfection that marked the colonists' entry into the eighteenth century.

Histories of American literature tend to glide over the eighteenth century, rarely devoting more than the shortest chapter of all to that epoch. There is, of course, a very good reason for it: lack of literary works of significance until the very end of that century. There were, however, philosophical, religious, and political tracts which are important to us not as literary works but as a record of events that marked the end of the domination of Puritanism and the arrival of the Age of Reason. It is therefore customary for the historians of American writing to discuss the eighteenth century in terms of the juxtaposition between its two most powerful minds: Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), each highly influential in his time. Without elaborating their relation in details, suffice it to say that their most important similarity and difference concerned their contribution to religious thinking: Edwards' as the last great proponent of the purest Puritanism, Franklin's as the most widely known eighteenth-century American Deist.

Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703. At the age of thirteen he entered Yale College, from which he graduated four years later. His philosophical essays written at that time provide ample evidence of his genius and of his early inclinations towards idealism. His keen interest in science led him towards the rationalistic type of idealism, which we can also see later in the works of the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalists. There is little use for speculations about how people come to believe in what they believe, but Edwards' *Personal Narrative* (c. 1740) provides us with a fascinating insight into his way of reasoning and helps us understand how a mind as powerful as his (Edwards is frequently referred to as the best mind ever born in America) came to embrace a religious system which diminishes man's role in the world more than any other faith. As the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty had lost its appeal among the colonists, Edwards took it upon himself to revitalize it. During his lifetime he in fact created a coherent theological structure in the strict Calvinist tradition, which draws both on the intellect and on emotion. It continues to be greatly admired by the scholars, but Edwards' popularity results mainly and unjustly from the controversial events that accompanied the implementation of his principles.

Soon after his graduation from Yale, Edwards became a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was deeply disturbed by the decline of religious zest among the colonists, which he related to the adoption of the so-called Halfway Covenant. The rules concerning membership of the church were discussed earlier in the chapter, but their strictness was subsequently softened by admission of the children of the converted. They were full members of the congregation, but were expected to experience their own "conversion" so that their children could in turn belong to the Church. The Halfway Covenant extended the membership to all those whose at least one grandparent was a church member. While church membership increased, Edwards believed that such slackening of standards was dangerous to the integrity of the church and he launched a campaign aimed at leading the faithful to the experience of conversion. This revivalistic movement, which came to be known as the Great Awakening, was first attempted in Northampton in 1734, and its main phase began in 1741 lasting, with varying intensity, for the next two decades.

From Edwards' point of view, the Great Awakening was meant to revive people's sense of God, to bring them to a deeper and lasting understanding of faith; from our perspective Edwards was in fact scaring people into religion. That this was the effect, if not the aim, of the movement, can be discerned from what happened to Edwards' own relative, one Joseph Hawley, who cut his throat during the first part of the revival in 1734. Edwards interpreted this as evidence of Devil's interference, but the population was shocked and the movement came to a temporary halt. When it was revived in 1741, with the assistance of George Whitefield, one of the founders of Methodism, Edwards was initially successful, only to be subsequently rejected by his own congregation; he went to a remote parish and preached to Indians. Keeping in mind that Edwards possessed both an exquisite mind and considerable rhetorical skills, we can interpret his defeat only as the defeat of the dogma he preached. People were no longer willing to accept the system in which God was all-powerful and man was of no consequence: the doctrine of predestination, the cornerstone of Calvinism, did not go well with those who saw the arrival of the Age of Reason.

During his lifetime Edwards wrote numerous texts: tracts, books, sermons, etc., most of which survived to our times. From this great body of his writings, two seem worth mentioning here: the best known one, and the least known one. There is little doubt, indeed, that his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is what comes first to an educated reader's mind at the mention of Edwards' name. While we can no longer be expected to be moved by it, it still strikes us as a powerful expression of deep religious convictions coming from a man driven by the urge to transmit the sense of God's anger to the supposedly hesitant audience. The image of man who is like a spider held by God over the pit of hell, and the immediacy of eternal damnation for which God need only to let go of that "loathsome insect," is cruel to us, but it was frightening and shocking to Edwards' audience. There exist reports that "the church was filled with an upswelling of sighs and moans, which turned, as Edwards relentless discourse went on, into such 'amazing' shrieks that Edwards had to pause till he could again be heard." In order to appreciate fully Edwards' stylistic skills we have to repeat that, quite obviously, sermons were meant to be delivered orally. Repetition is among the chief rhetorical devices used by preachers and, for that matter, by all public speakers: one has to assume occasional lapses of attention on the part of the audience. On the other hand we should notice that in Edwards' text images are not simply repeated, but they are presented with increasing intensity, and the hysterical reaction of the audience was consciously evoked by the preacher. Whether confessions of faith made under such emotional pressure can be considered valid is a matter that outside commentators should better leave to the interested parties.

Edwards' least known text is in all likelihood "Notes on the Apocalypse," kept secret by him and published only in 1977. It is a learned study, but its importance for us lies not so much in the profundity of the text, as in its subject-matter which is the concept of the end of the world. As Perry Miller is right to say, "Can one indeed begin to comprehend the eighteenth century... unless he recognizes the apocalyptic spirit in which it was conceived?" Having taken it upon himself to revive the flagging Puritan faith, Edwards could not separate the task from one of the main tenets of the eighteenth-century thinking: the belief that the wicked world would be destroyed and the New World would be created in America. It is indeed surprising to see a mind as fine as Edwards' spend time to calculate the exact time of the end of the world and provide arguments that America was indeed the site where eternal happiness would reign: Asia and Europe had their place in God's scheme and now it was America's time. What seems to be far more interesting, however, is the combination of irrational assumptions and logical reasoning. Puritan theologians frequently applied logical principles to prove their theses, but it was only with the arrival of the Age of Reason, of which

Benjamin Franklin was the best known American proponent, that rational thinking was applied to explain laws of nature rather than God's designs.

A popular joke has it that Franklin was born in Philadelphia at the age of seventeen. There is more than a grain of truth in it, because had he stayed in his native Boston, where he spent the first sixteen years, his life could very well have been different from what it became. While Philadelphia was not yet the capital of the colonies, it was already a vivid industrial, as well as intellectual center. Franklin's twin vocations as an unusually gifted scientist and an astute businessman could flourish there, later to be supplemented by his political wisdom. We must also remember that the colonies differed in their religious inclinations as a result of having been settled at various times with various refugees from intolerant England. While New England was predominantly Puritan, Pennsylvania was primarily Quaker and Deist, which suited Franklin's temperament much better.

Franklin's early essay "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain" (1725) was for him an exercise in logical, rational thinking in which he convinced himself of the existence of Deistic God. He supplemented it later with other, more mature arguments, yet the basic premises remain unchanged: reason could not render a different conclusion. It is enough to recall Edwards' *Personal Narrative* to understand that the Puritans were not always free from initial doubts either. While these had to be overcome by the time of one's conversion, logical reasoning was also employed by Puritan theologians, so the main difference between them and Franklin consisted in their respective understanding of the relationship between God and man. The 18th-century intellectual revolution concerned the vision of God, but not the rational thinking which had always been the cornerstone of the American society. God was seen by Deists as rationalistic himself, and a creator of a logical universe which men, through thinking and experimenting, could fully understand and explain. It is much beyond the scope of the present study to judge whether such sweeping optimism is indeed more "reasonable" than recognizing man's limitations and learning to live with them.

Benjamin Franklin did not create Deism, or even added significantly to its ideology, and his main achievement in the field of philosophy was that he was among the first proponents of pragmatism. The term was not defined until much later (by William James and John Dewey), but its basic assumption had already been accepted. It held that truth is measured by practical experience: what worked was true because it could be traced back to a law of nature. With this combination of transcendental and practical guidance, Franklin could indeed enjoy what the Puritans only hoped for: a quiet conviction that his successes were in harmony with the overall pattern of the universe. And his list of major accomplishments has been matched by very few in the course of American history.

Benjamin Franklin's life was such that perhaps a dozen lesser men could find a claim to greatness in it. Should he be remembered first of all as the inventor of the lightning rod, or the man who negotiated the crucial peace settlement with the British in 1783? The founder of the American Philosophical Society, or the editor of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, a yearbook which gave very sound advice to farmers about their everyday life? The first and most effective Minister to France, instrumental in gaining international recognition for the newly created United States of America, or a member of the Royal Society and a recipient of its much coveted Copley medal? And what about his part in drafting the Declaration of Independence, his own outstanding business and public career – or the invention of bifocal lenses and the Franklin stove? He was even the author of the poem "The Lighthouse Tragedy," which became a popular success. If any man can achieve it, Franklin was the embodiment of American culture: politics and practical inventions first, but some room is saved for artistic imagination as well.

But, almost unbelievably so, Franklin's role in American life was even greater than the above would suggest: his own life became the epitome of the most essential of American myths, that of a person advancing "from rags to riches." In his *Autobiography*, written for the benefit of his son, and published only almost a hundred years later, Franklin presents his early life in a way that became an American life model – if not in details, then at least in principle. As a young man he had his whole day rigorously planned from five in the morning till ten in the evening. He also made a list of thirteen cardinal virtues and prepared weekly reviews of his behavior on all days of the week, marking sins against these virtues with black spots. He would ask himself in the morning (between five and eight o'clock): "What good shall I do this day?" and then in the evening (between six and ten o'clock): "What good have I done to-day?" Most certainly a very unexciting model, yet this is what the myth of "from rags to riches" is all about – though Franklin was probably unique among people of success with his concern about goodness. The Puritans believed that every moment of our life must be accounted for; Franklin would probably reject the notion of having to "account for," but would argue, in most reasonable terms, towards the same idea: success is possible only if one does not waste one's life away. In Franklin's world there was no predestination, and man alone was responsible for what he would do with his own life: when we reject the Puritans' view of the world as depriving man of the ultimate control of his life, are we aware that being left with all responsibility may in fact be an even greater burden? After all, for every man who has gone from rags to riches, there must be several who have gone from riches to rags...

We have devoted so much space to Benjamin Franklin not because of his literary accomplishments, which alone would not have warranted it, but as a representative of the Age of Reason which brought about not only a rational approach to the world, but first of all the belief in progress. While it is worth remembering that progress does not have to be the only measure of either individual or social achievement, there is little doubt that the circumstances in the 18th-century America were such that made a dramatic leap forward both a necessity and a virtue. The American Revolution was not a generally welcomed event, and Benjamin Franklin for one fought hard to prevent it. Yet when it broke out,

America proved to be rich not only in military commanders, but also, if not primarily, in political philosophers who helped create the new country. Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were but the best known of these, and there were many others, such as Alexander Hamilton or James Madison. Many of their writings, including the Declaration of Independence, possess literary merit, though none of these texts was meant as a literary one. The trouble is, as critics point out, that “America could not, logically or historically, be said to possess a *nonliterary* world until its poets and prose writers had developed a world recognizably and genuinely literary.”

Such time was not far away. Poetry was being written at all times, and it was becoming both more independent of the British literary style and more sophisticated as the 18th century was drawing to a close; at the same time the end of the century witnessed also the arrival of first American fiction writers. While it was still at least half a century away from literary maturity, no sooner did the United States of America come to existence than it also entered the age of literature.

Wiesław Furmańczyk

Chapter 2: Early American Fiction

The literary situation in the newly created United States was aptly characterized by “The Poet of the American Revolution,” Philip Freneau, in his “Advice to Authors,” written in 1788: “There are few writers of books in this new world, and amongst these very few that deal in works of imagination, and, I am sorry to say, fewer still that have any success attending their lucubrations.” The reasons for this predicament were quite clear to this young patriot, regarded by some modern critics as the most American poet before Walt Whitman. Although obviously concerned about the plight of the American writers at that time, he said ironically that in a country which two hundred years before had been inhabited only by savages it was “really wonderful there should be any polite original authors at all in any line, especially when it is considered, that according to the common course of things, any particular nation or people must have arrived to, or rather passed, their meridian of opulence and refinement, before they consider the professors of the fine arts in any other light than a nuisance to the community.” Thus Freneau advised his compatriots with literary ambitions to turn to other trades: “I mean to say, in plain language, that you may make something by weaving garters, or mending old sails, when an Epic poem would be your utter destruction.”

In his obviously sarcastic remarks, Freneau voiced the anxieties of all those concerned about the creation of a truly national literature. The fact that at that time vital political and socio-economic issues were pushing *belles-lettres* into the background was one of the obstacles that stood in the way of aspiring American men of letters. Another important one was the still limited number of people who had enough leisure for reading the kind of literature that was not concerned with the practical problems of everyday existence, and were not affected by the still lingering attitudes that the perusal of fiction or other “light literature” should be regarded as a waste of time. But even the relatively narrow, though gradually increasing leisure class of enlightened readers was still looking for literary works by British writers. And for many more years to come the American book market would be dominated by British authors even though many of their books were actually printed in the United States. There was, moreover, another purely technical obstacle in the way of a would-be professional American writer. The Copyright Law of 1790 protected him in this sense that his own works could not be reprinted without his permission and the subsequent remuneration. But it did not protect him from the competition of British or other foreign writers, since under the same law, their books could simply be reprinted in the United States without any compensation whatsoever. Thus an American publisher was more willing to make money by reprinting the works of a British writer with well-established reputation, whose books were likely to sell well, than to invest his money in the venture of launching a native author.

In his poem, “A Political Litany,” written in 1775, Philip Freneau prayed for his country’s deliverance from British dependence. Yet, the general character of his poetry, marking the transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, reflects the predominant trends in the British literature of that period. And his case illustrates the dilemma of writers in the young Republic: while looking for new subjects and new means of expression, they simply had to rely on the models and traditions of the Old Country. And in that sense, America was not going to be so easily delivered from British dependence.

It is just an academic problem to inquire now when it was that a distinctly American literature began. For some people, it began as soon as the first colonists who set foot on American ground wrote anything of literary intent. At the other extreme, someone might claim that it was only with the appearance of such truly American literary phenomena such as Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) that American literature came into being. For Philip Freneau and his contemporaries American literary independence was certainly not a purely academic problem. They were not only concerned about the future of American literature: they were already busy shaping it. Yet, for the reasons outlined above, this first generation of American writers did not achieve literary success.

The first true men of letters in America who, in various stages of their lives, became professional writers, belonged to a generation born after the American Revolution. Historically speaking, the most important of them were Washington Irving (1783-1859), James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), and William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878). And it is really amazing that the first two of these literary newcomers gained international renown, a fact which certainly helped to boost the image of American literature abroad. In 1820, the English critic, Sydney Smith, could still ask: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” With Irving’s and Cooper’s reputations firmly established, this kind of prejudicial attitude would be replaced by a growing awareness that the emergence of a separate, if not yet quite distinct, branch of English literature across the Atlantic was a fact that could no longer be ignored.

The character of Washington Irving’s writings and the reasons for his successful literary career have been perhaps most concisely described by Lewis Leary: “Few writers have successfully stretched a small talent further than Washington Irving. He was an alert, ingenuous man who liked to be liked, and who tried to write what other people expected of him.” Indeed, viewed in historical perspective, Irving does not appear as a literary giant, mainly because his ‘small talent’ prevented him from producing – with a few exceptions – really unique works, both in form and in

contents. On the other hand, he wrote well, and was for a long time one of the most widely read American authors. Even today popular anthologies of English-language prose on both sides of the Atlantic usually include one of his sketches or tales.

The youngest son of a New York merchant, Washington Irving, was reading law, when at the age of nineteen he made his literary debut. He contributed nine essays to the *Morning Chronicle*, edited by his brother Peter. In these essays he made humorous comments on various aspects of life in New York, which was then not only rapidly growing in size, but was gradually becoming another important cultural center along the Atlantic coast, even if Boston and Philadelphia were still in the lead. Irving's earliest essays betrayed some of the distinctive features of the style seen in his later writings: the smooth, well-balanced sentences and the specific humor. Immature as they still were, these first writings did not pass unnoticed.

In 1804 Irving left for Europe, where he spent almost two years, travelling, learning foreign languages, and reading. This was, in fact, the shortest of his European tours. Altogether he was to spend twenty-three years in Europe, almost one-third of his life. As someone put it, in the broadest sense the literary history of Washington Irving is that of his successive (and sometimes simultaneous) exposures to different European cultures.

On his return home in 1806, he passed his examinations for the bar and in 1807 helped defend Aaron Burr, former Vice-President of the United States, now tried for treason. But soon Irving was engaged, together with his brother William and James Kirke Paulding, in writing the *Salmagundi* papers which appeared irregularly from January 1807 to January 1808. They were a series of satirical essays and poems, modelled on the English journal *The Spectator*, and clearly betraying the influence of Goldsmith and Addison.

Irving's first literary success was *A History of New York from the Beginnings of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, by **Diedrich Knickerbocker**, published in December, 1809. Begun as a parody of a current history of the early Dutch settlers, the *History* turned into quite an original work, a truly humorous and partly fictitious account of life and manners in New Amsterdam, as New York used to be called. The book is now considered to contain that particular mixture of what Leary describes as "extravagance, mock gravity, and massive irreverence" which characterizes American humor in the works of such apparently different writers as Mark Twain and William Faulkner. The *History* made its author a popular figure at home. Soon, Irving and the whole group of his young literary friends in New York were referred to as the Knickerbockers. In England, the book gained favorable recognition from such men as Scott, Byron and Coleridge. Thus, at the age of twenty-six, Irving was already beginning to serve as "the first purely cultural ambassador from the New World to the Old."

The young writer's promising career was checked for a few years by adverse circumstances, and he did not write anything of major importance before setting out for England in 1815. In the frequently quoted introduction to *The Sketch Book* he explained that going to Europe he longed to escape "from the commonplace realities of the present" and to lose himself "among the shadowy grandeurs of the past." His native country was "full of youthful promise," but "Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age." Although Irving's references to Europeans as "the gigantic race" from which Americans "degenerated" are obviously ironic, they clearly reflect the hidden doubts and anxieties which were part of that larger confrontation with Europe and its culture, an important experience for many American writers. Some of them, like Irving, were strongly attracted to it, and used many of its rich resources in their own works. Others, like Henry James and T.S. Eliot, were to be so much affected by the culture of the Old Country that they finally returned there.

When *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, was first published in May 1819, it consisted of five sketches. One of them was "Rip Van Winkle," a typical product of Irving's indebtedness to European sources, and yet a strangely new American phenomenon. Encouraged by Scott to read German legends, Irving did so, and the story of "Rip Van winkle" is simply taken from an old German tale, "Peter Klaus." Yet, by transplanting it to the American soil, Irving not only made it the first American short story to be widely read, but created in Rip the prototype of the carefree American male, who forever remains an adolescent – a character frequently appearing in American fiction.

When the final version of *The Sketch Book* was published in 1820, it contained thirty-two essays and sketches, only four of which dealt with American themes. But among them was another story that is usually included in anthologies of American literature – "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," again based largely on Bürger's "Der Wilde Jäger," yet with the background of the Hudson River valley in a not so distant past and with references to the times of the first Dutch settlers. Although twenty-six sketches of the book are devoted to the English scene, which appealed to the British and American readers alike and made Irving's work extremely popular, his present reputation as an American writer rests mainly on these two highly derivative but truly American stories. With *The Sketch Book*, Irving reached the climax of his literary career. In this book, as in his other works, scholars have traced the influence of many English writers, and thus emphasize its imitative character. Yet here, all these influences somehow blend into a unique whole, characterized by a specific mood of romantic melancholy.

The remaining years that the writer spent in Europe were marked by the influence of different cultures. In 1823 he set out for Germany, travelling there in search of new materials, and then went to Paris, where he stayed for a year. The result of this trip was a volume of stories and sketches, *Tales of a Traveller*, published in 1824, and not very well received. Then, in 1826, he moved to Madrid, employed there as an attache to the American Legation. This was the beginning of a very productive period. Working very hard, Irving wrote voluminous histories, as well as *The*

Alhambra (1832), a collection of sketches in which the writer recorded his experiences in Spain. It was with this book, almost as popular as *The Sketch Book*, that Irving's literary reputation was firmly established. In 1830 he received a medal from the Royal Society of Literature and a year later was awarded an honorary doctorate at Oxford. So, when in 1832 he returned to New York, he was a famous man, welcomed enthusiastically by his countrymen.

The works of Irving's contemporary, James Fenimore Cooper, were even more famous, both at home and abroad. Unlike Irving's works, however, Cooper's are still widely read, though mainly by young people who anxiously follow the romantic adventures of Natty Bumppo and his Indian friends. His novels have also been for many years among the most frequently published works of American writers in Poland.

Although he was certainly the first major American novelist, Cooper was preceded by a number of native novelists whose works, although seldom read now, are briefly mentioned here for the sake of historical perspective. The beginnings of American fiction are usually traced back to Francis Hopkinson's *A Pretty Story* (1774) and Jeremy Belknap's *The Foresters* (1792), in which the establishment of British colonies in America is described in the form of political allegories. Much more popular were some of the sentimental novels in the Richardsonian tradition, where the heroines were usually poor, helpless females, seduced and then abandoned by merciless "black characters." The first of them was *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) by William Hill Brown, whose aim was "to expose the dangerous consequences of seduction." The most successful was Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), a heart-rending story indeed: by 1933 it reached an amazing record of 161 American editions.

It was also in the 1790s that two American authors began to write novels in other British fashions popular at the time: the Gothic and the satirical. Both of them, Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816), are regarded now as writers of higher stature than their contemporary sentimental romances. Brown's first Gothic novel, *Wieland* (1798), was – as Leon Howard put it – "a tale of terror which included death by spontaneous combustion, mysterious voices and multiplicity of senseless murders." Frequently described as the first professional author in the USA, Brown is also remembered as a champion of the rights of women which he defended in *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798), a treatise written under the influence of William Godwin.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the author of *Modern Chivalry*, six parts of which appeared between 1792 and 1815, is viewed by contemporary historians of American literature as an even more successful writer. His picaresque satirical novel, in the manner of Don Quixote and Tom Jones, deals with the adventures of Captain Ferrago and his servant Teague O'Regan, travelling in Pennsylvania. It provides an interesting description of manners in the early days of the American Republic and is one of the few American novels of that period which are still entertaining.

James Fenimore Cooper was not inspired by any of these native works of fiction; like most of his compatriots at that time he would rather read English novels. According to a story told by his daughter, one evening Cooper complained about the quality of an English novel he had been reading aloud to his wife, and said he thought he could write a better one. Challenged by her to do so, he soon began to work on a novel of manners with an English setting, a subject he was certainly not familiar with. Although Cooper supposedly chose one of Jane Austin's novels as a model, his own work, *Precaution* (1820), was but a pallid imitation of the original.

Whether or not we believe this story, the fact is that his resolution to start writing came quite unexpectedly. This former navy officer and then country gentleman was thirty-one when his first novel appeared, and before that date there were no indications whatsoever that in the remaining thirty-one years of his life he would produce thirty-two novels and a dozen or so other works, thus becoming one of America's most prolific writers.

Not discouraged by the poor reception of his first work, he was soon busy writing another novel, this time supposedly inspired by Walter Scott's historical romances. Yet, regardless of how much he might have owed to his English model, he made use of native historical material. However, unlike Scott's historical romances, Cooper's new novel dealt with quite recent history: the times of the American Revolution. So, while establishing the tradition of the American historical novel, Cooper was describing the events that still lived in the memory of the older generation. The action of *The Spy* (1821) is set in Westchester County, which the author knew quite well. As Carl Van Doren puts it, it is perhaps by chance that in this historical novel Cooper "hit upon a type of plot at which he excelled, a struggle between contending forces, not badly matched, arranged as a pursuit in which the pursued are, as a rule, favored by author and reader." Yet the novel also betrays some of the weak points in Cooper's literary technique, such as structural faults and shortcomings in character drawing, especially as far as women are concerned. With all its defects, Cooper's second novel was quite well received. Here was an American writer who was finally dealing with a truly American theme. And much of this positive attitude was also due to the fact that in Harvey Birch, the main hero of the novel, Cooper created a memorable character, the first in a line of simple, honest, brave and yet modest men who were to figure prominently in the best of his fiction.

Encouraged by the success of *The Spy*, Cooper began to work on *The Pioneers*, which was eventually going to be the first book in the so-called Leather-Stocking series, his most memorable literary achievement. Leon Howard believes that Cooper must have come to the conclusion that the book which most suited "his own interest and knowledge could be neither an imitation of Jane Austen nor of Walter Scott," but instead "an application of the approach of one to the material of the other... a semi-historical novel of manners on the American border, an examination of American life in its most distinctive and peculiar aspects, a story of the pioneers of a new world."

If the theme of *The Pioneers* was quite new to the American readers, it was even much more so to the Europeans. The popularity of westerns in our own times shows that frontier life is still part of the American myth as it is manifest in Europe, where people have always looked upon America as a kind of exotic land. The frontiersman and the Indian were certainly exotic creatures. So Cooper was offering the European readers just what they really expected from an American writer.

The action of *The Pioneers* takes place in Otsego County ten years after the Revolution, and the settlement described is that in which Cooper spent his childhood. In fact, Judge Marmaduke Temple, one of the main characters in the novel, is a somewhat modified portrait of the author's father. Thus the writer was describing again something that he knew very well, and one of the most valuable things about the novel, seen from historical perspective, is that it provides a convincing and vivid picture of frontier life in the early years of the Republic. One of the interesting features in this picture is the cosmopolitan character of the population of the frontier settlement, including an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a German. Even here, at the very border of civilization, America is shown as a melting pot of different races and nationalities.

In terms of literary craftsmanship *The Pioneers* is not a much better novel than *The Spy*. The love story is again not its strongest point, most of the minor characters are flat, and the structure is rather poorly balanced since the events of a single day take up almost half of the novel, so that all the plots are developed and brought to a climax rather hurriedly in the remaining chapters of the book. Unlike Poe, Hawthorne or Henry James, Cooper was not a conscious artist. He was always more concerned with what he wrote about than with how he did it. And if his works originated from instinct and not careful planning, then his instinct certainly did not fail him when in *The Pioneers* he brought to life Natty Bumppo. Like the famous frontiersman, Daniel Boone, who served as a model, this fictitious character had all the admirable qualities of a self-reliant woodsman, and in addition to that his own distinctive traits: honesty, loyalty, and essential goodness. No wonder that from the very beginning he captured the hearts of the readers. Leon Howard maintains that Natty Bumppo was „the first genuinely original character to be recognized in American fiction” and that he finally became „the most widely admired romantic hero in American literature.” Even if this view might not be shared by all historians of American literature, the fact remains that the popularity of this particular novel and the following volumes of the Leather-Stocking series is largely due to this central figure, accompanied by another memorable character, Natty's loyal friend, the most idealized among Cooper's "good Indians" – Chingachgook. *The Pioneers* brought its author an immediate success: 3,500 copies of the novel were sold on February 1, 1823, the day of its publication.

Into his next novel, *The Pilot* (1824), Cooper poured all the experience he had gathered during the five years he had spent at sea. It was the first American nautical novel of major importance. It is usually said to be a continuation of the English sea tales by Defoe, Smollett, and Scott. Some critics believe that owing to Cooper's first-hand knowledge of the subject matter *The Pilot* was, from the technical point of view, a much better sea novel than those of any of his English predecessors. Cooper's achievements as a sea novelist have been acknowledged not only by critics, but also by such masters of sea fiction as Melville and Conrad.

With the publication of *The Spy*, *The Pioneers*, and *The Pilot*, Cooper reached an important stage of his literary career. He was so popular now as to become a national figure. And, what is even more important, in these three novels he laid the very basis for most of his future works. *The Spy* was to be followed by several other historical novels, *The Pilot* was the first of a dozen or so sea tales, and *The Pioneers* opened the Leather-Stocking series, the most successful and the most lasting of Cooper's literary achievements. It consists of five novels, but the chronology of their plot does not correspond to the order in which they were written. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of *The Pioneers*, and knowing how much this was due to the romantic figure of Natty Bumppo, Cooper decided to make him the central character of another novel. But in *The Pioneers* Natty was already quite an old man, and his Indian friend, Chingachgook, died after having been rescued from a forest fire. So in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) Cooper makes Natty thirty-six years younger and brings Chingachgook back to life. This novel, generally considered to be the most successful and popular of Cooper's works, was followed by three other novels of the series (*The Prairie*, *The Pathfinder*, and *The Deerslayer*), in which the author moved back and forth in time, yet somehow managed to make Natty a uniform character throughout the whole cycle.

In 1826 Cooper set out for Europe with his whole family. His financial situation was quite secure now so that, like many other prosperous Americans, he could make the Grand European Tour. In Europe, Cooper stayed most of the time in Paris. It was there that he wrote *The Prairie* (1827), and *Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor* (1828), a semi-fictionalized report of an English traveller's impressions of America. This book, marked the beginning of the writer's growing interest in social and political problems. This, as it often happens, soon made him a somewhat controversial figure in his own land. Cooper's friendship with Lafayette and his support for the republican cause led to his growing involvement in French politics, criticized by his countrymen. Like some other American writers, he also strongly supported the Polish people in their struggle for freedom. The result of his increasing interest in political problems at that time were three historico-political novels dealing with European themes. They echoed in various ways the writer's support for the American system of democracy, based on "concessions of natural rights made by the people to the state for the benefits of social protection."

Ironically enough, upon his return to America in 1833, the writer, who had been out of touch with everyday realities of political life at home, found that the Jeffersonian type of democracy he favored had been transformed into the Jacksonian one, which he did not like. In *A Letter to His Countrymen* (1834) Cooper voiced his disappointment with the state of affairs in his country. The fullest statement of his political views appeared in *The American Democrat*, published in 1838.

It might have been the more congenial atmosphere of Cooperstown, where the writer finally settled in 1836, or simply his instinct which made him complete the Leather-Stocking saga with two more volumes, *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), included by critics among his best and certainly most popular novels. In the remaining period of his life, Cooper's creative power was by no means reduced. In ten years he wrote sixteen novels and some minor works, though none of these later novels was ever to be widely read.

With all reservations about his style, Cooper's position in the mainstream of American fiction seems to be quite secure. As a historical novelist, romancer of the western frontier, author of sea novels, and social critic he was a pioneer in some of the major areas that were to be developed by the coming generations of American novelists. Viewed in historical perspective, Cooper was undoubtedly the first American novelist of international reputation who dealt with distinctly American themes.

Another writer widely admired in Europe was Edgar Allan Poe who, however, shared very little else with Cooper. In his study of Poe's work, Edward Wagenknecht says that the story of the writer's life reads like a Gothic novel in which hardly anybody behaves normally. As someone else has remarked, Poe's biography seems to be a tale invented by Poe.

There are still many things we do not know about Poe's strange and tragic life though none of the missing biographical data may have any significance for a critical assessment of Poe's literary achievements. "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia" will remain among his best tales regardless of what we may ever learn about the exact circumstances of their origin. But it would be interesting to know whether they were essentially the product of the writer's rich imagination or – at least partly – of his „drug-inspired“ hallucinations, as some critics are inclined to believe.

Born in 1809, son of itinerant actors, Poe was orphaned at the age of two. Taken into the home of John Allan, a wealthy merchant in Richmond, Virginia, he was never formally adopted, and for one reason or another did not manage to work out a satisfactory relationship with his foster father. This led to frequent periods of estrangement, and it is hard to ascertain which of the two parties was more to blame for this. Fortunately enough, Edgar's relations with Mrs. Allan were quite different. But on the whole, even during the time when he was, formally speaking, still a member of the Allan family, he experienced quite a few adversities.

Upon entering the University of Virginia in 1826, he fell in love with Elmira Royster, but their engagement was soon broken due to her parents' interference. This was the first in a series of unsuccessful or simply unfortunate relations with women in Poe's life. The young man's university career was also cut short because of the debts he ran into as a result of gambling. His foster father decided not to provide any longer for Edgar's university education, thus limited to just one term. The inevitable conflict between the two men made Edgar leave Richmond. He went to Boston, where he published anonymously his first volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827). Unable to find a job, the young man enlisted in the army, from which he soon wished to be released, but his release was made on the condition that he would eventually enter the military academy at West Point. Before he went there, Edgar had arranged for the publication of his second volume of poetry, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (1829). Poe's education at West Point, begun in 1830, was rather brief: when he realized that he could no longer expect any financial support from his foster father, he deliberately got himself expelled from West Point. From then on, until his death in 1849, probably caused by delirium tremens, the writer's life was one of continuous struggle for existence.

It is rather ironic that simply because he had to try to make a living, Poe turned to writing tales, which many scholars consider to be his greatest literary achievement. He had begun his career as a poet, and after his expulsion from West Point he still managed to publish another volume of *Poems* (1831), containing the early versions of some of his best works, such as "Israfel," "To Helen," and "The City in the Sea." Yet he must have realized soon that for financial reasons he had to produce what was in demand at that time. There was an expanding market for the short story. In his study of Poe's life and work, Vincent Buranelli emphasizes the fact that the young writer "recognized and exploited the prevailing drift in the reading habits of Americans." Poe found that most of his compatriots did not have the time and patience to read bulky novels, nor were they satisfied with the "trivial fiction," printed in daily newspapers. The short story was certainly one of the most important forms of prose which filled the pages of monthly magazines, and it was there that Poe published some of his earliest tales. In 1833 he won a prize for "MS Found in a Bottle." Two years later he became editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, published in Richmond. This was the first of his several editorial jobs, none of which he was able to hold for a long time. He suffered from frequent states of depression which led to occasional sprees, and it was because of drinking that Poe soon lost his job and went back to Baltimore. There, in 1836, he obtained a special license to marry his aunt's daughter, Virginia, who was then just thirteen years old. Although they lived supposedly for two years as „brother and sister," this unconventional marriage must have caused some disapproving comments, to say the least.

Yet the writer's literary and editorial talents obviously outweighed the oddities of his character and habits, since he was soon re-employed by the *Messenger*. During the relatively short period of his work as editor of this magazine, from which he was finally discharged in 1837, Poe accomplished quite a lot. He published eighty-three reviews, six poems, four essays, and three short stories; among them "Berenice." The large number of reviews indicates the predominant character of his literary activity at that time. As F. O. Matthiessen points out, Poe's reputation before the publication of "The Raven" in 1845 was mostly that of a magazine critic. Together with some of the more "formal" essays, like the famous "Philosophy of Composition," Poe's literary reviews constitute the main body of his literary criticism, in which he formulated some of his basic views on prose and poetry.

Even if Poe's first editorial job could hardly be described as a "period of triumph," (in fact there were no such periods in his whole life) he obviously learned what was needed to make a magazine successful. During his work for the *Messenger*, its circulation rose quite rapidly. Aware of his talents, both as editor and contributing writer, Poe eventually began to think of publishing his own magazine, a dream he would realize just once, for about three months. It was one of those strange things in Poe's life: will all his unusual talents and abilities, he simply could not make a living.

Having lost his job in Richmond, Poe moved with his family to New York, where he published a novelette, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). In 1839 he went to Philadelphia. His stay there marks the most fruitful and original period in his literary career. Employed as co-editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, he contributed to it many of his own writings, including one of his best stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher." In Philadelphia he also published *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), his first collection of short stories, of which "Ligeia" was probably the most important. The two-volume edition of the Tales contained 25 stories, which represent more or less all of Poe's characteristic types of short fiction. Poe's versatility in this domain, shown in the stories published until 1840, made him soon the only American writer so far who has ever invented a new form of literature. Having left *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, he became an editor of *Graham's Magazine* and it was there that he published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," generally considered to be the prototype of the detective story. "The Purloined Letter" and "Thou Art the Man" also belong to this category. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe introduced C. Auguste Dupin, the detective, the first in a long line of memorable characters created by some of the best writers of crime fiction. In the same story, and in "The Purloined Letter," he made the narrator Dupin's companion, thus establishing the Sherlock Holmes-Dr. Watson pattern to be repeated again and again ever since.

Poe worked for *Graham's Magazine* until 1842. During this short period he not only wrote a number of tales, including "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Masque of the Red Death," but published some of his most interesting reviews. One of the most important among them was his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, in which he emphasized the significance of the unity of effect as a characteristic feature of what he believed was a successful short story:

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then in his very first step has he committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale, its thesis, has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed – an end absolutely demanded, yet, in the novel, altogether unattainable.

Thus, just as in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe believed that a literary work in which a desired single effect was to be achieved had to be short – read at one sitting. From the point of view of the development of American fiction the important thing is that Poe not only worked out some of the basic theoretical principles of the short story, but, as a conscious artist, put them into practice. Not all of his short fiction reach the highest level he was aiming at, but most critics emphasize the fact that in some of his best stories the unusually strong emotional impact on the reader is achieved just because of that unity of effect Poe was trying to attain.

In the spring of 1844 he left for New York, where he was employed as a literary critic by the *New-York Mirror*. In 1845 he published another edition of *Tales* and "The Raven," one of his most popular poems. It was also at the beginning of 1845 that Poe became editor and then owner of the weekly *Broadway Journal*, but his attempts to keep it alive failed. Soon after that he moved to a cottage at Fordham, which was to be his last home. "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Philosophy of Composition" were the most important works published in the same year.

Having lost a regular job, the writer soon ran into financial difficulties, and experienced real poverty. Virginia's death of tuberculosis on January 29, 1847, left the poet in despair. She was the fourth of the women, so dear to him, who died during his lifetime. The first one was his mother, whom he did not even remember. Then, Mrs. Stanard, mother of his friend Robert, whom he described as "the first purely ideal love of [his] life." Another woman he

loved, his foster mother, Mrs. Allan, died five years later, in 1828. These experiences must have influenced Poe's sensitive psyche, and are certainly reflected in both his prose and poetry, where the loss of a beautiful and loved woman is a frequent motif.

In the final, hectic and tragic period of his life, Poe still continued writing. In 1847, the only important thing he published was the poem "Ulalume." In 1848 appeared *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, in which he presented his view of the universe. In the same year he gave a lecture on "The Poetic Principle," published posthumously in the form of an essay. His last poems, "For Annie," "Annabel Lee," "Eldorado," and "The Bells," appeared in 1849.

Viewed in historical perspective, Poe's tales are usually considered to be his most lasting contribution to American literature, and are still certainly the most widely read. Among these tales, his "arabesques," in which suspense is based on such strong emotions as horror and terror, seem to be the most effective and memorable. In these stories Poe was obviously following the European Gothic tradition, and even in America he had been preceded in this respect by Charles Brockden Brown and Philip Freneau. Yet, as he explained, the terror of his stories "is not of Germany, but of the soul." So, no matter how much he was indebted to his predecessors, what he certainly added to the Gothic tradition were the psychological elements, including his unusually effective descriptions of the various mental states, often verging on the abnormal, experienced by the heroes of some of his tales. The case of Roderick Usher is a typical example.

Although Poe's contribution to the development of American fiction is the primary objective of this introductory essay, at least some space should be devoted here to his poetry. He wrote only fifty poems, a rather small number in proportion to the body of his critical essays on poetry. It has to be remembered, however, that busy with the editorial work and filling the pages of various magazines with his stories, Poe did not write any poems for quite a long time: fourteen years elapsed between the publication of the last collection of his early poems (1831) and that of "The Raven" (1845).

On the whole, Poe's literary works are placed in the Romantic tradition. This is perhaps not always so obvious in his short fiction, but in poetry his indebtedness to the English Romantics is so strong that, as Leon Howard puts it, "He apparently tried to be – not simply to write like – Lord Byron and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and, to a lesser extent, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley." Yet, in spite of how much Poe owed to his Romantic predecessors, he is usually regarded as one of the most original poets.

In "The Bells" Poe produced an onomatopoeic effect probably unequalled by any other poet writing in English. He was able to do this because of his extreme sensitivity to the sound of words, which makes some of his poems quite unique in melody. But it was also because of this unusual talent that he was described by Emerson as "the jingle man," someone more concerned with sound than meaning. The controversy about Poe's poetry runs mainly along these lines, and much of the criticism voiced by Emerson was caused by some of Poe's own views on poetry. In 1831, in his "Letter to B–," he made the following statement: "A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having for its object an indefinite instead of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained: romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with indefinite sensations, to which end music is an essential, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception." In his later work, "The Poetic Principle," (1848-1849), Poe defined poetry as "The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty." In "The Philosophy of Composition" (1848), where he described in detail how he had composed "The Raven," Poe said: "Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." Whether or not this essay is to be taken literally (i.e. whether the poet actually did write "The Raven" in this way or simply used his "ratiocinative" method to show how it should have been written), it is an important exposition of Poe's poetic theories.

The narrow range of feelings and ideas in Poe's poetical works has often been criticized – as often as his artistry has been praised. His "art for art's sake" approach has been the main target of criticism not only in reference to his poetry but also to his prose. Wagenknecht's study of Poe's literary reputation shows that, on the whole, English writers have been more enthusiastic about him than his compatriots. In fact, his reputation has been even higher in non-English-speaking countries, especially in France, where he exerted an important influence on the Symbolists.

In spite of all the controversy about Poe's work, his great role in establishing a truly American literary tradition cannot be denied. His contribution to the development of the American letters has been summed up most aptly by Sculley Bradley:

During a short life of poverty, anxiety, and fantastic tragedy Poe achieved the establishment of a new symbolic poetry within the small compass of forty-eight poems; the formalization of the new short story; the invention of the story of detection and the broadening of science fiction; the foundation of a new fiction of psychological analysis and symbolism; and the slow development, in various stages, of an important critical theory and a discipline of analytical criticism.

Bernard Koloski

Chapter 3: Transcendentalism: Emerson and Thoreau

American Renaissance

American literature came of age in the 1850s. The first great writers in the United States appeared at that time and these writers articulated for the first time the essential – if often contradictory – truths of the American national character. The long search by artists to identify American subject matter and American artistic form had come to an end. What scholars call the American Renaissance, America's period of artistic awakening, had begun.

In much of Europe the Romantic Movement was fading, but its influence in America was still profound, so American Renaissance literature is almost exclusively Romantic literature. All of the major books which were published during the country's literary explosion in the early 1850s are Romantic books: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. America's literary Renaissance, its Romantic Movement, coming three generations after the country achieved its political independence, spoke to many concerns. It explored what it meant to be an American, what it meant to be an American artist. It looked at the American government and the country's political problems, especially the problems of war and Black slavery. It brooded over what writers saw as an emerging American materialism and conformity. It probed the ways in which waves of new immigrants were changing the character of the population and bringing strange customs and traditions to a nation that was just beginning to recognize and articulate what its own traditions were. It examined sexuality and, driven in large part by Walt Whitman and by Emerson's friend, Margaret Fuller, studied the relationship between men and women in America. And, as we would expect in a romantic movement, it absorbed itself with nature, with the power that nature exerts on our lives.

Individualism

Yet it is individualism, a focus on individual experience, which pulls together these concerns of American writers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and acts as a motif running through many of the major literary texts. "Nothing is at last sacred," Emerson says in "Self-Reliance," "but the integrity of your own mind." Thoreau, as was his custom, makes Emerson's abstraction concrete: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions," he notes as he describes his solitary life at Walden Pond, "perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away."

And Whitman, taunting his readers because they might be "proud to get at the meaning of poems," declares:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess
the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there
are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on
the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

There is no substitute, these men insist, for direct, individual experience and their words echo sentiments that have been part of America and American literature for two centuries.

Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) wrote essays and poems that are remarkable not only for what they embody or what they say, but for their influence on others. Hawthorne, Melville, Fuller, Whitman, Dickinson, and especially Thoreau knew Emerson's work and needed to come to terms with it as they wrote. The seed, the center, the essence of Emerson is clearly stated in his famous "Self-Reliance" essay: "Trust thyself," he says, "every heart vibrates to that iron string." "In self-trust," he argues elsewhere, "all the virtues are comprehended."

His message is both original and derivative, purely American yet obviously European. Emerson had absorbed and been powerfully moved by the writings of the English Romantics Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. But he uses his Old World sources to articulate a New World wisdom. In Europe, he insists, in spite of its philosophers, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, the individual person exists for the glory of the nation; in America the nation exists

for the glory of the individual person. Or at least, so it should be, so it must be, he maintains. It is not only the New World. It is the new way of seeing, the new way of living.

Each of Emerson's works expresses some specific aspect of this general perception. "The American Scholar" essay (1837) focuses on education, describing what a student in America needs to become. It crystallizes what Emerson had recognized to be the truth of his time: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." So, he says, an American student must make himself into a "Man Thinking" if he is in the "right state," if he understands what the times, what the modern world demands of him. If, however, he is in the "degenerate state," if he is still, as were so many students in the past, a "victim of society," then he will become "a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking." His words constitute America's intellectual (as distinct from political) declaration of independence.

The student learns by studying nature, the world around him. The student learns from books, too, but he uses them to guide, to inspire, but not to control, to replace his own thought. "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst," Emerson declares. "I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite rather than a system."

But it is not so much books, Emerson knew, that draw Americans out of their own orbit. It is much more likely to be religion, Christianity. In his powerful "Divinity School Address" (1838) he goes to the heart of the matter, affirming his own belief in the existence of God while firmly insisting that faith "cannot be received at second hand." It cannot be taught to a person, be passed on to a person, by someone else: "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing."

We must each of us find our own faith. We cannot receive it from family, community, society, tradition, or church. Jesus Christ understood that, Emerson claims, in a much-quoted, much-argued-about paragraph, but Christ's followers did not:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man... But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the sane, in the next, and in the following ages!... The idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes.

When people recognize the truth which Jesus Christ understood, that God is in every man, they will learn to trust themselves. They will no longer need Christian churches to teach them about God. "I am divine," they will say, "and my life is a miracle."

So for Emerson, self-trust means trust in an inner power, a power that lives in each person: "When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love," Emerson says, and he calls this power "the Oversoul" in his essay of that name (1841). He describes a power, a force that is for him beyond Christianity, beyond all religions, creeds and dogmas.

In "The Poet" (1844) Emerson shows how self-reliance leads to great art. The true poet is a person with the great insight that self-trust brings. He sees the presence of the Oversoul in himself, in others, and in all things as well. He finds words for what he sees. He is "the sayer, the namer" as much as the seer, he "re-attaches things to nature and the Whole," and so restores their beauty, washes away their ugliness. The poet "knows and tells" the truth that his self-trust lets him see. He does not just play with rhymes, rhythms, or meters. "It is not metres," Emerson declares, "but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem – a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing." There is in American literature no better description of what makes literature good.

That "metre-making argument," that truth that the poet sees, creates its own form. The true poet does not shape his insight to fit forms that other poets have used (and for Emerson in 1844, this means European forms used by European poets). "The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet." America, Emerson could see, was waiting for its great poet, its seer who would create new American forms to express the American truth.

Emerson knew he was not himself that great poet. His power and influence lie in his essays. He, more than anyone else in his time, articulated early nineteenth-century American confidence, optimism, and determination to do things in a new way. Yet many people find in Emerson a shallowness, almost a blindness to some aspects of reality. And it may be that he was not able to understand adequately the existence of categorical evil. "Good is positive," he says. "Evil is merely privative, not absolute. It is like cold, which is the privation of heat." He believes that evil is merely the absence of good.

Emerson on the subject of good and evil is probably wrong. But his influence and his ability to inspire remain. Emerson gave voice to something quintessential about America, perhaps about modern life. His words have had a

tremendous effect on millions of people, and his demand that each person – and each nation – learn self-reliance as a way of life still rings true in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Transcendentalism and Margaret Fuller

Shortly after Emerson published his early essay, “Nature” (1836), in which he first described the ideas that were the basis for all his best work, a group of his friends formed a loose association called the Transcendental Club. For the next four years, the members of this club met – irregularly and informally – to discuss Emerson’s idealistic perception of life and to articulate a rather vaguely-defined philosophy which came to be known as Transcendentalism. More of a call to action than a precise, logical line of thought, Transcendentalism urged people to break free of the customs and traditions of the past and to listen to the spirit of God inside them. Like nineteenth-century Romantics in England, Germany, and elsewhere, Transcendentalists distrusted reason and preferred intuition, distrusted society and preferred the individual, distrusted the restraints of tradition and preferred the freedom of nature.

Emerson remains the best-known of the writers associated with the highly-influential Transcendentalist movement, but also read widely today is Emerson’s close friend, Margaret Fuller (1810-1850). For two years, Fuller edited the Transcendentalists’ magazine, *The Dial*, where she published her essay, “The Great Lawsuit: MAN versus MEN; WOMAN versus WOMEN” (1843), America’s most eloquent early argument for sexual liberation, for men and women being freed from the social roles sex imposes on them.

Fuller uses Emerson’s doctrine of self-trust as a basis for examining the condition of women in the nineteenth century. Men, she notes, are coming to recognize how traditions and the past have prevented many of them from achieving their potential. And while men also are victims of society, they can at least participate in the creation of the demands that society makes upon them: “Early I perceived,” she writes, “that men never, in any extreme of despair, wished to be women.” “What woman needs,” Fuller continues, “is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely.”

Thoreau

The Transcendentalists separated morality from Christianity and placed it firmly in nature. For two centuries American Christians had been taught that the source of morality, of whatever was virtuous in human behavior, is in God and that people come to know God and thus what is good through the church, through the community, through a vision of life that is essentially collective rather than individual. The Transcendentalists changed all of that – at least for many intellectuals in their generation, and nowhere is that change to be seen more clearly than in Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854).

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) is one of America’s most demanding writers, not because his work is difficult to read, but because he asks so much of his readers. He wrote *Walden* not to entertain or inform. He wrote to change people’s lives. He wrote to inspire, liberate, transform. Reading *Walden*, he believes, should be a spiritual experience for them.

Walden is a record, Thoreau insists, not of what he said or thought but of what he did. For two years he lived alone in a small cabin he built himself among the trees on the shore of a pond called Walden – on property owned by his friend Emerson. He wrote much of the book while he lived at Walden, then finished it after several years of further work on the manuscript. He went to the woods, he says in one of the most famous passages in American literature, “because I wished to live deliberately,... I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep...”

Walden is Thoreau’s passionate description of how he learned at the pond to “live deliberately” and “deep” and to know life “by experience.” It is for Thoreau an urgent task and not one commonly undertaken. “The mass of men,” he says, “lead lives of quiet desperation,” largely, he argues, because they are doing what others taught them they must do, because they think they have no other choice. But he is optimistic and determined: “It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof.”

“What old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new,” he asserts, and follows with a sentence American university students have been quoting to their elders ever since: “I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors.”

Thoreau’s advice is put forward simply (simplicity is a very important matter for Thoreau) and straightforwardly – we need to renew our lives. We “must learn to awaken and keep ourselves awake,” and, he adds significantly, “not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.” What we believe is possible for ourselves determines the limits of our being, and it is within our power – it is, in fact, our duty – to shape our own being, our own lives. “It is something,” Thoreau notes, “to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do.”

Walden describes the details of Thoreau’s life in the woods, and every moment matters to him. “I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.” But such a “religious exercise” for Thoreau is not the repetition of a prayer, a gesture, or a ceremony originated years or centuries ago by

other people. It is an expression of his own awareness of the importance of the present moment, an awareness of what Emerson would call the “Oversoul” living and acting within him.

So his record of his life at Walden is not for Thoreau a statement of philosophy or a collection of wise sayings. It is a sacrament, a symbol of a spiritual reality. To use Christian terminology, his life at Walden was for Thoreau a “baptism,” a purification of his old life, an initiation into a new life. It was a “communion,” a common union with the spiritual. But unlike Christian sacraments, Thoreau’s religious acts are designed – to quote R.W.B. Lewis on the subject – “to expose the individual again to the currents flowing through nature, rather than to the grace flowing down from supernature.”

Thoreau’s perception of his life in nature as sacrament has made him, along with Emerson, the most recognizable of Transcendentalists. We could, in fact, think of Transcendentalism quite simply as a mid-nineteenth century need to see beyond what is before our eyes, to see a deeper significance, a transcendent reality. And it is that which is beyond the vision of society, tradition, family, religion. It is the source of his optimism and his great energy.

It is also the source of his outrage over social injustice. His essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” (later titled “Civil Disobedience”), and his “Plea for Captain John Brown” are eloquent protests against social wrongs – a war with Mexico in the former and the institution of slavery in the latter. He can see the moral error in an unjust war and in legal slavery even if the government cannot see it, even if much of the church, much of the Christian community cannot see it. What is moral, what is right, must be found in the heart of each individual person, Thoreau argues. It is to reestablish his connection with his own heart, his own moral truth, that he retreats temporarily from society (he returned to his village life after two years at Walden). He is seeking refreshment, renewal, rebirth in nature. He wants to reawaken himself to the “essential facts of life”: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth,” he demands. And truth for him, for Emerson, for the Transcendentalists is that which is within the individual.

Some readers find Thoreau even more unbearable than Emerson, and for the same reason. The man does not understand evil, they say. He does not understand human weakness, human limitation. But others, and there are many, find great inspiration in Thoreau’s work. His book is a record of how he found his own turning point, and he urges us to do the same, but in our own way. He is not suggesting that we leave our lives and take up residence in the woods. Just the opposite: “However mean your life is, meet it and live it,” he says. “Do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are... Love your life, poor as it is.”

It is not **where** we are, **where** we look, Thoreau suggests. It is **what** we are, **how** we look. Our lives **can** change, and change radically, he insists, but we need to open ourselves to the possibility of such a change. “Only that day dawns,” he says, “to which we are awake.”

Even Emerson could not have phrased it better.

Bernard Koloski

Chapter 4: Romantic Fiction: Hawthorne, Melville

Introduction

Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and the Transcendentalists wrote mostly essays. They spoke directly and clearly. They said what they believed and then trusted that reasonable people who listened would come to see the truth.

And in general they were right. The great mass of Americans did not act on the specifics of Transcendentalist writing. But most people embraced the basic message. The Transcendentalists had, in fact, articulated what America already possessed – a trust in the individual, in democracy, in the possibility of continued change for better.

But there were other Romantic writers in America who were not optimistic, who saw problems more than opportunities, and who were especially sensitive to human frailty, weakness, limitation. These men spoke not for the majority but for a skeptical, troubled minority. Their truth would not be so easily welcomed by the mass of Americans. These Romantics – Hawthorne and Melville are the best of them – wrote not essays but fiction. They described not what is but what might be. They spoke not directly but obliquely, ambiguously. And they offered a vision of life which is essentially dark.

Fiction and Symbolism

The first great American fiction is heavy with the fantastic and fabulous – with white whales and scarlet letters, with wicked Italian scientists and brilliant French detectives, with houses that sink into the earth and men who sleep for twenty years, with mysterious Wall Street clerks who say little more than “I would prefer not to” and larger-than-life Western explorers who love Indians more than white men. And much that is fantastic becomes consciously, deliberately symbolic as well, picking up additional meanings, often ambiguous meanings, sometimes even contradictory meanings. Melville interrupts his narrative in *Moby Dick* and devotes an entire chapter to listing all the possible meanings, all the possible significance which the white whale might have for various people.

Moby Dick is an extreme example, but also a representative one. Most of the best American fiction is written in a symbolic form. It is through symbolism that America’s best writers typically choose to approach their readers.

Fiction and Transcendentalism

American writers of fiction portray through the symbolism in their stories and novels the existence of a reality beyond what is visible, thus putting into practice a central notion of Transcendentalist thought. They express in fiction the truth of Emerson’s words in his early essay, “Nature”:

It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch.

Hawthorne and Melville create in their works “correspondences” between “appearances” or “natural facts” and “states of the mind” or “spiritual facts.” These writers, in predictable Transcendentalist fashion, replace the traditional Christian symbols – Christian allegories would be more accurate – with their own symbols. They substitute their individual moral vision for the vision of the community. And they sometimes turn Christian allegory on its head, using the old Christian emblems – water and fire, whiteness and blackness – to suggest alternate, even opposite, correspondences. They often create the impression that they regard Christianity as a useless moral force but a valuable storehouse of symbols for their stories.

Fiction: The Influence of Bunyan and the Gothic

So in a sense the symbolism in American Romantic fiction is an expression of Transcendentalist thought, though in a larger and more important sense it is also the expression of European Romantic thought. In Germany, Goethe said it this way: „Truth, identical with divinity, can never be directly apprehended by us; we see it only in the reflection, in the example, the symbol.” And other European influences are equally clear.

One major source for American writers is British: John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Christian allegory that, along with the Bible, was among the most popular books in eighteenth and nineteenth century America. Hawthorne wrote a short story called “The Celestial Railroad,” a parody of Bunyan’s book, and both Hawthorne and Melville used literary techniques that Bunyan used – stories built around dreams, stories of emblematic pilgrimages or journeys, stories, like “Young Goodman Brown,” in which the hero seems to suggest someone other than himself, seems to represent a general type of person, in this instance, a young good man.

And writers of fiction could hardly escape the influence of the European Gothic romance which – capturing something unleashed by the revolutions and other upheavals in Europe – directed its intense energy to fantasy, to the sensational, the supernatural, to terror and madness. Like the medieval romancer in which its roots are planted – and such writers love medieval settings for their stories – the Gothic romance is for the most part shorter than the more mature novels being written in England and Europe at the time. It is more interested in action than in the development of character, and the action is often fantastic, allegorical. Characters appearing in Gothic romances tend to have mysterious origins, they tend to be ideal, exaggerated, obsessed people, more like types than like fully-formed human beings, and they tend to relate to one another in primitive and – once again – abstract, symbolic ways.

Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) wrote short stories and novels especially concerned with people's relationships with one another. And, because he shared something of the Puritans' belief in a depravity within human beings, because he was sensitive to the existence of evil within himself, his fiction explores for the most part the dark side of human relationships.

Hawthorne's characters struggle with pride and intellectual arrogance and egotism. They are often isolated, lonely people, torn between what Hawthorne called "head," the intellect, and "heart," the emotions, separated not only from other people but from the other part of themselves. And they often suffer from the effects of their ancestors' relationships with one another. They are haunted by the past and the influence of the past upon the present.

Hawthorne is best known for his creation of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, but many of his most memorable characters appear in short stories which he collected during his career into four books: *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), *Moses from an Old Manse* (1846), *The Snow Image* (1851), and *The Tanglewood Tales* (1853).

One of the most tortured of Hawthorne's creations is the hero of the short story, "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent," whose obsession with himself and lack of concern for others takes the form of a snake which lives inside him and savagely bites his inwards. Nothing at all will drive the snake out. Only when this totally self-absorbed man sees his estranged wife and when love for her causes him to forget himself does the snake leave his bosom.

Egotism isolates this man from others, separates him, and so it is, for Hawthorne, sinful. In Hawthorne's stories sin consistently means a state of separation – from people, from God, from oneself, a condition of coldness to the needs of people, an inability to respond to people. It is such a state that the clergyman in "The Minister's Black Veil" recognizes in himself and so wears a veil over his face as a sign for others. Each person, the minister knows, is in some way willfully isolated and "loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin." Yet the person who knows his own sin knows the sin of others, too. "I look around me," the minister says, and "lo! on every visage a black veil."

All people are sinful, Hawthorne's stories suggest. Separation is a part of the human condition and not in itself necessarily irreversible – the serpent of egotism can leave a person's bosom. But excessive cultivation of the intellect intensifies isolation, insulates people from their own emotions, makes them all "head," no longer able to respond at all to other people. Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, is such a person, and so to a large extent is the father of the sensuous and beautiful Beatrice in "Rappaccini's Daughter," a man so dedicated to his love of learning that he isolates his own daughter through, as Hawthorne says, "the fatality that attends all such efforts of perverted wisdom."

The hero of "Ethan Brand" is among the worst of all – a man determined to learn if there is any sin which God cannot forgive. There is, Ethan Brand learns, an "unpardonable Sin" – "The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims!"

Hawthorne clearly does not share the contention of those who, like Emerson, argue that evil is merely the absence of good. He sees not only a world in which evil exists, but one in which all people carry a share of it within themselves. And American individualism aggravates the situation by encouraging people to see themselves as different from the general human trait. Two of Hawthorne's best stories deal with the initiation of innocent people into the sinful but real life of the community, a community which is corrupt but at the same time more honest with itself than is the uninitiated. "Young Goodman Brown" describes a person's deliberate attempt to learn the truth about that dark side of himself which he knows exists. His symbolic journey into the forest – and for Hawthorne the raw unrestrained nature of the forest is the symbolic location of evil – is a journey into his own character. But when learning to see the sin in himself teaches him to see it in others, including his wife, he becomes a discouraged, hopeless person.

Less clear – because the hero sees himself as "clever" and is not aware of his innocence – is the journey of Robin in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" from the tranquil life of a village to the violent, rebellious life of a pre-revolutionary New England port. Robin comes to the port city in search of a relative who will help him get started on his "rise" into success. But he soon learns that his relative is himself a fallen and broken man. Robin's laugh at the end of the story when he finally meets his humiliated and agonized kinsman has left generations of readers puzzled. Is Robin laughing at his relative, himself, his old life, his present life, his future? Has he, like Young Goodman Brown, lost hope after his initiation or can he, as his seemingly kind companion suggests, "still rise in the world" in spite of, or because of his new knowledge?

Hawthorne does not answer the question, but some suggestions about his likely response are contained in his novels where he has space to explore matters more carefully. In addition to his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, and an

early apprentice novel called *Fanshawe*, Hawthorne published three novels, two of which are fascinating examples of American Romantic fiction.

The House of the Seven Gables (1851) appeared just a year after *The Scarlet Letter*, and Hawthorne thought it was a better balanced book because it was dark, like the story of Hester and Arthur, but light and touched with humor as well. It is, in fact, a story about light itself – about the “grey” of the past and the “broad daylight” of the present – and about time, about the way that the evil of one generation is carried through time to the next, about how the dead continue to haunt the living.

The images of light and time find symbolic expression in the person of Holgrave, a young photographer, a man whose new profession has taught him to use light and time to produce what people in 1850 called “daguerreotypes”: “I make pictures out of sunshine,” he says. Holgrave and Phoebe, the young woman he loves, are both caught up in the history of the Pyncheon family of Salem, Massachusetts, with its enormous old house of seven gables in which two aged surviving aristocrats live. The house has been cursed for generations, and Hawthorne describes the attempts of the young people to let their present love for each other conquer the ancient hatreds the house embodies.

A large part of the difficulty Holgrave and Phoebe face is the house itself – though the word has the same extended meaning that it does in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” One of the characters in the book puts it this way:

What we call real estate – the solid ground to build a house on – is the broad foundation on which nearly all the guilt of this world rests. A man will commit almost any wrong – he will heap up an immense pile of wickedness, as hard as granite, and which will weigh as heavily upon his soul, to eternal ages – only to build a great gloomy, dark-chambered mansion, for himself to die in, and for his posterity to be miserable in.

So while the problem for the young lovers in *The House of the Seven Gables* is individual human sin, evil, and corruption, sin assumes a social character as well, and Holgrave and Phoebe posit the democratic impulse against the residual evil of aristocracy, and they question the morality of private property which passes from one generation to the next.

It is Hawthorne’s interest in the social, as distinct from the individual, character of sin that gives direction to *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). The novel, not altogether successful, is focused on a Utopian socialist community that is obviously based on an actual Transcendentalist community called Brook Farm which Hawthorne himself lived at for several months. The action is presented through the eyes of a poet and, like so much of Hawthorne’s work, is pictured as a struggle between a perception of life that is optimistic and one that is pessimistic, between what Emerson called “the party of hope” and “the party of memory.”

Central to the novel are a Utopian reformer named Hollingsworth who insists he is following the will of God for the good of the community, but is one of the Hawthorne’s great egotists, suffering from an “unpardonable” intellectual pride; a remarkable, memorable woman named Zenobia who, like Hester Prynne and Beatrice Rappaccini, is one of Hawthorne’s sensual, sexually-powerful beauties; and a Puritan woman named Priscilla who, like Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is Hawthorne’s woman of innocence set in contrast with his dark woman of experience.

Perhaps because Hawthorne himself was too close to the reality of his life at Brook Farm, *The Blithedale Romance* lacks the sustained intensity of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, but in *The Marble Faun* (1860) Hawthorne creates a moving narrative that is the fullest development of some of his major themes.

Like “Young Goodman Brown” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” *The Marble Faun* is the story of a man’s transformation from innocence to experience. Donatello, the Italian Hero living in Rome, is called a “faun” because he has posed for the statue of a faun done by the American sculptor Kenyon (Miriam and Hilda, the other principal characters, are painters) and because his character is faun-like, of “the Golden Age, before mankind was burdened with sin and sorrow, and before pleasure had been darkened with those shadows that bring it into high relief and make it happiness.”

Donatello’s transformation is linked to his passionate nature and his passionate love for Miriam who even more than Hester, Beatrice, or Zenobia is a dark sensuous beauty with a tremendous sexual magnetism, Donatello intuitively knows – he is a man of “heart” rather than “head” – Miriam’s great fear and hatred of a mysterious stranger who has been following her, and when that stranger appears suddenly one night, Donatello impulsively hurls him over a cliff to his death. The experience of sin changes Donatello. He now shares the guilt of Miriam who has urged him on to his deed, and that guilt spreads to Kenyon and even to the dove-like American innocent Hilda, whose prototypes are Phoebe of *The House of the Seven Gables* and Priscilla of *The Blithedale Romance*.

Hawthorne raises directly – but does not necessarily endorse – a possibility in *The Marble Faun* that he has hinted at throughout his career. As Kenyon and Hilda discuss the change in Donatello, Kenyon notes that “in the black depths the Faun had found a soul, and was struggling with it towards the light of heaven.” And he adds:

Is sin, then... like sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have obtained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than his?

Again, Hawthorne does not answer the question, but the possibility of the “Fortunate Fall,” a person’s fall from innocence into the wisdom if not the happiness of experience, a fall into a fuller, more sympathetic humanity, remained a fascinating notion and was taken up by Hawthorne’s neighbor, Herman Melville.

Melville

America has no Shakespeare, no writer who commands almost universal recognition as being the very best the nation has produced. But most critics agree that few artists in America have written books as powerful as those of Herman Melville (1819-1891).

Melville’s greatness was not recognized in his lifetime. Like Hawthorne, his first novel was a popular success, but unlike Hawthorne – who followed *The Scarlet Letter* with other successful books and whose literary reputation has never been seriously challenged – Melville’s audience left him as he matured into his craft and, though he published eleven prose books, along with shorter pieces and books of poems, it was only thirty years after his death that people began to realize just what it was he had managed to achieve.

The America of Emerson and Thoreau was, perhaps, not ready in the 1850s for Herman Melville, not prepared to hear what he had to say. The world as Melville sees it is not one to be particularly cheerful about. Melville is not a dark pessimist – his best work is laced with humor. Neither is he especially optimistic. There is a bright side to life, he says, but there is twice as much gloom. “The sun hides not the ocean,” Ishmael notes in *Moby Dick*, “which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true – not true or undeveloped.”

Melville expands the metaphor in the “Two Sides of a Tortoise” sketch of “The Encantades” with his famous description of a huge, ugly tortoise whose shell – over two-thirds of the animal, and all that a person usually sees of it – is black, but whose underside is a bright golden color. However, Melville says:

Every one knows that tortoises as well as turtles are of such a make, that if you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves, and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side... The tortoise is both black and bright.

Melville writes about survival. His fiction describes people who search for a way to live in a predominantly dark world. Not all of them succeed. Those who do are people who find harmony, balance, people who unite the claims of their mind with those of their heart. It is not an accident that only Ishmael survives the journey of the *Pequod*. His is the only mature, balanced person left on the ship, the only true person, the only person who has found the harmony and development that will let him continue to live.

Moby Dick (1851) is Melville’s masterpiece, the fullest expression of his insights. Chronologically, the book lies precisely in the center of his works of fiction – five of his books were published before *Moby Dick*, and five after. And it is a turning point in the development of his craft. *Moby Dick* and the first five of Melville’s works of fiction are first-person narratives; the opening sentence of *Moby Dick* reads: “Call me Ishmael.” The last five books are third-person narratives.

This shift in person ironically enough reflects the opposite of what we might expect – Melville’s move from the outside into inside, from books of personal narrative, with the emphasis on individual adventure and action, to books which are increasingly introspective, meditative, brooding over the universal condition of human beings. And as Melville turns inward, he turns as well to symbolism and ambiguity as forms of expression; the sub-title of *Pierre*, his 1852 novel, is *The Ambiguities*.

Typee (1846), his first book, a thrilling, exciting adventure story, was an instant success. The narrator describes his escape from an intolerable life aboard a whaleship, his four months of captivity on a South Seas island by an apparently cannibalistic tribe called the Typees, and his dramatic rescue from this island. It is the first of Melville’s stories of survival, but it is also a fascinating look at a primitive life which is free from the influences of civilization – and of Christianity.

In part the novel is autobiographical. Though Melville read carefully the accounts of earlier visitors to the South Seas islands and incorporated them into his book, his actual adventures as a young man during various voyages in the Pacific colored *Typee*, along with almost everything else he wrote. And those adventures affected not only his subject matter but also his attitude toward Western culture. *Typee* does not paint the primitive people as either noble savages or evil eaters of human flesh. The Typees are both bright and dark. But the novel illustrates how the coming of the white man, of Western civilization in the form of traders and especially missionaries, was beginning to corrupt the Typee culture.

Melville intensifies such illustrations in *Omo* (1847), which continues the adventures of the Typee narrator on the island of Tahiti. The great villains in both *Typee* and *Omo* are Protestant missionaries who are determined to plant Western ways and especially Christian guilt and shame among the South Seas people, and Melville ran into trouble with his publisher because of his attacks on missionaries and his passages describing the sexual conduct of the savages he visited. He had to remove parts of the English edition of *Typee* before it could be published in America.

Two kinds of characters that Melville incorporates in *Typee* and *Omo* have parallels in *Mardi* (1849). Fayway, the lovely Typee companion of the narrator who at one point in the book uses her robe – her only piece of clothing – as a sail and herself as a mast, in *Mardi* is presented as two women: the distant Albino Yillah, and the dark, dangerous Hautia. And Toby, the narrator's fellow sailor and deep friend in *Typee* appears as Jarl in *Mardi* (and later in *Moby Dick* as the unforgettable Queequeg). But *Mardi*, though it begins as a further development of the South Seas adventure story, becomes allegorical: it is an obscure, difficult, and frustrating novel.

Melville followed it the same year with *Redburn: His First Voyage*, the story of a young boy from rural New York who travels to Liverpool, in England, and back. Like Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," *Redburn* describes a person's initiation into the harsh reality of life, a loss of innocence. The Robin-like Redburn finds cruelty, drunkenness, and suicide in the sailors he meets. In Liverpool he discovers poverty, starvation, injustice, and a great gulf between the rich and the poor. And on the voyage back to America on a ship full of destitute emigrants escaping from their life in Europe he sees the filthy cabin conditions which create disease, fever, and many deaths.

Melville's vision in *Mardi* and *Redburn* becomes darker, his questioning of Western values more insistent. But his audience became less patient. People found *Mardi* impossible and *Redburn* better, but not up to the standard of *Typee* or *Omo*. In 1850, trying to recapture that audience, Melville published *White Jacket*, one of his very best books, and his last popular one.

White Jacket combines the powerful narrative immediacy of *Typee* and *Omo* with the growing blackness and anger of *Mardi* and *Redburn*. It describes the trip from the South Seas to America of someone very much like the *Typee* and *Omo* narrator – however, the journey is not on a whale-boat but on a naval vessel, a war ship. As he would do again in *Moby Dick*, Melville presents the ship as a microcosm of society – in this instance an authoritarian society under naval military rule. Melville's attack on the cruelties and injustices of the naval military system and its officers is vicious – but he does not endow the ordinary sailors themselves with a romantic gentleness; they too are corrupt and cruel. There is both institutional and individual evil in Melville's universe.

The narrator of the novel is called White Jacket because, unlike all the other sailors, he has no dark coat to wear on the cold ship's deck, so he makes himself a garment out of white sail cloth. The whiteness of his coat isolates him from the other crewmen and makes him excessively visible and vulnerable to the officers, who assign him most of the ship's worst jobs. Even the intervention of his friend Jack Chase – who functions in the novel as the narrator's deep friend, like Toby in *Typee* and Queequeg in *Moby Dick* – does not ease the narrator's sense of separation, which is the result of his innate innocence, or his immaturity, or possibly his faith (it's not clear which), any or all of which find an emblem in his white jacket.

But life on the ship, life in this microcosm of society, educates the narrator. His recognition of the injustices and the cruelty of people, the arbitrary authority of government (there is nothing at all democratic in the operation of the ship), the obvious homosexuality of some of the crew – these change him, mature him, develop him. One day when he is high on the mast a sudden movement of the ship tosses him into the water and, after nearly drowning, he cuts himself loose from his white jacket and is free. His "Fortunate Fall" from innocence to experience, his "baptism" into the reality of life, lets him live in his far-from-ideal society. He achieves a better sense of balance. He survives.

Most readers of Melville's next book will see parallels between the education of White Jacket and that of Ishmael. But *Moby Dick* did not become popular when it appeared in 1851. Many reviewers found it chaotic, confusing. And *Pierre* (1852), Melville's long, contemplative Gothic tragedy about the descent into destruction of a young idealist, was flatly rejected by almost everybody. Attacks on its author flourished: "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY," one headline read.

Pierre upset people not only because it deals with incest and atheism or because it is obscure, difficult, exceptionally demanding. The book is a bitter denunciation of Transcendentalism, in fact of all schools of philosophy, and a condemnation of those who produce verbal generalizations about life while others suffer in desperate misery, poverty, and hopelessness.

Pierre seemed to temper some of the worst of Melville's passions, and he turned to writing short fiction which he collected in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). It is through his shorter pieces that Melville first reaches many people today, and his stories "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" are among the finest in American literature. *The Piazza Tales* includes also two unusual, memorable sketches – "The Encantadas," which describes in bleak but mythic terms the Galapagos Islands off the coast of South America, and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," which uses the imagery of pregnancy to explore the position of many women in nineteenth-century society.

In 1855 Melville published *Israel Potter*, a novel about the American Revolution, and then produced *The Confidence-Man* (1857), his last full novel and one of the great treasures of American fiction – though a book which hardly anybody in the United States seems to have read when it appeared.

As he had done in *White Jacket* and *Moby Dick*, Melville creates in *The Confidence-Man* a microcosmic society aboard ship, this time a Mississippi river-boat, and presents that society hopelessly self-serving, egotistic, and interested primarily in money-making, though covered by a thin layer of pseudo-Christianity. As if he were writing short dramas rather than a novel, Melville presents different characters in different sections of the book – people in one section are replaced by others in the next. Connecting them all is a mysterious “confidence-man,” a swindler, a fraud, who – though precisely what is happening in the book is never entirely clear – uses various disguises to cheat everyone on the boat. It may be, however, that there is more than one confidence-man. Or it may be that the confidence-man is not a man at all but the devil.

The Confidence-Man is Melville’s strongest attack upon the foundations of Western values, especially the value of individualism and self-confidence. The swindler on the river-boat appeals to each person to have faith in him, to trust him, to have confidence in him. He appeals to each person’s individual goodness, each person’s decency – and then steals whatever is most valuable to that person.

Unlike *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man* is easy to read, and also unlike *Pierre*, it upset nobody. By 1857 Melville’s audience had deserted him. In the years before his death Melville wrote mostly volumes of poetry: *Battle-Pieces* (1866), about the Civil War, *Clarel* (1876), about a trip to the Holy Land, and others. Shortly before his death he turned once more to prose and wrote *Billy Budd*, a remarkable story not published until 1924.

Though a painful narrative, *Billy Budd* sounds a note of acceptance, reflecting Melville’s emphasis throughout his career upon the necessity of harmony and balance. And it is such an emphasis that is a major source of Melville’s great power for readers in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Herman Melville sees the horror of modern life and tells the truth about what he sees, but he is not overwhelmed or destroyed by the sadness of that truth. Like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, he survives.

“Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man!” Ishmael says in the famous “Try-Works” chapter of the novel, and he speaks, as if Melville himself were speaking, words which stand at the center of *Moby Dick*, at the center of all of Melville’s best work: “There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness.”

Bernard Koloski

Chapter 5: Whitman and Dickinson

The United States, Emerson wrote in 1844, is ready for the appearance of its great poets. When they arrive, he predicted, they will come with a “new thought,” a “whole new experience to unfold” – an American thought, an American experience. And they will have to break away from European forms and seek American techniques, he insisted, because really great poetry has “a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”

He himself had written poetry that was fresh and vital, but not, he knew, great. Edgar Allan Poe had created some superb poems that continue to be read throughout the world, yet they too did not sufficiently clear away the past and set a new direction for the nation.

Two people, however, were alive at the time who would emerge as the artists Emerson was waiting for. A decade after Emerson wrote, Walt Whitman would publish his *Leaves of Grass*, creating with a single book a poetic language unmistakably American. And Emily Dickinson would begin to write the verses which would ultimately establish her as a major American poet.

Whitman

For Walt Whitman (1819-1392) everything depended upon *Leaves of Grass*, the book of poems he first published in 1855 and then rewrote five more times and published a total of ten times before his death. Whitman wrote other poems and some highly respected essays, but *Leaves of Grass* was his life’s work. It is through this one book that Walt Whitman became known as one of America’s greater writers.

Leaves of Grass is Whitman’s continuous expression of his identity – his identity as a individual person and his identity as an American. For Whitman the two are the same thing. When he begins his “Song of Myself” – perhaps the best poem in the book – with the famous lines,

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,

he means what he says. To discover oneself, Whitman believes, is to discover one’s nation.

Whitman sees himself as a representative democratic person, as a microcosm of all that is America, so in offering us *Leaves of Grass* he is offering us himself – and he is offering us America as well. To be sure, his America is now at least a century older. Whitman wrote before the United States became a world power, before the two world wars, before the age of electronics and space travel, before all the marvels and all the horrors of the twentieth century. But Whitman’s identity, his everpresent “I,” his archetypal American personality, captures something permanent, unchanging about the United States. *Leaves of Grass* encompasses and integrates the concerns of the other American Romantics – the individualism of Emerson, the spiritual intensity of Thoreau, the “head” and “heart” emphasis of Hawthorne, the balanced survival of Melville, even some of the feminist vision of Fuller. It reconciles the transcendentalists’ optimistic hopefulness with Hawthorne’s and Melville’s power of blackness. “I am not the poet of goodness only,” Whitman declares. Also, he accepts. He accepts what he finds in himself and what he finds in America. He captures in his poems the largeness of the American continent and its landscape, the variety of people who live there, the range of experiences these people have, the cultures, religions, passions, and interests which shape them.

To describe the identity of his nation, Whitman knows, is to describe a great pluralism and to absorb that pluralism into himself. His poems deal with New Englanders, western trappers, and black slaves; with singers, machinists, immigrants, scientists, children, brides, drug addicts, eagles, and various other animals, birds, fish, and insects – even with locomotives and underwater telegraph cables. It is the freedom Whitman discovers in such pluralism which is the heart of his identity – and that freedom expresses itself both in what he says and how he says it, both in the content of the poem and in its form.

One great result of Whitman’s removing from himself „limits and imaginary lines,” of his “divesting” himself, freeing himself of “the holds that would hold” him is his ability to treat openly – for the first time in American literature – the subject of sex. “I am the poet of the Body,” he declares, “and I am the poet of the Soul” – and the two for him are one.

The body shapes the soul, he believes. He persists with great courage in rejecting an ever-present nineteenth-century American Christian dualism which taught that people’s greatest responsibility in life was the perfecting of their souls, that the sensual, the animal, the physical, the sexual in people was to be controlled, overcome, even, if necessary, destroyed. Whitman approaches the subject directly, clearly, as in “I Sing the Body Electric.” There is a passionate acceptance of the physical and the sexual in him:

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
 I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and
 heart,
 Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.
 I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
 Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles and each part and tag
 of me is a miracle.

So identity for Whitman – his identity, his nation’s identity – is dependent not only on a great pluralism and a great freedom but upon an awareness of the beauty, the wonderfulness, the “miracle” of the human body. It is, Whitman believes, part of the genius of all which is best in his America – an unwillingness to continue any longer on a new continent what he sees as a fatal European separation between the physical and the spiritual.

Whitman does not trivialize the spiritual. He does not reject it. “I believe in you my soul,” he says. But he adds, “the other I am” – he means the body – “must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other.” Like Emerson Whitman believes in what Emerson calls the “Oversoul,” the presence of God in each person. But for Whitman the body in which that presence dwells is as good as the presence itself, and in Section 5 of “Song of Myself” he describes through sexual imagery the mystical union of the body and the soul. For Whitman to know that God is within him is to delight in the holiness of himself and the holiness of other men and women.

Leaves of Grass vibrates with Whitman’s natural love of people. Whitman articulates the essential human need for intimacy and love. Whitman sees people through the eyes of love, and he reaches out with affection to touch those he loves. Much of *Leaves of Grass* is about touching, about physical contact, because Whitman seeks closeness, union, intimacy: „To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand,” he writes, and continues: „Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity.” Whitman’s identity, America’s identity is **continuous**, dynamic – it both is and is **in process** of becoming. Whitman is not seeking a „new” identity. He is not dissatisfied with what he is. But he knows that life means growth. And for him adult human growth comes through intimacy, through touch.

Yet he knows also that the process of life and growth leads ultimately to death. And this too he accepts:

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?
 I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die,
 and I know it.
 I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash’d
 babe, and am not contain’d between my hat and boots,

He is not flippanant or foolish, he is not thinking about a Christian heaven after death, and he is not tired of living – no American writer has ever been more in love with life than is Walt Whitman. But he sees that there can be no acceptance of life without an acceptance of the inevitability of death. And he sees that facing the reality of dying intensifies the sheer joy of living.

Two of his best poems look pointedly at death. The lovely and haunting “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is a poem of reminiscence describing how a young boy learns about love – and about his mission in life – through observing the death of a mocking-bird and the mourning for the bird by its mate. In discovering death along the shores of the ocean, the boy comes “out of the cradle” – out of his childhood – into the beginnings of maturity and into a recognition of his destiny as a poet.

And “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” – one of the great elegies in the English language – is a musical outpouring of Whitman’s grief over the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Whitman makes the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac a symbol of his love for the slain President, suggesting that while Lincoln is dead, the poet’s love will continue to renew itself – like the Spring flower.

So Whitman’s identity, which begins with the freedom of America’s pluralism, and which encompasses all that is physical and spiritual, finds some of its fullest expression in the poet’s confrontation with death. Whitman accepts and has a deep respect for the birth – growth – death cycle. It is one of the major subjects of his poetry. And it is the basis for the organizational principle upon which he builds his *Leaves of Grass*.

The book begins with a group called “Inscriptions,” followed by “Song of Myself.” Then comes the “Children of Adam” section, poems like “I Sing the Body Electric” about the love – usually the sexual love – between men and women, and the much-argued-about “Calamus” section, Whitman’s auto-erotic and homo-erotic poems, followed by individual poems, including “Song of the Open Road” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” a beautiful visionary poem in which Whitman projects himself into the future.

Next in *Leaves of Grass* comes the “Sea Drift” section which includes “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and the poignant little poem “Tears,” followed by a grouping including “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” about Whitman’s love of, yet impatience with, science, and “The Dalliance of the Eagles” – a remarkable short poem in which Whitman describes an ideal male-female relationship by a picture of two eagles making love in mid-air, each

sustained by her or his own wings, each passionately joining with the other, yet maintaining a separate identity: “She hers, he his.”

Then Whitman places his “Drum-Taps” section, his Civil War poems – one of the best is the tiny “Reconciliation” – and his “Memories of President Lincoln” section which includes “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” And, finally, there comes the “Autumn Rivulets” section with two poems often taught to children – “There was a Child Went Forth” and “Miracles” – along with a separate poem called “Passage to India,” Whitman’s best song to the glory of science and technology, and the “Whispers of Heavenly Death” and “Songs at Parting” sections.

The book moves, then, from beginnings, through a recognition of self and of sexual power, through a wide range of adult experiences of growth, including exploration, war, and sorrow, and into old age and approaching death. And many of Whitman’s poems are themselves cyclical – “Song of Myself” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” are the best examples. They introduce subjects and themes and images and patterns, and then circle back upon themselves.

Whitman is so concerned with cycles for reasons of both content and form. Like the greatest poets in any language, Whitman is creating new poetic forms for himself – forms which will reflect his new insights, his new wisdom, his identity as a representative person in a new nation. It is, he knows, not alone **what** he says in his book which will embody the character of America. It is **how** he says it.

So he makes his poetry expansive, large, pluralistic; he makes it free from so many of the poetic limits of the past – people often call it the first “free” verse; he makes it sensual, stimulating, even sexual; he makes it spiritual – it sounds at times almost like a bible for the new world; and he makes it cyclical.

Whitman thoroughly understood and thoroughly agreed with Emerson’s belief that the great American poet would create a new American poetic form, that he would refuse to imitate older forms, European forms, that he would create in a poem “a thought,” to use Emerson’s words, “so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”

Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is experimental because he sees America itself as engaged in a great democratic experiment. It is simple and direct and free of formality because he sees the American character as such. Whitman does not reject poetic devices, especially those he learned from a careful reading of the Bible, which was for him – as for so many major American writers – the greatest of books, the greatest of influences. He loves repetition and assonance and alliteration; he loves lists – catalogs, as people often call them (and some of those catalogs, like those in section twenty four of “Song of Myself,” are among the most beautiful in the English language); he loves a rhythmic ebb and flow in his lines. But he uses these devices in new ways for poetry in English.

Walt Whitman is no god. He is not free from faults and problems. Some of his poetic experiments simply do not work. At times he seems unable to tell the difference between what is good and what is not good in his work – many scholars think his earlier versions of *Leaves of Grass* are better than his later ones. His lists are occasionally too long, too repetitive, even maddening. He sometimes argues the reverse of what he argued earlier – though that for him is no particular problem: “Do I contradict myself?” he asks. “Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

But he is not blind to reality. He sees the full truth – bright and dark, good and evil – about America as clearly as any writer has seen it, before or since. There are sorrows on this earth which cannot be washed away, Whitman realizes. But he seeks to heal what hurts he can heal, to reconcile what differences can be reconciled, and to celebrate all which – alongside the wrongs and the hurts – deserves to be celebrated. He is, in the final analysis, the most influential poet America has to offer the rest of the world.

A Second Path For Poetry: Emily Dickinson

Walt Whitman looked outward at all of America. He sang his songs loudly and clearly for the whole country.

At the same time, in a small New England village, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) looked inward at her own experience. She wrote quietly for herself and for a very few close friends: “Distills amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings.”

Seldom has an artist so thoroughly understood and so precisely expressed what she was setting out to do. The six words are a nearly perfect description of why the best of Dickinson’s poems are so surprising and delightful and satisfying and memorable, of why Emily Dickinson is one of America’s major poets.

In her writing, Dickinson “distills” sense out of her “ordinary” life and what people would think of as its ordinary “meanings.” Her existence had an outer – if not inner – simplicity: She rarely left Amherst, the little Massachusetts village where she was born. She maintained, especially as she grew older, intimate friendships with a very small number of people. She read, for a major writer, relatively few books – the Bible, Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson, the Brontës, Thoreau, Emerson, a handful of others.

And in ways her life was even less than “ordinary.” She renounced some of what most people she knew would have experienced. She did without a lasting, loving relationship with a man. She let go of the comfort and security of religious faith: at age 17 she found herself unable to declare to people that she had experienced the inner “conversion” necessary in her community to be a professing Christian, so she no longer attended church services. And she apparently did not seek the fame that publication of her poems might have brought her, although it seems likely that publishers

would not have printed without changes her eccentric and radical-looking punctuation and capitalization and word choices. While she wrote 1775 poems that people know of, only seven were published in her lifetime, and not until 1955 were all of them printed as she had written them.

So Dickinson renounced a richness of outer experience. She writes:

Renunciation – is a piercing virtue –
The letting go
A Presence – for an Expectation –

For her, “letting go,” doing without, renunciation is a central part of her experience of life. “Heaven,” she writes, “is what I cannot reach.”

What she **can** reach, or reach **for**, is truth – at least the “Expectation” of truth. The agonizing renunciation in her outer life has for her the “Virtue” of forcing her to look inward to perceive the truth of her inner life. “Truth is so rare a thing,” she writes, „it is delightful to tell.” Her poems are the telling of her truth. And much of that telling is, as she says, “delightful,” such as this poem about how a “discerning” person’s perception of what is “Sense” and what is “Madness” may well be different from what the “Majority” of people think and may well make that person “dangerous,” no longer “sane,” in the judgement of that majority (it is poem number 435; Dickinson did not write titles for her poems, so T.H. Johnson numbered them in more or less chronological order):

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

Or this poem (number 1624) about how the frost, which she calls – it is a famous description – the “blonde Assassin,” kills off a flower as an “Approving God” stands by:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at it’s play –
In accidental power –
The blonde Assassin passes on –
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God.

Other poems, like her famous pieces about a snake (986) and a locomotive (585), also delight readers, even children, with their charming simplicity and freshness of language. But much of her best poetry is painful, both for her and for her audience. She writes often about anguish, despair, suffering, fear, denial, loss, grief, death. She seeks the truth about these subjects with great emotional courage, with great strength, and without self-pity. Few writers have been as honest with themselves as has Emily Dickinson and yet as gentle in articulating that honesty to their readers. This poem (1129), with its New England sense of restraint, is a good example:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies –
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

The writings of Emily Dickinson, then, are the result of her “psychic reconnaissance,” as one critic calls it, her deep study of her inner life brought about by the deprivations of her outer life. Her work is, she says, “my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me.”

It is a passionate letter. Emily Dickinson knew what so many writers of the twentieth century have learned – that to be deprived of something is often to increase the desire for that thing; to do without is often to intensify the degree of sensitivity to whatever is missing; to have less is often to have more. “Success is counted sweetest,” she writes, “by those who ne’er succeed.”

Dickinson seems, despite her simple life – some people would say her exclusive, even her eccentric life – surprisingly close to many contemporary Western writers who see pain rather than joy as the central truth of people’s lives, who depict people as searching for their own truth in a world which has lost its religious certainty and which no longer offers people the security of lifetime emotional bonds within marriage and a family.

Without certainty or security, but also without despair, and with good humor, she looks for her own way. She examines fear (the opening lines of 512):

The Soul has Bandaged moments –
When too appalled to stir –
She feels some ghasty Fright come up
And stop to look at her –

She studies great pain (the opening of 241):

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it’s true –
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe –

And she is willing to confront even the subject of her own death. “Because I could not stop for Death,” she begins a poem (712), “He kindly stopped for me.”

She explored happiness as well, but her great sensitivity and her passionate response to life make happiness at times almost too much for her to bear (the beginning of 252):

I can wade Grief –
Whole Pools of it –
I’m used to that –
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up ray feet –
And I tip – drunken

Dickinson “distills” from the “ordinary Meanings” of joy, pain, fear, and death the “amazing sense” of her poems. She filters her life through her art. And though the poetic techniques she uses are worlds apart from those Walt Whitman was working with at the same time, they are in her hands as original and effective. Dickinson turns her back on most of the literary devices of her day. She finds her basic rhythmic pattern in the folk line, a form used for centuries in English by writers of ballads, hymns (Dickinson knew well the Protestant hymnbooks so important in New England church services), and children’s verse. Compare the rhythm of these old verses:

Jack and Jill ran up the hill
To fetch a pail of water

with these of Dickinson:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –

She uses the folk line with great metrical skill, combined with a passion for the precise word, the fresh image. She is a master – one of the greatest in the English language – at putting a common word in an uncommon position. Consider the word “Heart” in line 5 of this poem (1078) about all the activity that takes place in a house after somebody dies:

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth –
The Sweeping up the Heart

And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

Many of Dickinson's forms are as surprising as her insights: nobody else sounds like her.

And that is a most important point. Though she is sometimes thought of as being separate from the American Renaissance because the fullness of her work appeared in print nearly a hundred years after much of the writing of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman, Dickinson is the most representative of all the Renaissance writers in one fundamental sense.

She is the embodiment of nineteenth-century American individualism. Both what she says and how she says it is so purely her own, so very much the result of her self-reliance, her independent personal and artistic judgment. In finding her way in life and in poetry she follows neither traditions nor religions. She is, of course, traditional in her use of very old poetic techniques. And she is religious in that she cares deeply about the often painful question of what our lives are all about, what they mean. But she is both of these only in the larger context of being herself. She puts all that is the past and all that is the opinion or belief of other people into the framework of her own personal experience and her articulation of that experience in her poetry. As much as any of the Romantic writers, she lives by Emerson's contention that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

And, like all the major Romantic writers, Emily Dickinson transforms, through the brilliance of her perception and her craftsmanship, life into art. The freshness and the power that Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville brought to the creation of prose, she and Walt Whitman brought to the creation of poetry.

Teresa Kieniewicz

Chapter 6: Mark Twain and the American Themes

Any discussion of Mark Twain's fiction should begin with an assertion that he is more than a humorist or an author for children. However true, neither term defines his title to greatness; the fact that he is both adds largely to the esteem and popularity he enjoys.

Samuel L. Clemens, generally known as Mark Twain, is the first thoroughly American writer. Unlike his literary predecessors and contemporaries, Twain, by conscious choice, turned his back upon Europe. He held no reverence for ancient institutions and customs of the Old World and refused to celebrate its art, history, and cultural tradition. Consequently, he also rejected the established patterns and conventions of English literature that shaped American writing up to the Civil War. Instead, he turned to his native land seeking to explore its resources in the realm of subject matter and language. American reality of his days offered him ample material for story telling. His American character types, localities, problems and situations are drawn with vividness and familiarity of the first-hand experience. Much of Twain's reputation, however, is due to his daring experiment in language. He was the first to investigate the possibilities that American idiom offered for serious writing. He found the colloquial speech of common Americans a flexible, colorful, if sometimes vulgar medium of expression, more stimulating than elaborate cadences of educated and polite British English.

Twain's fiction derives from several sources of which the South-western humor was, perhaps, the most fruitful. These camp or bar-room stories constituted the most striking and colorful element of the frontier folklore. The contrast between the custom of the frontier and that of the settled areas offered endless possibilities of fun-making with a naive newcomer as the favorite butt of practical jokes and tricks. The most popular "tall tales," i.e. stories of boasting, bragging and exaggeration, were elaborate exercises in wit and imagination in which the ability to outdo the opponent and maintain listeners' attention counted as high as the skill of ending them with a totally unexpected twist or punch line. Thus "to spin a good yarn" was no small achievement. Unembarrassed by their vulgarity, violence, or brutality, these narratives mixed comically with nonsense, zest for life with bustling energy – physical as well as verbal. This odd combination of their characteristics gained them first attention, then popularity among the reading public until they came to be recognized by general and literary magazines of national circulation as a separate subclass of short stories.

The post-Civil War literary scene was dominated by magazines which offered beginners a chance of reaching the reading public, establishing reputation, and gaining a regular, if modest, income. These practical reasons were of major importance, first of all because few American publishers were willing to take the risk of publishing a novel by an unknown writer when reprinting a famous English novelist meant an assured financial success. Moreover, there was also a financial consideration of selling the same piece twice – first to a magazine, and later to a publishing house. Like most of his contemporaries, Mark Twain wrote largely for the magazines, for all these reasons.

Twain's narrative method evolved out of, or was stamped by, his early exercise in travel sketches. Immensely popular, these personal accounts combined extensive descriptions of foreign places, scenery, monuments, and curiosities with detailed practical advice about how to profit by and enjoy travelling while avoiding its hazards. The sketches served the increasing numbers of American travellers as first guidebooks to Europe; to those who could not afford a European tour, they offered excitements of vicarious experience. Their informative character made them acceptable to the strict moralists and pragmatists who held fiction in contempt. Travel books contained facts, while the personal touch of sentiment or humor rendered them entertaining at the same time. In many ways *Innocents Abroad* (1869) is a typical travel book of the day. It grew out of Twain's letters for the San Francisco *Alta California* and the New York *Tribune*, written during his cruise to Europe and the Holy Land in 1867. Twain assumes in them a mask of total ignorance to ridicule his fellow travellers as much as their European guides. He stubbornly refuses to worship the Old World just because it is ancient. His mocking irony blends with genuine horror at poverty and abuses he perceives there. Yet his continuous praise of everything American sounds almost defensive. Twain must have found the narrative structure of a travel book congenial, for he used the same temporal and spatial arrangement of episodes in his later fiction. In a way, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is but a record of another innocent's travel abroad.

Twain's fiction is largely autobiographical. His novels and stories retell much of his personal experience as if his own memory was the richest and most reliable store of life-like situations, characters, and incidents. The proportions between factual and fictional parts vary considerably from a condensed but fairly straightforward account of his apprenticeship as a cub-pilot in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), to a consciously composed and elaborate tale of his ideal boyhood in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Somehow he can be faithful to minute details of setting, behavior, or speech and idealistic or nostalgic about the past. This peculiar combination of realism and idealization brings him close to what is referred to as "local color" fiction which, for all the differences of mood and purpose, was a spontaneous response to the main current of events that carried the post-Civil War America away from rural, provincial sectionalism toward national politics and economy. Like Twain, colorists described places and people they knew at first hand and loved, the world which was rapidly disappearing under the pressures of expanding industry and urbanization. Whether written for pure entertainment or criticism, they record the fondly remembered peculiarities before these fade

away. This desire to preserve gave incentive to minutely accurate descriptions of the life of the region and an earnest effort to note down oddities of local speech. These two elements bring the entire movement, and Mark Twain, within the mainstream of American realism.

Twain's personal dream about good old days in Hannibal, Missouri, or on the Mississippi did not blind him to the cruelties, violence, and injustice of the ante-bellum South. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) is, perhaps, the most perceptive accusation of the inequities of slavery. In the story of Tom Driscoll and Chambers, Twain does more than depict a slave's ordinary trials and miseries. He tries to assess psychological damage done permanently to both the Black and his white master. The novel is also memorable for the excellent portrait of Roxana, a slave because she is one-sixteenth black. Roxana is fully alive in all shades of human emotions: cunning and passionate, she is as convincing in her tenderness, blind devotion, and self-sacrifice as she is in fear, anger, or mischief.

A comparable exploration of the essential humanity of a slave lies at the core of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). After many days spent on the raft, and many a misadventure, Huck becomes convinced that "Jim is white inside." This concise phrase sums up his recognition of Jim's humanity which leads him to risk his own salvation in helping Jim escape. Writing *Huckleberry Finn* Twain was keenly aware of the prevailing convention which presented the old South as a pastoral country of beautiful women, well-mannered gentlemen, eternal yet benign sunshine amidst rose and magnolia blossoms. In short it was the land of high breeding, tender sentiment, and chivalry – all of which Twain exposed as superficial if not directly false. In sleepy Dawson's Landing (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*) fear and greed erupt in crime, while St. Petersburg (*Tom Sawyer*) seems almost Edenic, except for violence, murder, and robbery lurking on its verge. *Huckleberry Finn* contains a terrifying picture of the South made up of rogues and their victims, of the kind but stupid, and smart but unscrupulously wicked. Huck relates his story of cruelty, violence, greed, duplicity, and vice with a calm detachment of a child so used to wickedness that it fails to shock or frighten him. His experience of the South contradicts the sentimental approach of popular fiction. Hence, by the end of his journey down the river, Huck identifies the "civilized" society with falsehood and corruption which leave no room for the values of the raft – friendship, freedom, honesty, peace. His final decision "to light out for the Territory" is an act of affirmation as much as of renunciation. The idyl of the raft could not continue forever – the further South they drifted the fewer their chances for a positive solution to their adventure. Twain was also too well aware that the American society he knew and described could not accommodate the ideal relation such as the one between Huck and Jim, nor could it accept Huck's new self-consciousness. The only way out was to send Huck to the wilderness "ahead of the rest." Thus Huck joins the long line of American innocents or Adamic heroes who, having suffered trials and tribulations in established society, leave it for a more primitive but sane and moral world of nature.

Twelve- or thirteen-year-old Huck is big enough to survive more or less on his own but he is still a child, still in need to be protected and guided. Confronted with evil or malice he is as helpless as Jim, wit being his only weapon against abuse. It is significant that in every new confrontation Huck invents a new name for himself and a new, larger family story in which he is the only survivor. His quick imagination and inventiveness in oiling up family disasters supply plenty of humor, yet it would be a mistake to overlook their seriousness. One is tempted to argue that Huck's adventures which begin ritual-like with an elaborate staging of his own death are, in fact, a subconscious quest for a father, for a family, i.e. for a network of human relationships binding one to society.

The first person narrative contains inherently the possibility of communicating the hero's immediate impressions. Huck sees the world as if for the first time – with fresh, innocent eyes uninfluenced by social conventions or preconceived ideas. He seems to see everything, notes facts as well as impressions with utmost accuracy. He may comment on the events he witnesses or participates in, but seldom speaks out in judgement. Noting down his thoughts and emotions he always stresses that his point of view is strictly personal: "I thought, I says" etc. He seems to believe he is too young or too ignorant to condemn his elder and presumably his betters. His humility keeps him entrapped in false notions of morality. Huck accepts the prevailing social standards as valid and true, therefore condemning his own wickedness of helping a runaway slave. He fails to realize that his heart is sounder than his head or that his intuitive sense of what is right and moral is truer than man-made laws. The conflict between his heart and his head, i.e. between what is inborn or spontaneous and what is taught by or absorbed from his social milieu, adds vivacity and color to his account. It becomes a source of additional suspense as important, in fact, as our concern about the outcome of his adventures.

Master of both situational and character humor, Twain is at his best when playing with language. Huck's mispronunciations and misuse of more sophisticated words are hilarious yet they constitute but a small part of Twain's linguistic ingenuity. *Huckleberry Finn* is the first great novel written not in standard, educated English but in plain American vernacular: given his choice of the narrator he could not do otherwise if he wanted his tale to sound "realistic." Twain uses colloquial speech consistently, yet Huck's peculiar variety of English is further enriched by dialectal forms used by other characters in the novel. Twain distinguishes and transcribes minor differences between Negro speech and white colloquialisms as well as between Missouri and Arkansas dialects. His greatest achievement, however, lies in flexibility and power of expression. Although "uncivilised," Huck never becomes vulgar, his profanities are mild indeed. Attuned to nature, adjusted to its rhythm, Huck responds wholeheartedly to every natural phenomenon before his eyes. He is sensitive to changing scenery as much as to light and shadows playing on water. Using his personal idiom he, or rather Twain, is able to describe accurately and poetically what he sees. Furthermore,

he can articulate his personal response to it in full richness of his emotions, moods, and ideas. In doing so he remains simple without ever becoming simplistic. Praising Twain's linguistic virtuosity Ernest Hemingway wrote in 1935:

All Modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. ... it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

All this is not to say that the book's greatness was immediately recognized. Of the three novels that constitute a kind of trilogy, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the last was least enthusiastically received. While the book is not without flaws (its end being the most conspicuous of them), the real reason was probably the undercurrent of gloom that began to be so visible in Twain's writings.

His later years strengthened this tendency even further. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," but first of all *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) concentrate on the dark side of human personality. The novel's hero is named Hank, and it is not just a coincidence: just like Huck, he comes into a desperate conflict with reality, but while Huck can at least try to go West, Hank has no such recourse and has to die.

Twain's last work, *A Mysterious Stranger* (1897-1900), started several times, but never finished, testified to both his vanishing writing power and increasing pessimism: the author was already too bitter about mankind to be able to describe its problems. Mark Twain died in 1910, famous, but full of hatred towards others. He was a real genius, but his gravest paradox, which ultimately destroyed him as a writer, was that the people he portrayed so well were also the same people he came to despise.

Teresa Kieniewicz

Chapter 7: The Literary Art of Henry James

A life-long friend of William Dean Howells, the chief spokesman for the realistic fiction in America, Henry James shared good many of his literary goals and convictions. Although his own views on literature evolved toward more purely aesthetic criteria, his early works adhered to the basic principles of realistic fiction advocated by Howells. James readily availed himself of Howells' autobiographical method and dramatic technique, yet he aimed not so much at verisimilitude, i.e. life-like presentation of facts, as at internal truthfulness to character, principles, and impulses of human psyche.

American fascination with Europe seemed to increase steadily in the last quarter of the 19th century. For the affluent upper middle classes, Europe was synonymous with good life, especially with highly elaborate ways of spending time and money. To more intellectual and better educated Americans it was a treasury of ideas and art, of scholarship and refined sensibility. James' early familiarity with Europe and his subsequent travels on the continent provided ample material for extremely popular, non-fictional travel books (his *Transatlantic Sketches*, published in 1875, were followed by *A Little Tour in France*, 1885, and *English Hours*, 1905) as well as for his "international novels" about Americans in Europe. James was perhaps the most skillful in handling the dramatic technique when he explored the international theme. Drawing from his personal experiences he was able to create or depict suggestive and convincing stage settings for his characters.

His talent for evoking physical spaces and objects was not, however, directed toward objective information. His keen eye for minute factual detail and his heightened sensitivity to light and sound helped him capture specific atmosphere of his locality or its momentary mood, thus conveying the sense of the place or, more frequently, the character's impression of it. James' preoccupation with physical setting of his action served several purposes. He drew attention to external appearances, to the look and substance of material objects, to peculiarities of dress, gesture, or movement because such details defined his characters' social position and relations with utmost precision. Furthermore, they usually became indicative of on-going drama of consciousness that lays at the core of his plot.

Having placed his Americans in the European or Europeanized society, James watches closely their actions, decisions, and response to the surrounding world. He was primarily an observer, not a commentator, yet by the very choice of both the setting and characters, he brought the two continents in confrontation. He confronted and questioned innocence versus experience, i.e. corruption and crudity versus refinement, barbarity versus culture, social chaos versus precise order, idealism versus skepticism, individualism versus conformity, honesty versus deceit.

In doing so he was painting the portrait of an American. The contrast between culture and civilization was drawn with utmost care so that the final verdict of preference was seldom unequivocal. Daisy Miller (*Daisy Miller*, 1878) could be charming in her naive insistence on following her own mind and asserting her independence, yet her social and intellectual ignorance was equalled only by her innocence. Still James took care to stress that she is condemned, on most superficial grounds, not for actual wrongdoings but for disregarding social code of manners. Christopher Newman's (*The American*, 1877) renunciation of revenge proved the essential nobility of his character which, however, could only partially redeem his total incapacity to comprehend and absorb social proprieties. He was an American self-made man, i.e. a modern barbarian, but, setting him side by side with the exquisitely cultivated and refined de Bellegardes, James found them morally deficient: "James' object is always to show the beauty and the grace that co-exist with this corruption in a really old society and to indicate what a fatal fascination these can have for a susceptible young mind, especially if the mind happens to be American." On the other hand James' uninhibited and unsophisticated Americans could be crude and provincial and boring, yet they were endowed with honesty and integrity rooted in fine moral conscience. Socially and intellectually deficient, American innocence is morally sound: it is of sterling character. James carefully demonstrated advantages and shortcomings of both continents because he consciously refrained from casting his voice for or against either. His ultimate purpose was artistic, not didactic. He returned to the international theme many times: in *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881, and later in *The Ambassadors*, 1903, *The Wings of the Dove*, 1902, and *The Golden Bowl*, 1904, shifting steadily away from studying social manners toward close analysis of human consciousness.

Few writers were as conscious and deliberate in their craft as Henry James. For him art was serious and the artistic effect could be attained only through self-imposed, rigorous discipline. Richard P. Blackmur explains that James' preoccupation with form derived from his search for an ideal:

The subject of art was life, or more particularly someone's apprehension of the experience of it, and in striving truly to represent it art removed the waste and muddlement and bewilderment in which it is lived and gave it a lucid, intelligible form. By insisting an intelligence and lucidity something like an ideal vision was secured.

This clarity of vision, however, is not one of straightforward account of events as they happen to fictional characters but as they are experienced i.e. felt, understood, and responded to. Hence, James' narrative is usually indirect, filtered through a fictional consciousness placed between the reader and the event. The reader is seldom allowed to observe the action "objectively"; instead, he is offered an interpretation or a sense of its significance.

James' "point of view" technique endows his tales with structural unity and consistency. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl* he confessed his

... preference for dealing with my subject matter... through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it.

Thus, all episodes and all characters are directly and closely related to the main hero or heroine who serves as the central intelligence of the novel. In *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer is the center of interest for four men: Ralph Touchett, Caspar Goodwood, Lord Warburton, and Gilbert Osmond. Their impressions of Isabel, their views of her, and comments on her decisions complement her portrait which James draws first and foremost by disclosing her growing awareness of her own self and understanding of the tragic disaster of her marriage. In his late novels James applied his technique even more rigorously. In *The Ambassadors* he confines his narrative to a single point of view of Lambert Strether while the two parts of *The Golden Bowl* are filtered through the consciousness of Prince Amerigo and Maggie Verver, the Princess, respectively. Nevertheless, James offers an extensive view of events setting his central intelligence to mediate upon them. Frequently, the hero is provided with an observant and sensitive confidante (Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors* or Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*) with whom he can further discuss other characters' actions, words, and gestures, analyze their probable motives and intentions, and weigh scrupulously psychological and moral implications of them all.

This careful elimination of unnecessary or random details leaves ample room for a thorough examination of what is found relevant. The reader is expected to take in and remember all the minute but significant clues which point discreetly to the crucial meaning of the tale. He is expected to share and enjoy James' interest in studying human psyche in depth even if it is achieved at the expense of breadth and diversity of the presented reality.

James was as deliberate in choosing his material as he was in his narrative technique. His prefaces to the New York edition of his novels (1907-1909) delineate how his stories often grew out of a slight incident or a casual remark that his imagination elaborated upon and dramatized. In the case of *The Portrait of a Lady* James saw his main difficulty in rendering "an intelligent but presumptuous girl affronting her destiny" significant enough while her adventures were, by and large, mild:

Without her sense of [her adventures], her sense **for** them... they are next to nothing at all; but isn't the beauty and the difficulty just in showing their mystic conversion by that sense, conversion into the stuff of drama... .

James pointed out two instances of such dramatic conversion. The moment when "Isabel, coming into the drawing-room at Gardencourt, ... finds Mme Merle in possession of the place" becomes the turning point in her life though she will realize the fact only years later. Her midnight vigil in Palazzo Roccanera, "designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of a picture" brings her painful revelation of truth.

The world of Henry James, and his characters, may well seem far-fetched or artificial to a modern reader. His upper class characters are as a rule rich and idle. His choice to write about the moneyed class, the uppermost crust of European and American society was dictated by better reasons than personal preference or mere snobbery. To concentrate upon internal drama of human psyche he needed his heroes (e.g. Isabel in *The Portrait*, Newman in *The American* or Strether in *The Ambassadors*) eminently free from ordinary pressures of life. Their minds were to be free from material cares, their decisions unconstrained by primary considerations of security, hunger, clothing or shelter. Furthermore, they are each "a single separate person" free from the usual social attachments and frequently of social control. They are removed from their natural environment so that conscience becomes the only point of reference guiding their conduct.

If James' heroes enjoy all the advantages of wealth and class, they are equally privileged as humans. To be acutely aware of things happening to and around them they must be ultra-sensitive, observant and, at least to some degree, introspective. They must be highly intelligent to analyze and comprehend their experiences and even more so to be articulate about them. Along with these qualities James endows them with innate uprightness, subtle moral sense, and deeply ingrained desire for knowledge and improvement, self-knowledge and self-improvement in particular. Their view of life tends to be serious, their standards and values absolute. Thus equipped, they almost involuntarily face moral dilemmas and weigh niceties of moral choices. Aiming at their very best, they refrain from immediate or personal gratification but reach out for non-utilitarian values of honor, dignity, and magnanimity. Obviously enough, they do not belong to the race of ordinary mortals or commoners, yet James finds his investigation into their

consciousness under extreme strain relevant to, and representative of, human experience precisely because they are the finest specimens of humanity.

The international theme is by no means the only one even in James' early fiction; in his later novels and stories it serves as a canvas for larger consideration. *The Portrait of a Lady* probes the question of freedom and responsibility. Starting on her European adventure, Isabel Archer values her personal freedom above all else. Not in fact "so as to choose" but "so as to see for herself" only. She wishes to enlarge her experience but seems as reluctant to learn of or share in human misery as to submit to a definite and therefore restricting social relation. In their final meeting after Ralph's death, Caspar Goodwood tempts her with a prospect of a complete freedom. Running away from Goodwood's temptation as well as his forceful sexuality, she goes back to Rome to face the consequences of her actions in the name of duty, responsibility, order, and dignity.

The prevailing critical view presents Osmond as the villain of the novel: a mercenary and parasitical snob who screens his dilettantism, moral corruption and egotism behind a mask of conventional propriety, spiritual refinement, and exquisite taste. This is how he is seen by Isabel and her friends, and the reader tends to accept their judgement as valid. However, Robert W. Stallman, who undertakes Osmond's defence, accuses Isabel of deception (self-deception above all), romantic idealism as well as selfish and essentially illusory superiority:

... she is characterized by "her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness."
... A pretentious and shallow creature duped by her own presumptuous ideas, Isabel is not the person we have been persuaded - all through Book I - to think she is.

Thus Stallman claims that to blame Osmond alone for Isabel's suffering is to exempt her from her share of responsibility for their mutual disappointment and the deterioration of their marriage.

However fascinated by social and psychological aspects of the international theme, James combines it with moral questions his characters have to face and solve. Christopher Newman (*The American*) and Maggie Verver (*The Golden Bowl*) are given power, opportunity, and valid reasons to hurt those who have sinned against them. Both resist the temptation: Newman in a gesture of magnanimous renunciation, Maggie, recognizing her own guilt and responsibility for evil done, accepts humiliation and suffering to restore moral order and win her husband's love and respect. *The Ambassadors* closes on a comparable note of renunciation – winners take nothing. Thus, Strether returns to America having lost both "Europe" and Mrs. Newsome. The novel, however, weaves together several thematic threads of which James' (Strether's) adhortation "to live" seems of major importance:

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. ... I see it now. I haven't done so enough before – and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. ... It's too late.

What Strether calls "life" can easily be stifled by prejudice, narrowmindedness, or preconceived ideas, as well as by greedy or blind attachment to some base or inferior (e.g. material) goal. To live means to observe, to be aware of the surrounding world, i.e. to experience things as they happen from one moment to another. Furthermore, living involves capacity and willingness to be related to other people.

Not content with mere observation of objects and places, James penetrates beyond or beneath their surface, i.e. their external appearance, in an attempt to elucidate their meaning. In the process they are assigned their symbolic function. Characteristically, James begins measuring them by aesthetic criteria but finds "the touchstone of taste" inadequate. Ever mindful of beauty, he nevertheless accepts moral values as his ultimate standard.

James' close analysis of the intricate workings of human mind and heart opens a new chapter in the history of the novel. The shift of emphasis from the plot, i.e. a direct narrative of events, to the internal drama of human psyche proved as lasting as it was influential. His technical innovations paved the way to further developments: interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

Wiesław Furmańczyk

Chapter 8: From the Genteel Tradition to Naturalism

The arrival of the realistic trend in American fiction toward the end of the 19th century is usually associated with William Dean Howells (1837-1920). Seen in historical perspective, he is certainly a lesser novelist than his contemporaries, Mark Twain and Henry James. Yet, during his lifetime, he was perhaps the most important and influential promoter of the new realistic tendencies, some of which he formulated in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891). He encouraged the young writers to free themselves from the influence of those critics who still judged contemporary literary works on the basis of the old criteria of the Romantic age. What he envisaged was an era in which the writer's attempt to present a truthful picture of the world would be the only measure of his achievement.

This concept of "fidelity to life," as Howells termed it, is a very general idea, and has been interpreted in different ways as one of the basic characteristics of both realism and naturalism. The situation becomes even more complex when some critics disregard the latter term and use the former to describe the work of such different writers as Henry James and Theodore Dreiser. Leaving aside for the moment a closer analysis of the critical problems involved, it should be stressed here that "fidelity to life" must have been broadly interpreted by Howells himself when he considers the practical effects of his activity as a literary critic. On the one hand, he lent his encouragement and support to Henry James, a subtle analyst of human nature and human relations, yet moving within a rather limited, usually upper-middle-class circle of characters. On the other hand, he was instrumental in promoting the literary reputation of Mark Twain, also in a sense a realist, but as distant from James in terms of content and style as Boston's Beacon Hill is from Hannibal, Missouri. Perhaps even more important was Howells' support for the younger generation of writers, including Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane.

The fact that Howells' general conception of realism stretched so far was in a way a reflection of his background and temperament. Born in Ohio, he grew up in a rather modest environment, and in this respect his experiences were similar to those of Twain and Garland, though not of James. He had very little formal education, and was, for all practical purposes, a self-taught young man when – at the age of twenty-one – he became associated with the *Ohio State Journal*. The year 1860 marked a turning point in his career. He wrote a campaign biography of Lincoln, who rewarded his services with the post of the American consul in Venice, where he stayed until 1865. On his return from Europe, he settled in Boston, and his long association with the most prestigious American journal at that time, *The Atlantic Monthly*, brought him in close contact with the literary circles of New England, where he advanced his advocacy of the new "commonplace realism."

But Howells' later decision to move to New York, in 1885, confirmed the fact that New England was losing its cultural importance and that New York had replaced Boston as the literary center of the country. In New York, Howells continued his prolific creative writing, and joined the editorial staff of another important monthly, *Harper's Magazine*. Howells' position at *Harper's* strengthened his influence on the contemporary literary scene – toward the end of his long life he was regarded as the "dean of American letters."

Howells' creative contribution to the development of the American novel is less significant than his critical works or his efforts to promote the careers of the new realists. Only a few of his novels are listed now as classical items in the history of American fiction, particularly *A Modern Instance* (1882) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Influenced by the new doctrines of socialism, Howells began to deal in his later works with the wider social problems that marked the rapid growth of industrialism. His awareness of these problems is reflected in such works as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and some Utopian novels.

Although in *Criticism and Fiction* Howells encouraged the young generation of writers to treat "fidelity to life" as the basic measure of their own achievement, his temperament caused him to shy away from aspects of experience he considered sordid or tasteless, including sex and sensuality. Summing up Howells' theory of realism, one might say that although he insisted that writers should try to give a truthful picture of reality as they saw it, he envisaged a reality limited by the conventional standards of taste. He himself certainly followed this rule. Frank Norris made this clear when he said that realism can be "respectable as a church and proper as a deacon – as, for instance, the novels of Mr. Howells."

One of the first "dissenters" from the official type of realism favored by Howells was Hamlin Garland (1860-1940). His works and his theory of fiction mark a transition between Howells' "gentle realism" and the more "audacious" naturalistic works of such writers as Crane, Norris and Dreiser. Garland described himself "as a farmer by birth and a novelist by occupation." Born in Wisconsin, he experienced the hardships of a farmer's life in the Midwest. Referring to that particular period of his life in one of his autobiographical works, he said: "Obscurely forming in my mind were two great literary concepts – that truth was a higher quality than beauty, and that to spread the reign of justice should everywhere be the design and intent of the artist."

So his early sketches of rural life, which appeared first of all in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) showed that the romantic vision of the fertile lands in the Midwest as a farmer's paradise was not true at all. Stressing the unpleasant aspects of everyday toil, he leaned, in this sense, toward naturalism. In the later period of his life, this "literary radical"

became more romantic and sentimental. Analyzing Garland's fiction in his study of American naturalism, Charles Child Walcutt concludes that the novelist "had the idea, if not the style and technique to make [his fiction] live."

The idea referred to was Garland's theory of *veritism* formulated in *Crumbling Idols* (1894). Similarly to Howells, but in somewhat different way, he encouraged writers to seek new ways of expression and not to be tied by traditional literary concepts:

The secret of every lasting success in art or literature lies, I believe, in a powerful, sincere, emotional concept of life first, and, second, in the acquired power to convey that concept to others. This leads necessarily to individuality in authorship, and to freedom from past models.

This theory of the veritist is, after all, a statement of his passion for truth and for individual expression. The passion does not spring from theory; the theory rises from the love of verities, which seems to increase day by day all over the Western world.

Garland believed that veritism would be best expressed by the regional or, as he termed it, the local novel. He thought that the local novel would "redeem American literature as it has already redeemed the South from its conventional and highly-wrought romanticism." The main value of Garland's theory of veritism seems to consist in his conviction that "the real utterance of a city or a locality can only come when a writer is born out of its intimate heart." Although his conception of veritism is based on a somewhat idealized picture of reality, he is by no means blind to the more ugly aspects of life in his country when he says: "The novel of the slums must be written by one who has played there as a child, and taken part in all its amusements; not out of curiosity, but out of pleasure seeking. It cannot be done from above nor from the outside. It must be done out of a full heart and without seeking for effect." This statement provides a kind of touchstone of how genuine a picture of reality would be presented by Garland's followers venturing to move further than he did from the "genteel tradition" of their predecessors.

Apart from the somewhat later work by Frank Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903), Garland's *Crumbling Idols* was the only attempt made by an American writer to formulate at some length the theoretical principles that marked a shift from realism to naturalism in the American fiction in the last decade of the 19th century. This shows that, in comparison with the situation in France or Germany, naturalism as it then emerged in America was a much less formalized literary movement.

In most definitions of naturalism, this literary trend is described as a more extreme or intensified form of realism. The distinction usually made is that although both the realists and the naturalists aim at presenting an objective picture of reality, the naturalists stress its more unpleasant, ugly, or even shocking aspects. This is certainly one of the characteristic features of naturalism. However, viewed only in these terms, naturalism cannot be so easily distinguished from realism, since what seems unpleasant or ugly to some people need not necessarily appear so to others.

Those who are easily shocked (or bored) by a realistic or naturalistic presentation of reality use the two terms indiscriminately. The situation is described by G.J. Becker: "Though the words *realism* and *naturalism* are freely, even rashly used, there is no general agreement as to what they mean. For many they have come to be merely convenient pejoratives, especially when qualified as *stark*, *raw*, *unimaginative*, *superficial*, *atheistic*, and more recently *socialist*."

Another aspect of naturalistic writing is its attempt to present an objective picture of reality, viewed by the writer with a kind of scientific detachment. A classical example of the approach was in Emil Zola's "experimental novel," in which "the study of abstract, metaphysical man" was to be replaced by "the study of natural man, subject to physico-chemical laws and determined by the effects of his milieu."

There were not many writers who followed Zola's detailed methods of investigation and documentation or his specific "clinical" analysis of man as a biological, hereditary, and environmental creature. Yet an increasing number of writers were influenced, like Zola, by nineteenth-century scientific theories which made them view man in a different light. Comte's positivism and Darwin's theory of evolution were among the most important factors in shaping these new attitudes. Referring to the influence of the works of the two authors on the origin of naturalism, Walcutt says: "They did not... dispose of the supernatural once and for all, but they made it possible to believe that man could be completely accounted for by physical, psychological, and social facts. When this program won a limited assent, naturalistic fiction could be conceived and attempted."

While Darwin's theory dealt with the animal world, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) developed a whole philosophical system, based on the assumption that all phenomena are subject to the Law of Evolution. It was he who coined the expression "the survival of the fittest." As Richard Hofstadter says, this phrase "was a biological generalization of the cruel processes which reflective observers saw at work in early nineteenth-century society, and Darwinism was a derivative of political economy." Spencer's works exerted considerable influence in England and, even more so, in the United States. They were especially popular there in the 1870s and 1880s. Written in a language that could be understood even by less sophisticated readers, they were for many of them the first introduction into a world of new ideas, questioning some of the previously accepted dogmas. Among these readers were some of the would-be naturalists who – in their formative years – were affected by Spencer's ideas.

It was due to the influence of all these 19th-century theories, including the economic analysis and criticism of the capitalistic system by Karl Marx, that a deterministic view of life found its expression – to a greater or lesser degree

– in the works of the naturalistic writers in Europe as well as in America. It is this particular feature of naturalism which distinguishes it from realism more clearly than any of the other characteristics mentioned before; and it is in this sense that the naturalistic trend in American fiction was continued, in one form or another, by some of the novelists during the entire first half of the 20th century, much longer than in Europe. So, to complete the definition of naturalism, one should emphasize the fact that, in general, its representatives look upon man as a creature whose life is determined in the end by forces over which he has no control: his biological, often animal-like instincts such as the struggle for survival, his inborn characteristics, his social and economic environment. Consequently, the most extreme interpretation of this deterministic philosophy leads to the logical conclusion that man has actually no free will at all, and so his actions cannot be judged in moral terms. Presenting man as a helpless creature, the determinists tend, as a rule, toward a pessimistic, if not quite fatalistic, view of life.

Whenever an attempt is made to define or classify such phenomena as literary trends or movements, the danger arises that too much generalization leads to oversimplification. This is also true of what has been said here about naturalism. No single naturalistic writer employs all of his characteristics. Even if all naturalists share to some extent a deterministic philosophy, it is expressed in different ways and with a varying degree of intensity. Some of the writers emphasize more strongly biological determinism, while others stress the influence of social or economic factors on human lives. It is also quite natural that not all of them treat the material they describe with the same kind of detached objectivity, nor do they all show an equally pessimistic view of life.

The scientific, social, and philosophical theories which shaped the naturalistic trend in literature toward the end of the 19th century reflected radical economic and social change caused by the Industrial Revolution, and characterized by sharp contrasts. Progress in industry, communication, and transportation was accompanied by excessive exploitation of natural resources and human labor; the rapid growth of cities, which provided higher living standards for some people, was marked by the emergence of slums. These social and economic changes occurred even more rapidly in America than in Europe.

In their brief but informative study of naturalism, Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine point out some of the problems connected with the triumph of industrial capitalism in the United States:

As in Europe, industrialization brought great mechanical and material advances but also extremely severe difficulties in the form of labor disputes, economic depression and strikes that erupted in violence, all of which feature prominently in the literature of the period. Political corruption was rife in many cities where the “Robber Barons” manipulated business so as to increase the wealth of the rich by excluding the little man and exploiting the labourer. By the last two decades of the century there was widespread disenchantment, as in France after 1870 and in Germany toward the turn of the century. In the U.S.A. it took a special form: disillusionment with the dream of success, prosperity and happiness that had drawn many immigrants to the U.S.A. The collapse of this predominantly agrarian myth brought Americans up against harsh realities with a very sharp shock.

Like some other historians of American literature, the same authors argue that American naturalism “grew in direct response to these native social and economic problems,” rather than in response to outside influences. They claim that it was mainly because of this that American naturalism differed in many respects from the European naturalistic movement.

The fact that from its very beginning American naturalism was not a formalized literary movement, with its own schools, groups or manifestoes, had far-reaching consequences. Since it was neither based on any definite theoretical principles nor dominated by the influence of a single writer, it was not confined in time, and continued as a trend rather than a movement in the works of writers belonging to later generations. For the same reasons, this trend is highly diversified if viewed in historical perspective, since the names of such apparently different writers as Norris and Hemingway or Dreiser and Steinbeck are placed side by side within the same stream of naturalistic fiction.

It is because of this diversity that “naturalism” is a somewhat elusive term when used in reference to American novelists. Quite often it is inserted within quotation marks; in other cases some of the writers mentioned here are described as “the so-called naturalists.” What it all actually means is that the particular critics or literary scholars discern only some naturalistic elements in the works of those American writers who may also be labeled as realists by other critics or scholars. As already stated, the borderline between realism and naturalism in American fiction has never been clearly drawn and this theoretical problem will never be solved to everyone’s satisfaction if only because there are no “pure realists” or “pure naturalists” among the writers presented here. However, as long as we keep in mind the characteristic features used here to define the latter term, there is no reason why we should not speak of the naturalistic trend to describe the change that marked the development of American fiction towards the end of the 19th century.

Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Frank Norris (1870-1902), and Jack London (1876-1916) are usually regarded as the main representatives of the first generation of American naturalists. Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is often treated as a naturalist of a later generation, perhaps simply because he lived much longer than Crane and Norris. What matters here, and what makes all of these writers pioneers of American naturalism, are not the dates of their births, but the dates

of publication, as some of the most typical naturalistic novels of that period appeared during a single decade, e.g., Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Norris' *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903).

At the age of twenty-two, Stephen Crane had had only two years of incomplete college education and some experience as a reporter and free-lance journalist, but he had already completed *Maggie*, his first novel. This story of an Irish family in the New York slums was based on his observations of life on New York's Bowery. Thus he was the first American novelist to treat such unpleasant and shocking subjects as prostitution and alcoholism. The book seemed much too grim for the publishers to whom he submitted the manuscript. So he decided to have the book printed privately under an assumed name. Not many copies of the novel were actually sold at that time, and it was only in 1896, after Crane's success with *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), that *Maggie* – in a slightly revised form – found a regular publisher, and was more widely distributed. The story of *Maggie's* publication was rather typical. Dreiser would have similar difficulties with the publication of *Sister Carrie* a few years later, and much later, in 1915, with the publication of *The "Genius."* When we read these novels today, we wonder why they were regarded as immoral, but at that time the standards of taste and propriety in America were still largely a product of the Puritan heritage, and it was much more difficult to break the barriers of conventionality there than it was in Europe.

Whatever effect *Maggie* might have had when it was published, it strikes the contemporary reader, at least in some parts, as a parody of a naturalistic novel. The picture of the hopeless existence of the Johnson family, where drinking is the only form of escape from the realities of everyday toil and misery, is obviously exaggerated. So much furniture is broken in the course of drunken rows that one begins to wonder where it keeps coming from all the time. The little boy, Jimmy, is so frequently kicked around and otherwise physically abused by both kin and strangers that one is actually surprised he is still alive at the end of Chapter II.

Walcott claims that the exaggeration in some passages of the novel is obviously intentional: "[it] renders Crane's sense that this world is so warped as to be mad. His tone unites despair and mortal outrage with the self-protection of a sort of wild humor." Whatever Crane's intentions might have been, this novelette seems very much outdated and hardly readable now. Yet, regardless of its present evaluation, it played an important historical role, since it opened the way for other American writers who were willing to depict realistically some of the more unpleasant aspects of life in their country.

Maggie represents Crane's writing at a formative stage. However, some of the typical characteristics of his style are already there. One of them is his attempt to render faithfully the sounds of common speech as it is really spoken, without any embellishments or grammatical corrections. In this way he contributed to the development of a native literary tradition – the inclusion of the colloquialisms marks some of the best realistic and naturalistic American fiction. Unlike Norris' and Dreiser's novels, characterized by an accumulation of details, Crane's works are not so carefully documented. His technique is rather impressionistic; he operates by means of images, which often have symbolic qualities. He does not use many words, and because of his sparse style is regarded by some critics as the founder of the "laconic school" of writers, with Hemingway as its most eminent representative.

All these qualities of Crane's specific style reach a higher level in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), usually considered to be his best prose work. It is especially here that the use of colors becomes an important element of his impressionistic technique, which he supposedly developed as a result of being influenced by the French impressionistic painting. This book is an interesting literary phenomenon. It is the first American novel in which war is presented realistically from the point of view of an ordinary soldier. Yet when Crane was writing it he had had no battle experience whatsoever; all that he knew about it was what he had learned from stories told by the veterans of the Civil War. This sounds rather ironic, since Crane, like his elder friend Garland, believed that the writer should first experience whatever it was that he intended to describe. *The Red Badge of Courage* shows that this rule need not apply in the case of a talented writer. Although the young hero's obsessive fear that he will not prove himself in combat seems somewhat exaggerated, on the whole the novel presents a fairly convincing picture of war as seen by an inexperienced soldier. The deterministic view of man, typical of naturalistic writers, is certainly there. The youth often behaves like an automaton, trapped in a situation he cannot escape or do anything about; as soon as he enlists, Henry Fleming is in a "moving box," with "iron laws of tradition and law on four sides."

Many interpretations of the novel have been offered, some of which seem rather far-fetched, but justified by Crane's symbolic images. Thus Jim Conklin, whose death causes Henry's regeneration, is supposedly intended to represent Jesus Christ. His wound in the side, his torn body, and his initials indicate this. Most critics seem to agree that the novel is more than just a study of fear. It is certainly the story of a man who tries to prove himself in combat and to find out what he is really like. But it is up to the reader to conclude whether Henry has actually acquired this self-knowledge and become a man – even if he himself believes he has.

Yet Crane's war novel is controversial, and the controversy centers around terminology. Stressing the fact that in *The Red Badge of Courage* all the experiences are seen only through Henry's eyes, some critics claim that in this sense Crane's method can hardly be called realistic. Other critics point out that his works lack the typical realistic documentation; quite often the author does not name the places he describes, and even seems to be able to tell a story without giving names to the characters. Although the characters in his war novel have names, he refers to them most of the time as "the youth," "the tall soldier," and "the loud soldier." So R.W. Stallman claims that "Crane is, in essence,

no realist. The persons of his fiction are not persons but just Everyman – the synthetic figures of a Morality Play or a medieval tapestry, the typical representatives of a group.” Yet, referring to the “sordid realism” of *Maggie*, the same scholar admits that Crane is a realist in another sense. Speaking about this novel and *The Red Badge of Courage* he concludes: “The two main movements in modern American fiction – realism and symbolism – have their beginnings in these achievements of Crane.”

The publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* brought Crane international renown, and marked the climax of his short, but eventful and fruitful life. Toward the end of 1896 he went on a gun-running expedition to Cuba. When the boat he was sailing in was shipwrecked, he spent thirty days at sea in a dinghy; later on, he described his experiences in “The Open Boat,” one of his best and most frequently anthologized short stories. Here, as in some other of his stories and poems, he pictures man as helpless creature at the mercy of indifferent nature or inexorable fate.

This kind of mood is perhaps best expressed in the following poem from the collection *War Is Kind*, its very title reflecting the irony that so often marks Crane’s works:

A man said to the universe:
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”

In 1897 Crane covered the Greco-Turkish War for the *New York Journal*. After a short stay in England, where he met Henry James and Joseph Conrad, he went again to Cuba as a correspondent during the Spanish-American War, which proved fatal for his health. In 1900 he went to a resort in the Black Forest in Germany, where he died of consumption, at the age of twenty-eight. Even if a large part of his literary work, especially in the later period of his life marked by serious illness, is not of first-rate quality, it is amazing that he was able to accomplish so much during his brief career as a journalist and creative writer. One of the pioneers of American naturalism, he was certainly the most talented of them all.

While some of Crane’s best works are still read now, this can hardly be said of Frank Norris. Yet he should be briefly mentioned here if only for historical reason. Norris’ present reputation is aptly summed up by W.M. Frohock:

Frank Norris name is much better known today than anything he ever wrote. The manuals of American literature bestow measured praise on *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901), note that *The Pit* (1903) was a relative failure, and mention the posthumous *Vandover and the Brute* (1914). They go on to report that Norris introduced French naturalism into American fiction, discovered the talent of Theodore Dreiser, and influenced legislation designed to curb the railroad monopolies.

Norris’ position among the early American naturalist is a peculiar one. Born to a wealthy family, he had a different background from Dreiser, London, or even Crane. He was only seventeen when he went to Paris to study art. Norris spent four years at the University of California, and then went for two more years to Harvard, where he studied creative writing. It was there that he began working on *McTeague* and *Vandover*. He might have had enough knowledge of life in California to describe convincingly in *The Octopus* the conflict between the ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley and the Southern Pacific railroad, but this young Harvard man certainly lacked the kind of experience needed to describe the life of simple people in a working-class district, and the gradual degeneration of the half-moronic character, McTeague. It is for this reason that at least some parts of this novel can hardly be treated as presenting a truthful picture of reality, but seem to be literary compositions in which the student is supposed to follow a theoretically constructed model of a naturalistic novel. As a result of this, such fragments read now like parodies of naturalistic prose, just as do some sections of Crane’s *Maggie*.

Let the text speak for itself. McTeague, an unlicensed dentist, had just administered an anaesthetic to his patient, Trina, a pretty girl to whom he was strongly attracted:

...He was alone with her, and she was absolutely without defense. Suddenly, the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring.

It was a crisis – a crisis that had arisen all in an instant; a crisis for which he was totally unprepared. Blindly, and without knowing why, McTeague fought against it, moved by an unreasoned instinct of resistance. Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself... It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world – the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other

man, the better self that cries, “Down, down,” without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back.

Garland was right when he said that the novel of the slums cannot be written “from above nor from the outside” but must be written “out of a full heart and without seeking for effect.” Norris was simply not able to do that.

The writer who certainly wrote “out of a full heart” was Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), especially when he described characters in the humbler walks of life. In this respect he differed considerably from Crane and Norris. Even if Crane was a keener observer of life in the working-class districts than Norris, his attitude to what he saw and portrayed was basically that of an outsider. Dreiser, on the other hand, lived through all of this.

Every literary work is in a sense based on the author’s own experience, but there are few writers whose works contain as much autobiographical material as Dreiser’s. He mainly wrote about what he knew; quite often he simply wrote about himself. The authenticity of the experiences depicted in some of his best novels is combined with a genuine sympathy for the characters, people from his own world, a feeling he cannot conceal in spite of the apparent detachment, so typical of the naturalists. It is because of this combination of authenticity and emotional involvement that most of his novels have survived the test of time, while so many works of his contemporaries have been forgotten.

Dreiser’s first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), has undoubtedly fared much better than Crane’s *Maggie* or Norris’ *McTeague*. The autobiographical material is very strong there. The story of Carrie Meeber is based on what really happened to one of Dreiser’s sisters. But the autobiographical elements are not limited to the basic framework of the story. What makes the novel really authentic is the fact that many of Carrie’s experiences are really those of the writer himself. Raised in a poor family of German immigrants, he was as anxious as Carrie to leave home. The picture of Carrie boarding the train for Chicago is the picture of young Theo himself, leaving Warsaw, Indiana, and dreaming of all the wonderful things that the big city may have in store for him. He is as ashamed of his poor clothes as Carrie. He goes through similar humiliating experiences before he is able to find a job. Yet, like Carrie, he is determined not to go back home, but tries to get ahead in spite of all the disappointments he has experienced. And finally, when they both “make it,” though in different ways, they share the same feelings, expressed by Carrie: “Her sympathies were ever with that under-world of toil from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood.”

One of the things that Dreiser and his small-town characters share is their fascination with the alluring power of the big city. Recalling his arrival in Chicago, the writer says: “Stepping out of the train, it was as though I were ready to conquer the world... It seemed more like a young giant afraid of nothing, and that it was that appealed to me.” If not so intensively, Carrie also shares that feeling; and there is much truth in Kenneth S. Lynn’s comment: “The greatness of *Sister Carrie* lies primarily in its portrayal of the blinding impact of the modern city on human personality.”

When Dreiser took the manuscript of his first novel to the publisher, Frank Norris was the first reader. He thought that the book was a real masterpiece, and so a formal “Memorandum of Agreement” was signed. When the firm’s owner Frank Doubleday, took home the proofs of the novel, his wife read the text and decided that it was an immoral book. She told her husband that he should not publish it, and Mr. Doubleday consented. Obligated to fulfill the letter of the contract, the firm published only a thousand copies of the novel but refused to sell and advertise it. Dreiser’s literary debut was a failure.

The contemporary reader may wonder what it was that made Mrs. Doubleday brand it as an immoral book. If Norris’ *McTeague* could be published, or Crane’s *Maggie*, why not this novel? Presenting what he considered a true picture of life as he saw it, Dreiser was questioning the validity of the basic moral standards which the world about him was supposed to follow. People were told to believe that if you worked hard and lived morally you would be rewarded. It was not only what they heard but also what they read in literature. After all, even in Crane’s shocking novel *Maggie* is basically a good girl, whose fall is the result of adverse circumstances. But here was the story of a girl who knew that what she was doing was considered immoral, and yet she succeeded in life. Whether she was just „a wisp in the wind,” or not, what really mattered was that this “immoral” heroine of Dreiser’s novel not only escaped punishment, but in a sense was rewarded, even if at the end of the novel she is left “dreaming such happiness as [she] may never feel.”

The failure of his first novel was a terrible blow to Dreiser. Disappointed, losing faith in what he was doing, he soon experienced the most critical period in his life. Using the money he had saved he went on writing, but without any success. Too proud to ask his family for assistance and unable to find a job, he actually considered suicide as the only way out. Fortunately, his brother Paul financed his stay in a sanitarium, where he finally recovered from physical deterioration. Then, for almost six months, he worked for the railroad. Soon he was writing again.

What happened next was a rather ironic sequel to this dramatic episode in Dreiser’s life. With the experience he had acquired as a journalist before he wrote *Sister Carrie*, he now moved from one editorial job to another, ending up in 1907 as editor at the Butterick Publishing Company, where he earned a very good salary. Although *Sister Carrie* was finally reissued in the same year, he was too busy editing Butterick’s magazines for women to continue work on the next novel he had already begun. What he was doing now was something that Mrs. Doubleday would certainly not object to. His policy was to make sure that the magazines he was directing should not print anything that might offend the readers. He wrote to a correspondent: “We like sentiment, we like realism, but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it all of a truly uplifting character.”

This relatively short period in Dreiser's long life has been singled out here for a purpose. It shows how much easier it was for a writer to make a living if he chose to follow the conventional standards of taste and propriety, and how much courage and persistence it required to move against the current. Yet Dreiser was a stubborn man. In his next novel he told the story of another "fallen woman."

Jennie Gerhardt (1911) is also based on the story of one of Dreiser's sisters, seduced – when she was only sixteen – by a prominent lawyer. As a matter of fact the whole novel is based on the Dreiser family, more than any other of his works. Although the writer himself cannot be easily identified with any of the characters, members of the Gerhardt family are rather faithful replicas of the writer's family. The picture of the extreme poverty, shown in the first sections of the novel, truly reflects the writer's childhood experiences.

Jennie Gerhardt is usually mentioned as one of Dreiser's three best novels, and some critics place it even ahead of *Sister Carrie*. It is certainly a more neatly constructed novel, perhaps Dreiser's best in this sense, but it somehow lacks the power that *Sister Carrie* has. For one thing, much of the impact of the latter novel comes from the dramatic story of Hurstwood's gradual degeneration. But there is also another reason: Jennie has none of the "self-interest" that Carrie has. On the contrary, she is full of compassion for others, ready for sacrifice. She does not fight, but surrenders, although by doing this she actually shows she is morally superior to those who have hurt her. She is certainly morally superior to Carrie, but this does not make her a more fascinating character. At one point in the novel Dreiser asks: "Did anything matter except goodness – goodness of heart? What else was there that was real?" To which the critic, Philip L. Gerber, responds:

"By posing the question rather than answering it, Dreiser reveals his own deep skepticism: for the method by which his world has organized itself leaves scant room for natural affections and holds goodness of heart very cheap indeed. In a jungle society, gentleness invites the predator. In a society of caste and class, passivity dooms one to fruitless waiting outside doors that will never yield. Many of Dreiser's succeeding novels would show goodness of heart trodden into the dust under the greedy human stampede toward materialistic rewards."

Among the works referred to by Gerber was Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire*, consisting of *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947). This time the principal character was not a "fallen woman," but one of the "Robber Barons," who became the target of attack by such writers as Frank Norris, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair. Most of Dreiser's biographers believe that what made him choose this subject was not so much his intention to expose the corruption of the moguls of finance and industry as his fascination with the strong individuals who not only refused to be defeated by society, but who were determined to succeed.

The first two novels of the trilogy, though not among Dreiser's best, can still be enjoyed if only as an interesting record of the epoch. *The Stoic* is a much weaker novel. So is *The "Genius"* (1915), the story of Eugene Tennyson Witla, a painter; in fact, it is very much the story of Dreiser's own life, in which his "unbridled sex drive" was causing him a lot of trouble most of the time, and about which he wrote with unusual frankness in some of his autobiographical works. An interesting thing about *The "Genius"* is that upon its publication the novel was attacked by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, because in their opinion it was "filled with obscenity and blasphemy." Among Dreiser's strongest supporters were Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, and Sherwood Anderson. Among those who refused to lend their support were Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells. Dreiser lost the case, but five years later the novel was republished by another company. So one more battle for a more frank treatment of eroticism in literature was finally won.

An American Tragedy (1925), considered to be Dreiser's best novel, is undoubtedly his most powerful one. It is based on concrete facts. In 1906, a young man, Chester Gilette, decided that his pregnant girlfriend, Grace Brown, was an obstacle to his further career. Pretending that he was taking the girl for an outing to Big Moose Lake, he drowned her there. He was tried for murder, sentenced to death, and executed. Before selecting this particular story, the writer had studied more than fifteen similar cases. He found that all of them had one thing in common. As Philip L. Gerber describes it, "The patently false but widely accepted American notion that an ambitious boy may rise to wealth with comparative ease seemed to Dreiser a primal cause of such crimes." The writer knew quite well that the dream of success, part of that great American Dream, was an illusion for most people. There were just a few people strong and shrewd enough to succeed; but there were many young men who were made to believe that material success should be their only goal and that it was within their reach; and yet they would find out, sooner or later, that this was impossible. Wouldn't they be tempted to disregard moral considerations if they thought that by doing this they could attain that final goal after all? And how far would they be tempted to go if that goal seemed so near and there was just that one more obstacle in their way? Were they the only ones to be blamed for what they did, or should the blame be shared by those who created these false illusions?

Before getting to work on the book, Dreiser accumulated a mass of detailed documentation. Nothing had changed in that respect since he wrote *Sister Carrie*. When he was describing a street, a building, a room, one could be sure that it looked exactly as he saw it. If the novel had just been based on this kind of documentation, on official court records, and newspaper reports of the trial, it could have turned into another typical journalistic "anatomy of crime"

book. The strength of *An American Tragedy* consists in the fact that the anatomy of the crime is traced to its very roots, to Clyde's childhood and then the story proceeds laboriously step by step to its inevitable end. This novel is also written "out of full heart." The shame of poverty, the desire for nice things, nice clothes, pretty girls; the alluring beauty of all those fine places – elegant hotels or restaurants – is what Dreiser experienced himself. Clyde's illusions were Dreiser's illusions; so was the dream of success, except that the writer's goal was different. It is again the authenticity of experience rather than the accumulation of mere facts and data which makes *An American Tragedy* a great novel, a moving story of muddled human lives, and not just an indictment of the society in which material success is regarded as the main goal in life.

Yet the indictment was there, and Dreiser wondered how the novel would be received. When the first reviews appeared, it was clear that *An American Tragedy* was his greatest success. The critics praised it unanimously. The publication of *An American Tragedy* marked the peak of Dreiser's literary career. The reception of this novel showed how much the attitudes of the readers had changed since 1900. Undoubtedly he himself had done a great deal to change these attitudes. Now Dos Passos, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Faulkner were publishing their first works. In a way, he had opened the way for them. Writing his greatest novel at that time, he proved that his works still remained within the main stream of the 20th-century American novel.

Dreiser was destined to live much longer, but none of the works published after 1925 matched his best fiction. In fact, he wrote only two more novels, as in the last two decades of his life Dreiser became more interested in social and political problems; he wrote such books as *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928), *Tragic America* (1931), and *America Is Worth Saving* (1941). This made him controversial figure, just as did his joining the Communist Party in 1945. In the 1930s Dreiser began also to work on his philosophical papers, *Notes on Life*, excerpts of which were published in 1974. A self-educated man, who went to college only for one year, he tried hard, as he put it, "to interpret this business of life" to himself. On the whole, Dreiser's philosophical notes show the deterministic view of life that we find in his fiction.

Dreiser's stature as a novelist has often been questioned, mainly because of his heavy, verbose style. He has even been described as "The World's Worst Great Writer." As Alfred Kazin once said: "It is by now an established part of our folklore that Theodore Dreiser lacks everything except genius." In retrospect, it seems that what Dreiser said is more important than how he did it. In 1959 Alfred Kazin summed up the writer's work as follows:

The novels of Theodore Dreiser have survived sixty years of complaint against Dreiser. They have survived most of the novels published by the realists of Dreiser's own generation, and they have survived (this would not have seemed so easy a thing to do some years ago) almost all concern with Dreiser himself... A new generation of readers... has been discovering that Dreiser is one of the few American novelists who have survived into the second half of the twentieth century.

Having reached in 1925 the peak of his literary career with the publication of *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser was disappointed when five years later it was not he but a younger man, Sinclair Lewis, who became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. The only consolation for Dreiser was the tribute which Lewis paid to him in his Stockholm address:

I am sure you know by now that the award to me of the Nobel Prize was by no means altogether popular in America, doubtless an experience not altogether new to you.

Suppose you had taken Theodore Dreiser. Now to me, as to many other American writers, Dreiser, more than any other man, is marching alone. Usually unappreciated, often hounded, he has cleared the trail from Victorian Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty, boldness, and passion of life. Without his pioneering I doubt if any of us could, unless we liked to be sent to jail, seek to express life, beauty and terror.

Although a controversial figure in his own country, Lewis was also one of the most widely-read novelists both there and in Europe. It is true that in some of his best works he not only criticized his countrymen, but simply ridiculed them. It was precisely this particular feature of his works which made him a famous writer at home and abroad. It seems natural that some European readers might have enjoyed this kind of attitude, which seemed to confirm their opinion that their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic were in some ways inferior to them, or that, generally speaking, the picture of the promised land to which so many other Europeans had migrated was not so inspiring after all. But why would Americans like to be ridiculed? First of all, when Lewis made fun of a certain specimen of "homo Americanus" in a particular novel, the other specimens were not affected; as a matter of fact they may have laughed – together with the author, so to speak – at their next-door neighbor with whom they identified the character ridiculed in the book. But even if the reader felt that he himself was the target of the satire he might have also wished to continue reading the book in spite of this. Ridiculed or not, Americans went on reading Lewis' novels and arguing about them.

There is another important element which accounts for the fact that the writer's censure was easier to bear even if someone felt he was the subject concerned; the ridicule in Lewis' novels is often mixed with a certain amount of sympathy for the particular individual who is what he is because of the way in which he has been shaped by the world around him. If, like George F. Babbitt, he is a shallow, narrow-minded individual, unable to break away from the confines of everyday routine and conventional ideas, he is not only a ridiculous but also a pathetic figure; his limitations are those of his class; there is simply no other way for him. Even if he is more a type than character, he is portrayed as a human being, with his individual weakness which the reader may, at least partly, recognize as his own. There is, after all, a little of a "babbitt" in each of us, Americans as well as Europeans. It is this "human touch" that has made Lewis' most famous novel survive, although so much has changed in the very picture of the American scene described there; or has it? The external features, the very details of middle-class American life which Lewis portrayed so accurately in his novels, have certainly changed; but many of the attitudes he criticized have still remained.

From the point of view of Lewis' contribution to the development of the American novel his role as a social critic seems most significant, and so his picture of human attitudes is more important than that of the outer reality. Yet the authenticity of those external details with which his novels are so densely packed was one of the things which made him a very popular writer during his lifetime. Lewis' success as a social chronicler results from his unusual ability to capture and describe the characteristic details of middle-class American life. Yet the talent itself would not do; an essential element was the writer's knowledge of a particular section of American society, based on his own experience and careful documentation. He himself was a member of the Midwestern middle class.

Born in a little town in Minnesota in 1885, Sinclair Lewis was the youngest son of a country doctor. His mother died when he was only five; on the whole, his boyhood was not a very happy period of his life. He left his home town when he was seventeen, but much of the knowledge of provincial life, portrayed in his first successful novel, *Main Street* (1920), derives from that period. His father was prosperous enough to be able to send his son to Yale, where Sinclair Lewis began to write regularly for the *Yale Literary Magazine*. Yet he must have gone through some kind of a crisis, since at the beginning of his senior year he left the college. After several unsuccessful attempts to earn a living as a writer, Lewis went back to Yale, and was graduated in 1908. For two years he travelled all over the country, trying to find employment as a newspaper man and to publish some of his stories, but without much success. His experiences at that time included a short stay at a bohemian colony in California; there he met Jack London, to whom he sold some plots of the stories he himself was unable to get published.

Finally, in 1910, Lewis settled in New York, where he worked for various publishing houses and periodicals. During most of that time he was also working on his first novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn*, which appeared in 1914. The beginnings were difficult. The novel did not sell very well, neither did four minor novels. Yet he soon managed to place some short stories in magazines. He was making money, and feeling more secure he quit his job and decided to concentrate on his own creative work.

Real success came with the publication of *Main Street* (1920). The main character of the novel, Carol Milford, an ambitious college graduate who is used to living in a city, falls in love with Dr. Will Kennicott, and when they get married she decides to go with him to Gopher Prairie, a small rural town in Minnesota. Disappointed by what she finds to be a self-complacent, intolerant, and narrow-minded community, she tries to reform it, but all her ambitious plans to enliven its cultural or intellectual life fail. She leaves the town and her husband, but two years later comes back again, feeling that she may be able to adjust to Gopher Prairie after all. Mark Schorer says that *Main Street* has actually the same basic pattern as Lewis' earlier novels: "the impulse to escape the conventions of class or routine; flight; a partial success and a necessary compromise with convention." For Carol Kennicott there seems to be no other way. As the same critic adds, "it is the middle class that triumphs and the Middle West, and the middle-brow. And so it would always be in fact in the novels of Sinclair Lewis."

Soon after its publication, *Main Street* became the subject of fervent controversy. Although one of the representatives of "the revolt from the village" movement, Sherwood Anderson, had already shown in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) that life in a small town was not so idyllic as it might have seemed, in Lewis' novel the indictment of the negative aspects of what provincial America represented was stronger. The reaction was stronger, too, since the characteristic accuracy with which Lewis described what he saw made his novel more widely read than any of the previous works dealing with the same milieu.

What has been said here about *The Main Street* can be largely applied to all of Lewis' major novels. The pattern is more or less the same, although the focus changes all the time; in this respect the writer shows remarkable variety, dealing practically every time with a different area of the American reality. His method was always the same: if he did not feel quite familiar with that particular segment of the contemporary scene he was going to describe, he would study it very carefully, recording whatever he thought essential to make the picture authentic enough.

In *Babbitt* (1922), Lewis chose to portray the life of a businessman in a small city. Although much has already been said here about this novel in the general characterization of the writer's work, a few words should be added. If *Babbitt* is usually regarded as Lewis' best work, this is largely due to the fact that the protagonist is one of the more fully developed characters in his fiction, even if he was originally conceived as a type. Although the novel begins as a typical satire, one cannot help feeling that somewhere in the middle of the book George F. Babbitt begins to be looked upon by the author more sympathetically and eventually becomes an almost likeable character. It is perhaps because of

this that some critics claim there was much of “babbitt” in Lewis himself. The novel was another challenge to the American middle class, and there was even more response to it than to *Main Street*, since in the early 1920s the small city was a more characteristic feature of the increasingly industrialized America. But both novels played an important role: they made many of Americans see the world around them in a different light and forced them to re-examine some of the values they had taken for granted. “Babbitt” has even become a common word in the American language; *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines it as: “a business or professional man who conforms unthinkingly to prevailing middle-class standards.”

In his next major novel, *Arrowsmith* (1925), the target of Lewis’ attack was the commercialization of the medical profession. In *Elmer Gantry* (1927), which Mark Schorer calls “the most controversial of all his books, the most brutal attack on American standards,” he dealt with religious America. The book caused more commotion than any of his previous novels, and was banned for some time, in one form or another, in many parts of the United States. The fifth of Lewis’ most important novels, *Dodsworth* (1929), was quite different from what the writer had produced so far; it presented, for a change, a very sympathetic picture of a self-made American businessman.

The award of the Nobel Prize in 1930, only ten years after the publication of *Main Street*, shows how quickly Lewis had won international renown. Most critics agree, however, that with that prestigious distinction the writer had reached the peak of his literary career: “The Nobel prize had come to him at precisely the right moment: it was the moment at which Lewis, the serious novelist, was finished.” He continued writing for two more decades, and he dealt in his works with various aspects of life in the United States, yet none of the novels written after 1930 matched the quality and the significance of the works from the most fruitful decade of his literary career.

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) had to wait much longer than Sinclair Lewis for the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he received in 1962. If that award came to Lewis at the right time, it was – as it often happens – a somewhat belated distinction in Steinbeck’s case. The peak of his literary career was certainly over at that time: *East of Eden*, his last major work, had been published ten years earlier.

Yet, even in the 1950s, when he was “a distinguished American writer” not all of his fiction was considered to be of equal stature. Sculley Bradley put it this way: “Among our modern novelists of undisputed excellence, Steinbeck is perhaps the most uneven.” Although there were also some minor items among Steinbeck’s earlier works, most critics seem to agree that a marked decline in his creative power may be observed after 1942, when he moved from California to New York. The implications are rather obvious. Steinbeck is usually described as a naturalist and California regionalist. While the beginnings of American naturalism were characterized by the development of the city novel, Steinbeck’s fiction, on the other hand, is described by Donald Heiney as “a model example of the modern American nostalgia for the primitive, the counter-reaction to the triumphant urbanization of American culture which took place in the first half of the twentieth century.” Whether or not the writer’s attitude was a reflection of the general trend, it certainly derived from his background. A native Californian, he was close not only to nature, but also to the people there. While he was still a student, he often worked on Californian ranches and took other manual jobs of all kinds, so that he acquired first-hand knowledge of the simple, hard-working people, including migratory fruitpickers and farm laborers he was going to write about in his fiction. In this way, he developed a natural sympathy for them, so evident in his works.

In 1925 Steinbeck went to New York, hoping he would be able to make a living as a writer, but since the necessary funds were lacking, his first job was that of a construction worker. He was finally employed as a newspaper reporter, but only for a short time. He returned to California, and for three years worked at various temporary jobs, writing all the time. In 1929 his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was accepted for publication. This fictional biography of Henry Morgan, a seventeenth-century Caribbean pirate, did not bring him much money.

Cup of Gold was followed by two other novels: *The Pastures of Heaven* (1923) and *To a God Unknown* (1933). They are usually treated as Steinbeck’s minor works, although some critics claim that *The Pastures of Heaven* has been greatly underrated. In 1933 Steinbeck managed to place the first two parts of *The Red Pony* and some other short stories in the *North American Review*. A year later, one of the stories, “The Murder,” was chosen as an O’Henry prize story, and for the first time its author gained national recognition. But the real success came in 1935, with the publication of *Tortilla Flat*. Although its reception by critics was not unanimously enthusiastic, it sold very well and was soon bought by Hollywood. This marked the end of Steinbeck’s financial worries. He could now fully concentrate on his creative work.

Tortilla Flat is one of Steinbeck’s typical regional novels, and his region was the Salinas Valley and the neighboring Monterey coast, with a mixed population, including Mexican farm workers and Italian fishermen. In this novel, or rather a series of connected stories, Steinbeck describes the adventures of Danny and his friends, whom he jokingly compares to the Knights of the Round Table. Although this “mock epic,” as it has been called, might have been originally enjoyed mainly because of its rather eccentric milieu and the unusual, often amusing episodes, it has a serious underlying theme, which – as John Fontenrose says – “is a recurring theme of Steinbeck’s fiction: the values of a simple people are opposed, as more healthy and viable, to the values of a competitive society.”

Like many other American writers, Steinbeck strongly reacted to the grim reality of the Depression era. In *Dubious Battle* (1936) deals with a strike of migrant apple-pickers. Considered one of Steinbeck’s most powerful works by some critics, it is described as one of his weaker novels by others. Steinbeck’s attitude toward the Communist

Party, which is shown in this novel as the leading power behind the strike, is ambiguous. Even if he was not politically committed at that time or in the future, his general sympathy for the proletariat and the rural laborer would have obviously made him their natural ally in the class struggle, when so many other American writers turned to the left during the 1930s.

Of Mice and Men (1937) deals with itinerant farm workers. There are no sharp conflicts here between the workers and the employers; it is a deeply touching story about those who keep on moving from one farm to another, working on the land owned by others, but not able to earn enough money to buy a piece of land for themselves. Although the socio-economic implications are obvious, the central problem here seems to be simply man's longing for land.

Steinbeck's works are often analyzed on a symbolic level. Much too often this tendency leads to rather far-fetched conclusions. Yet, referring to *Of Mice and Men*, Walcutt seems to offer a sensible interpretation:

Lennie's feeble-mindedness symbolizes the helplessness of the folk in a commercial society; perhaps in a larger frame it symbolizes the bewilderment of man in a mindless cosmos. The bond between him and George is not strong enough to let them succeed in the modern world.

There is still another aspect of Steinbeck's fiction which might be worth mentioning in connection with this novelette, namely the author's use of the effaced narrator, or what is simply known as the dramatic method. In other words, some of his novels and short stories, or at least large portions of them, consist mainly of dialogue and can be easily dramatized. This was also the case of *Of Mice and Men*. Not only did the novel itself bring its author enormous success, but in the same year in which it was published, its stage version appeared in New York and won the New York Drama Critic Circle's Award. Steinbeck was a famous man.

After the publication of *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories, came *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), commonly regarded as his greatest work, marking the peak of his literary career and the end of its "proletarian" period. In accordance with the naturalistic tradition, the novel is based on first-hand experience and research. In 1936 Steinbeck toured the camps of migrant workers in California. He picked fruit and cotton just as they did and then wrote a series of articles about their plight, entitled "The Harvest Gypsies," published in the *San Francisco News*. A year later, on his way from the East coast, the writer drove through Oklahoma, travelled with the Okies all the way to California, and worked together with them in the fields there. With all this material fresh in mind he set to work on what has been called "the epic of the Great Depression." It is a powerful story of human suffering and endurance, and of the awakening of social consciousness among people deprived of their native land and subjected to the same humiliating experiences in what they thought to be the Promised Land. The impact of the novel largely results from its very structure. The story of the people, told in sixteen interchapters, alternates with fourteen chapters describing the experiences of the Joad family. Thus what might have been a piece of journalism and propaganda, or the story of just one family, is combined into a much more impressive artistic whole. It is true that "the Joads as a whole progress from an exclusive concern for family interests to a broader vision of cooperation with all oppressed people." Yet the picture of this general process of the growing social consciousness among the migrants becomes sharper when it is shown as a dramatic struggle within a single family. The story of the family supplements that of the people and vice versa. So much has been written about *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the novel speaks so strongly for itself, that too much comment seems to do it more harm than good. It is generally recognized as a great work, and in the following statement Walcutt explains perhaps most clearly why it is so:

The great movement of the Okies across the dustbowl and into the Promised Land of California suggests the biblical analogy of the Chosen People fleeing into Israel. The story is shaped in heroic dimensions, and like the great epics of the past it is laid out over the face of the nation whose struggle it depicts. America struggling with the Depression, struggling for very life, is epic.

Cannery Row (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952) are usually regarded as the best books in the later period of the writer's life. The latter novel, partly based on the history of his own family, is perhaps one of the most-widely read of Steinbeck's works, as many other family sagas are, but it somehow does not quite match his greatest literary achievements. *The Pearl* (1947), a Mexican folk tale, is frequently cited as a good example of Steinbeck's symbolic parables. Steinbeck's versatility, a rare ability of adopting different styles for different purposes, is a characteristic feature of his writings. W.M. Frohock puts it in this way:

There is really more than one Steinbeck. There is the Steinbeck of *The Grapes of Wrath*, of *In Dubious Battle*, and a number of short stories, an angry man whose anger has put a real tension in his work; there is Steinbeck, the extremely gifted humorist; and there is also the Steinbeck who seems at times to be only a distant relative of the first one, the warm-hearted amused author of

Tortilla Flat, *Cannery Row*, *The Wayward Bus*, *The Pearl*, capable of short stretches of some really dazzling stuff, but over the length of the book, increasingly soft and often downright mushy.

Recently, Steinbeck's stature seems to have somewhat diminished. There is certainly less scholarly interest in his works than in those of his great contemporaries, Faulkner and Hemingway. Whether this is just a transient trend or not, it is hard to tell. Yet even those critics and scholars who differ in their opinions of Steinbeck's literary achievements, emphasize the fact that he is a superb storyteller. It is perhaps for this reason that his best novels and short stories are still widely read and may continue to be read in the future.

Elzbieta Foeller

Chapter 9: Innovative Fiction Between the Two World Wars

The Twenties

In *This Side of Paradise* Scott Fitzgerald described the generation of the 1920s as “a new generation, grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken...” Gertrude Stein coined the statement: “You are all a lost generation,” used by Hemingway as a motto to *The Sun Also Rises*. Certainly the generation of the 1920s, writers included, felt itself to be radically different from their predecessors, largely because of the traumatic experience of the First World War, known at the time as the Great War.

Malcolm Cowley has called World War I “the extinction of the fittest.” Nearly a whole generation of the finest young men were killed in the trenches of the Great War. The battle of Verdun, for instance, lasted six months and it is estimated that a million men died in it, with neither side making any gains. To those fighting on the Western front it became a nightmare dominated by the idea of death, not victory. Hence the popularity of the American poem by Alan Seeger “I Have a Rendezvous with Death.” Those who did not die rotted in the trenches for months or even years, became shellshocked or poisoned by the gases used for the first time in warfare.

The United States entered the war in 1917, relatively late. When the Armistice came in November 1918 they were not as exhausted as the Europeans. Fitzgerald even considered the Jazz Age a result of America’s “unexpended energy” in the war and it was in the 1920s that the American lifestyle and American fashions began to invade Europe, which was tired of suffering and longing to have a good time. Before that happened, however, a number of American writers had gone abroad to fight in the war.

Many of them volunteered and many served in ambulance units (Hemingway, Dos Passos) or foreign armies (e.e. cummings in the French army, Faulkner in the Canadian Air Force). There was an element of observation, of being a spectator of exciting events for them; in some cases they became fascinated by the danger of war and took unnecessary risks to brush close to death (Hemingway, for instance). Even the pacifist Dos Passos claimed that the presence of death “sharpened the senses. The sweetness of white roses, the shape and striping of a snail shell, the taste of an omelet, the most casual sight or sound appeared desperately intense against the background of the great massacres.” This may explain in part the vividness with which the writers of the 1920s evoke sensory perceptions in their fiction.

Some, like e.e. cummings, became victims of the stupidity and narrow-mindedness of the older establishment. He spent three months in a French detention camp because of a mistake, an experience he described in his only novel, *The Enormous Room* (1922). Right after the Armistice the future looked hopeful to young Americans, as democracy had triumphed, the great tyrannies were over and young men out of uniform could bring a new order to the shattered world. The old and narrow-minded, however, stayed in power. America entered a boom period when money and consumerism became the chief aim. It also entered the era of Prohibition with its subsequent growth in violence, gangsterism and corruption. In disillusionment young American writers turned away from social action and social writing. In the 1920s writers on the whole were concerned with the individual, with probing the human heart and analyzing the human personality, to which tendency Freud’s theories contributed as well. American fiction after World War I is distinguished by a marked interest in the individual and his psyche as subject matter, and a search for more precise modes of expression in form. The model writers for the new generation were those who stressed dedication to art – Flaubert, Mallarmé, Proust, T.S.Eliot, and Joyce in particular.

Many writers stayed on in Paris after the War, or came later, lured by the culture, the congenial atmosphere for artists, and the cheapness of post-war Europe. Hemingway entitled his memories of Paris *A Moveable Feast*, and Dos Passos – *The Best Times*. Paris in this period was the cultural capital of the Western world, with the most active avant-garde in the arts, as well as a stable background of cultural tradition. It was international and welcomed foreign artists. Indeed, although there has been no lack of native French artists in the 20th century, the three “presiding geniuses” of Paris – Picasso in painting, Stravinsky in music, and Joyce in literature – were all foreigners. A variety of new styles and movements developed in Paris – fauvism, cubism, dada, and surrealism – which enriched and inspired artists working there. Among the Americans who stayed in Paris were the writers Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the poets Ezra Pound, e.e.cummings, William Carlos Williams, Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benet, Allen Tate and Hart Crane.

Of these, Gertrude Stein exerted the deepest influence on younger writers flocking to Paris. She evolved an experimental, truly 20th-century style of prose, exploring the possibilities of language to the very limits of intelligibility. In *Three Lives* (1909) and *The Making of Americans* (1925) she developed a technique of reproducing human speech in all its repetitiveness and simplicity of syntax. *Tender Buttons* (1914) are prose poems in which Stein comes close to the cubist technique of analysing and abstracting objects. Her best-known (and least characteristic) work – *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) – presents a vivid account of Paris in the 1920s with painters,

musicians, and writers of various nationalities gathering in her salon. Stein was not widely read but, as Sherwood Anderson pointed out, her importance is “not for the public but for the artist who happens to work with words as his material.” Stein influenced Sherwood Anderson, the writer who ushered in the second phase of realism in American letters, the so-called “New Realism,” with his most enduring work, a collection of loosely connected portraits of lonely, obsessed people in a small mid-Western town called *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Both Stein and Anderson helped the young Hemingway in his search for a suitable literary style.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) published two collections of short stories in Paris: *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923) and *in our time* (a book of 30 pages), later expanded and published in the United States as *In Our Time* (1925). The language used by Hemingway is a result of Stein’s influence, as well as of the journalistic “cablese,” a shortened form of language used by correspondents when sending news by cable. These first stories are already characteristically tense, terse, pared down to essentials; they avoid adjectives, flowery terms or “big words,” triggering stereotypical emotional responses.

The sparseness and tenseness of Hemingway’s prose is a result of his conviction that “literature is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over.” Ellipses, if handled well, can be as important as what is actually said in a work of literature, for “the dignity of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.” Hemingway uses this technique in one of his greatest novels, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), published in Britain as *Fiesta*. It was the most notable product of the American expatriate scene, a picture of Paris in the 1920s, as well as of the new lifestyle and the new, post-war morality. Jake Barnes, the narrator, has been rendered impotent by a war wound, a suitable symbol for the effects of war on its participants. It is through Jake’s eyes that we see Lady Brett Ashley and the other disillusioned representatives of the “lost generation.” Their lives are aimlessly restless and futile, and their only principle, shared by Jake, is to accept life without complaint and derive as much enjoyment out of it as possible. Jake complains little, despite his very real suffering. His emotions are barely visible under the restraint he sets himself. He tries to forget his wound and his hopeless love for Brett not only in drink, but also in work, in good companions, in his shaky religious faith, and in the rituals of fishing and bullfighting. The stylized precision of the bullfight provides the most effective counterbalance to the disillusioned futility of Brett and her friends as well as to the puerile illusions of Robert Cohn. The bullfight, with its ancient traditions, its real danger, the skill and daring involved in this representation of the primordial struggle between man and beast, provides a touchstone against which the characters can be judged.

Gertrude Stein’s words: “You are a lost generation” provide one motto of the novel, and in Jake and Brett we see the effects of the war on the sensibilities of a whole generation. The other motto is taken from the Ecclesiastes, the book of the Bible that stresses the vanity of human endeavors, and the quotation points to the passing of generations while “the earth abideth forever.” Nature, the backdrop for human passions, in its endurance offers hope of stability in the midst of futile human activities.

A Farewell to Arms (1929), Hemingway’s novel of World War I, reveals some of the causes for the “lost generation’s” wounded sensibilities through the love story of an American officer and a British nurse on the Italian front. The long disillusionment of the war pushes Frederick Henry and Catherine Barkley to escape the war by deserting to Switzerland, where their union ends with Catherine’s death in childbirth. For Henry the action of the novel is a movement away from nihilism towards a personal commitment in love, and a growing awareness that life is an ordeal that always ends in death. The book’s opening description of marching troops, miserable in the rain and carrying their deadly weapons like a promise of life (a hint as well of Catherine’s still-born child and death) reveals the suffering and illusions of the war, while the death of “only seven thousand” soldiers from cholera points up the inhumanity of the war machine. In carefully restrained language Hemingway succeeds in conveying images and attitudes that come through to the reader despite the sparsity of details.

Hemingway portrayed another war in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), probably the best literary tribute to the struggle of the Spanish people in the Spanish Civil War. Here the outsider, the foreign observer, Robert Jordan, dies for the just cause of another nation. The book displays features of the classic epic and presents not only the struggle of the individual, but of a whole country. In order to render the flavor and peculiarities of the Spanish language Hemingway uses a most effective technique of distorting English so that it sounds as if translated from Spanish. The novel reveals great understanding of and solidarity with the common people of Spain, solidarity stressed by the title, taken from John Donne’s reminder that “No man is an Island, entire of itself.”

In his book on bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway thus summarizes the aims of his writing:

I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced... the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard to get it. The only place where you could see life and death now that the wars were over, was in the bullring... I was trying to write,

commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest and the most fundamental is violent death.

In most of Hemingway's fiction violent death or the threat of death is present, serving to test and define his protagonists. Most often, however, Hemingway sets a solitary protagonist against death. In war, hunting, or fishing the Hemingway character must face death with equanimity and skill, as Macomber learns to do on a safari in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" a writer dying of gangrene in the African bush must face death aware that he has not used his talent and skill to their best advantage. Hemingway stresses the responsibility of the craftsman in whatever field – literature, hunting, bullfighting – to do his best as a way of maintaining control over his life and of achieving dignity and respect.

In *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), which helped Hemingway gain the Nobel Prize in 1954, the old Cuban fisherman Santiago, alone in the vastness of the ocean, captures a gigantic marlin, which is both his opponent and his "brother" in the unity of man with nature. His struggle with the fish and later with the sharks that devour it before he can tow it home becomes, in Hemingway's hands, a universal fable of human life, with overtones of Christ's Calvary. Santiago, although he comes back with only the skeleton of the fish, has tested his strength and endurance to their limits and thus achieved heroic dimensions and a spiritual victory.

Hemingway's devotion to his craft had an enormous influence on the writers of his own and later generations, though the legend of Hemingway the man for a time eclipsed the writer. He himself defined literary creation as making something "through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality." Hemingway's best works achieve this enduring quality.

John Dos Passos (1896-1970), unlike Hemingway and other writers of the "lost generation," is noted for his concentration on the whole of society, rather than the individual. His writing thus forms a link between the individualistic novel of the booming 1920s and the social, "proletarian" novel of the Depression. As Alfred Kazin points out, "the defeatism of the lost generation has been slowly and subtly transferred by him from persons to society itself. It is society that becomes the hero of his work, society that suffers the impending sense of damnation that the lost-generation individualists had suffered alone before." Dos Passos started his career in the typical 1920s fashion by writing about the Great War he knew as an ambulance driver. *One Man's Initiation* (1920) is still a very imitative, immature book, written in an ornate fin-de-siècle style characteristic of the "Harvard aesthetes" to which Dos Passos belonged in college. The more mature *Three Soldiers* (1921) describes the war experiences of three Americans, one of whom is a musician who deserts the army to write an orchestral work and is arrested by the military police. In these first books, as in the later works, one of the essential themes is that of the sensitive, creative individual being crushed by the routine brutality of modern society.

In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) Dos Passos begins to evolve his characteristic technique of parallel narration, an attempt at rendering the mass scenes of a great city, its kaleidoscopic confusion and futile motion. He is no longer the Harvard aesthete writing "purple" prose; he reproduces actual everyday speech, moving towards the style of his famous trilogy *U.S.A.* The descriptions of the city are subordinated to the overall effect of presenting the pace of a great metropolis – frenzied, staccato, unnatural and futile. The city is shown as a force that crushes the individual. The sensitive individuals like Jimmy Herf leave the city, while those who give in to the mirage of success in New York are either crushed by it (commit suicide, go bankrupt, turn criminals) or become dehumanized in their success. Dos Passos presents the lives of his protagonists in sharply observed vignettes that are run up together in a loosely chronological order. All the action takes place in the city, even though some of the characters go to Europe during the Great War. These short sections seemingly jumbled together are a very effective way of expressing the fast pace and frenetic activity of the city, with multitudes acting out their lives simultaneously in the same environment.

In the trilogy *U.S.A.* Dos Passos creates a similar, though more elaborate picture of the whole country – from the beginning of the 20th century to the Great War in *The Forty-Second Parallel* (1930); during World War I and its aftermath in *1919* (1932); and during the boom years of the 1920s in *The Big Money* (1936). Again there are several protagonists, most of whom interact at one point or another. They represent different walks of American life, though oddly enough there are no farmers or genuine workers among them. There are revolutionaries, a typist, a business tycoon, an interior decorator, a Hollywood star, an aviator turned businessman, a sailor. All of them move towards disillusionment and dissatisfaction, the more sensitive crushed and the more callous hardened by the inhuman machine of American big business and the dehumanizing effects of the pervasive mirage of success couched in material terms.

The characters are seen from the outside, presented in clipped, succinct sentences. Eleanor Stoddard's story begins: "When she was young she hated everything," pointing to the coldness and selfishness she displays throughout her move up the social ladder, from the daughter of a Chicago stockyard worker to the head of her own interior decoration firm. The lives of Dos Passos' characters reflect changes in America – the technological advances of the early 20th century, the rise of new business such as aviation and the film industry, the conflicts between labor and capital, the changes in aesthetic and sexual attitudes. In order to capture the feeling of the times Dos Passos used a "cinematic" technique of following the course of nearly a dozen characters in short sequences and alternating these narratives with "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" sections. The picture of America is reinforced by the "Newsreel"

sections, comprised of newspaper headings, excerpts from the press and snippets of popular songs. The “Camera Eye,” perhaps to compensate for the coldness of the narrative sections, offers a subjective, stream-of-consciousness picture of America, an interior monologue of a man remembering his childhood, adolescence and early manhood.

The fictional stories are also interspersed with biographies of famous Americans of the time. These include political figures such as the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, or the socialist Eugene Debs; business tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie or William Randolph Hearst; inventors such as Thomas Alva Edison, the Lindbergh brothers or the architect Frank Lloyd Wright; popular artists such as the dancer Isadora Duncan and the film star Rudolph Valentino. Dos Passos does not describe any serious writers, painters or musicians, perhaps to imply that great art is marginal in American society: “Art was something ivory white and very pure and noble and distant and sad.” The stress is predominantly on the negative aspects of American life and appropriately enough the trilogy ends with a young vagrant alone on a highway, trying to get a ride, while above him an airplane carries the callous rich. Alfred Kazin has termed *U.S.A.* “one of the saddest books ever written by an American.”

Dos Passos presents a vast social panorama, America seen from coast to coast by a disillusioned and bitter Whitman of the 20th century, America of the Machine Age, in which the individual is dominated by impersonal forces and where the rhythm of life becomes more and more similar to the rhythms of machinery in futile and perpetual motion. The characters are presented from the outside, usually through their actions, rarely through their thoughts or emotions, so that their characterization is somewhat impersonal; most of them are rather unpleasant or uninteresting, and a sense of distance is maintained throughout. The absence of any important or longlasting love sequences stresses the barrenness of human relationships. Individuals are determined by their environment – either hardened and limited by it, or crushed. The message is profoundly pessimistic, but its form is new and exciting.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was also a chronicler of the dissolution of the “American dream.” In *The Big Money* Dos Passos presents a “Camera Eye” picture of the unspoiled America of the Pilgrim Fathers and contrasts it with the industrialized wasteland of 20th-century America. The same idea is expressed at the end of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), where the narrator imagines America as seen by the first Dutch settlers of New York: “for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent... face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” It is this still fresh capacity for wonder and adherence to a dream (even one as debased and ridiculous as winning back the vacuous Daisy, even one as impossible as repeating the past) that make Gatsby, a gangster and a parvenu, “great.” The narrator, Nick Carraway, has retained stable moral values in a period of dissolution, and gives Gatsby this sobriquet by comparing him to the rich, egocentric and careless Buchanans, the cold and dishonest Jordan Baker, the vulgar Myrtle and her weak husband, the criminal business associates of Gatsby, and all the grasping, indifferent crowds that flocked to his parties. The dissolution of America is symbolized by the valley of ashes that one must pass to enter New York, a waste land dominated by the mysterious brooding eyes of Dr. T.J.Eckleberg. It is here that the crucial car accident takes place, precipitating Gatsby’s disillusionment with Daisy, his loss of his dream, and ultimately – his death.

The beauty and freshness of new-found America as Hick imagines it, contrasted with the heat and vulgarity of New York, the debilitating valley of ashes, the pretentious and imitative mansions of West Egg, offer an implicit criticism of the degradation of “the Republic.” Unlike Dos Passos, Fitzgerald works mainly through the presentation and interaction of individual characters and it is the mysterious Jay Gatsby, the self-made man, who holds the scene. Although Gatsby adheres to Benjamin Franklin’s ideas of self-improvement, this 20th-century American gets rich by bootlegging rather than through hard and honest labor; far from becoming a scientist and a leader of his country, he tries to enter high society in order to regain his girl. The degraded nature of Gatsby’s dreams stresses how far America has moved from its beginnings – from idealism to materialism, from a sense of responsibility for the republic to the “vast carelessness” of Gatsby’s partygoers.

Fitzgerald became famous overnight through the publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920). He did not experience the Great War at first hand and his first novel is not a war novel, but a picture of the young in America, played out largely against the background of Princeton. Although immature and pretentious, *This Side of Paradise* became an instant success because it rightly assessed the mood of the new generation of the Roaring Twenties. “None of the Victorian mothers – and most of the mothers were Victorian – had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed... deep in an atmosphere of jungle music and the questioning of moral codes,” we are told here. The 1920s were the time of enormous social and technological change for the United States. America was launching into the automobile age of cheap cars, highways, the development of suburbia and an enormous increase in people’s mobility. The automobile and airplane, together with telephone, radio and film changed American society. All this helped young people get away from the older generation and emphasize their own uniqueness.

This was a period when youth was consciously cultivated and the American girl’s emancipation made her “a ragtime kid, a flapper, a jazzbaby, and a baby vamp,” to quote from *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald’s second novel. No one was better at expressing the ideals, lifestyle and inevitable disillusionment of the jazz generation than Fitzgerald, who emphasized the cult of youth. Social patterns changed and women gained a new freedom along with short dresses and bobbed hair. A wave of anti-Puritanism swept America due, at least in part, to a reaction against the establishment which sanctioned the Great War and Prohibition, and also as a result of a superficial popularization of Freud’s theories. The Prohibition provoked an enormous consumption of liquor and created both the new trade of

bootlegging and the organized crime. The newspapers made much of crime and scandals, exciting topics now that war news was no longer coning in. Industry had been geared to high productivity by the war and for the first time Americans were being encouraged towards consumerism. New “service” industries such as advertising, public relations, and filming flourished.

Scott Fitzgerald became the chronicler of the Jazz Age, the generation of “flappers” and their dates, in such short stories as “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” and “Winter Dreams.” His fascination with the very rich – their egotism and careless cruelty – resulted in such stories as “The Rich Boy” and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz.” “Babylon Revisited” is a poignant and devastating judgement of the irresponsibility and careless extravagance of the 1920s, seen from the perspective of the Great Depression and a man’s attempt at rebuilding his life. This theme recurs in *Tender is the Night* (1934), where a promising psychologist dissipates his energies and ambitions in expatriate life on the Riviera, dominated by the beauty, enormous fortune and recurring mental illness of his wife, who was once his patient. Fitzgerald stresses the material and aesthetic advantages of the prosperous, while consistently chronicling their inner emptiness. This theme is most brilliantly treated in *The Great Gatsby*, but in general the movement in Fitzgerald’s fiction is from great possibilities and enchantment with life towards limitation, boredom and disillusionment. This is also true of his heroines – beautiful, rich, successful debutants, who turn out to be heartless and egotistical. Their artificial world has a charm all of its own, however, and Fitzgerald brings it out in his carefully polished style, as in this scene from *The Beautiful and Damned*:

In the foyer of the theatre they waited a few moments to see the first-night crowd come in. There were opera-cloaks stitched of myriad, many-colored silks and furs; there were jewels dripping from arms and throats and ear-tips of white and rose; there were innumerable broad shimmers down the middles of innumerable silk hats; there were shoes of gold and bronze and red and shining black; there were the high-piled, tight-packed coiffures of many women and the slick, watered hair of well-kept men – most of all there was the ebbing, flowing, chattering, chuckling, foaming, slow-rolling wave effect of this cheerful sea of people as tonight it poured its glittering torrent into the artificial lake of laughter...

Yet it is those characters who rise above the narrow limits of a humdrum existence – while retaining a capacity for self-discipline, work, craftsmanship, as well as certain idealism and warmth of heart – that engage Fitzgerald’s approval: the writer Dick Caramel in *The Beautiful and Damned*, Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby, the actress Rosemary Hoyt in *Tender is the Night*, as well as the movie producer of *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Fitzgerald’s unfinished novel on Hollywood. Fitzgerald himself is a great craftsman in his best works and offers a superb comment on his generation and, in the process, on human nature itself.

The Thirties

The Great Depression (started by the crash on Wall Street in 1929) was a shock to America and marked it economically, socially, and culturally. A collapse of world-wide proportions profoundly altered the common man’s view of the world. He no longer felt secure, no longer could believe in the American dream. This crisis of the traditional order, more hopeless and tangible than the Great War, produced a new generation of writers. These “New Naturalists,” of whom Dos Passos and Steinbeck are the best known, were interested in the workings of society and man as part of a community. Proletarian literature became the dominant trend, but the search for new forms and the use of non-naturalistic modes of expression continued. Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), for instance, an innovative and talented playwright also wrote novels dealing with universal moral issues through the medium of characters from widely different times and places: *The Cabala* (1926), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), *The Ides of March* (1948). His “Depression novel,” *Heaven’s My Destination* (1934) describes the comic misadventures of an American travelling salesman who is a devotee of Gandhi.

Two notable Americans writing in and about bohemian Paris of the 1930s, when most expatriates returned home, were Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. Miller’s books are fictionalized autobiographies, in which he describes his life as an artist and international bum, in great and extremely vivid detail. His fiction offers extraordinarily vital and penetrating pictures of the human psyche, particularly the irrational side of man. An example is *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), set in Paris, the first of Miller’s most popular trilogy which includes *Black Spring* (1936) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939). Miller’s vivid and sensual style as well as the conventions he broke by his outspokenness influenced younger American writers, especially the Beat generation. His popularity was certainly increased by the fact that his novels were officially considered pornographic and could not be published in the United States until the 1950s. Like many English-language writers before and after him, he used the Paris-based Olympia Press to get his works published.

Anaïs Nin is the author of an autobiographical surrealist prose poem *House of Incest* (1936), short stories and several novels, including the cycle *Cities of the Interior* and *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954), as well as her famous *Diary*, where she analyzes her life and work including her friendship with Henry Miller. She gained wide recognition first as a cult figure of the feminist movement in the 1960s, for her portrayal of the feminine psyche. Both Nin and Miller have much in common with the surrealists and were fascinated by the surrealist cult of mystery, the marvelous,

and the subconscious. As Nin wrote in her Diary, Miller, like André Breton (whose Surrealist Manifesto was published in 1924), believed in freedom “to write as one thinks, in the order and disorder in which one feels and thinks, to follow sensations and absurd correlations of events and images.”

A writer of similar sensibility was Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938), who shares with Miller the depth and intensity of self-exploration. He wished “to set down America as far as it can belong to the experience of one man,” which he did in such books as *Look Homeward, Angel* (1935) or *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). Speaking of Wolfe and Faulkner, Alfred Kazin described them as representing,

like the surrealists, like the anxious and moving search for spiritual integrity in so much contemporary poetry, the loneliness of the individual sensibility in a period of unparalleled dissolution and insecurity; and they represent even more vividly a reaction against a literature of surface realism that merely records the facts of the dissolution.

The same can be said of Nathaniel West (1903-1940), of whose four novels two enjoy growing appreciation from readers and critics, and have proved influential with the writers of the 1960s. His early and immature novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) is an involved, phantasmagoric narrative describing the title hero's wanderings in the intestines of the Trojan horse. The novel satirizes fin-de-siècle attitudes, self-conscious literary poses, religion, and Freudian psychology. *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), set in the reality of contemporary America, offers a mature and highly symbolic statement on the human condition, through the medium of a newspaperman who edits the advice column as “Miss Lonelyhearts.” Obsessed with the pervasive human suffering documented by the letters that pour in, he tries in vain to escape his feelings of guilt and responsibility, and becomes a religious maniac. He is killed by a jealous cripple as he tries to embrace and heal him in a miracle. Very appropriately the protagonist is known only as “Miss Lonelyhearts,” as it is his role as a “priest of 20th century America” that determines his life and the manner of his death.

In this novel West's prose is clear and precise, while his imagery testifies to an acute power of observation. The cripple hobbles along and makes “many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect.” At one point Miss L. feels “like an empty bottle, shiny and sterile”; at another he reads a letter “for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain.” Through the letters to Miss Lonelyhearts West shows the suffering and misery inherent in human life, while his characters' reactions to the letters portray the attitudes of modern man to his predicament.

At one point in the novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* generalizes on the situation of modern Americans: “Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one was the worst.” *The Day of the Locust* (1939) dramatizes this betrayal through a vivid evocation of Hollywood as a Waste Land, where America's dreams have been cheapened and simplified. Hollywood represents the waste, artificiality and synthetic emotions of Americans, a place where Coleridge's dream of Xanadu, Kubla Khan's summer palace, becomes Khan's Persian Palace Theatre, a moviehouse. Hollywood stands for the ultimate illusion. West stresses the violence simmering in the tawdry dreamland of California, to which people retire in search of sunshine and thrills, only to be bored in their long-awaited leisure. They break loose into mob violence in a scene that is to be immortalized in the protagonist's painting “The Burning of Los Angeles.” The pictorial is stressed in this novel, where the action is seen mainly through the eyes of a painter who notes the ugly and pathetic imitativeness of Hollywood people and houses. In his novels West reveals in symbolic form the degradation of the American dream and the terror and violence inherent in the artificial and cheap conditions of modern man.

William Faulkner (1897-1962) began publishing his works in the 1920s and 1930s, but they were largely neglected at the time. Only in 1948 Malcolm Cowley edited and wrote a perceptive introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, thus launching widespread recognition of this great writer of the American South. Faulkner started his writing career with a conventional novel on the “lost generation” theme, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926). *Mosquitoes* (1927) was a satire on the literary coterie of New Orleans. With *Sartoris* (1929) Faulkner began creating his picture of the South. In a whole series of novels and short stories, he described a fictional region called Yoknapatawpha County and chronicled it from the 17th century to the 1950s, with particular emphasis on the first decades of the 20th century.

Also in 1929 Faulkner published one of his best and most famous novels – *The Sound and the Fury*. The book is a stylistic tour-de-force narrating the decline of the once distinguished Southern family, the Compsons. Attention is focused on Caddy Compson's loss of virginity and marriage as seen through the eyes of her three brothers – the idiot Benjy, the idealistic and morbid Quentin, and the crassly materialistic, cold Jason, his mother's darling. The novel opens with the “tale of an idiot” – the stream-of-consciousness of Benjy, for whom the loss of Caddy is the loss of love. Benjy obliquely introduces the reader into the Compson story through the confused impressions of his sensory perceptions on Good Friday 1928, his 33rd birthday, mingled with his memories of the past, which center on Caddy. Benjy is not conscious of time sequences or the cause-and-effect principle. When he burns his hand he describes the event as a disjointed mass of perceptions: “My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me. I could still hear the clock between my voice. My voice was getting louder every time.” However, what seems at first a

random collection of memories and emotions is actually a carefully chosen sequence which makes the reader experience events in the most immediate and timeless way – for Benjy is outside time.

The second part of the novel further elucidates the family history through the reminiscences of Benjy's brother, Quentin, on the day on which he drowns himself. His stream-of-consciousness also centers on Caddy, but from the viewpoint of a romantic idealist obsessed with the loss of his sister's virginity as a violation of family ties and the family's honor. In contrast to Benjy, Quentin manifests a very acute sense of time, and his suicide is an attempt to stop time and the inevitable changes that time brings. Jason, whose interior monologue occupies the third part of the novel, is locked in time as well, obsessed with the unfulfilled promise of a bank job from Caddy's husband, and frustrated in his attempts to play the stock market. While Benjy's story is timeless and full of nature images, and Quentin's is burdened by clocks ticking, Jason's is dominated by money.

The fourth part of the novel is a direct first-person narrative. It is Easter Sunday 1928 and Dilsey, the faithful Black housekeeper, the closest to a mother that the Compson children have had, takes Benjy to a Negro FASTER service. It is her attitude of stoical patience, good will and ungrudging affection that pass implicit judgement on the Compsons and the lack of affection that poisons their lives. The three brothers offer their limited versions of the family story which together form a full picture; the fourth part, dominated by Dilsey, brings a sense of distance and acts as a corrective and final judgement of the selfishness, coldness and withdrawal of love that brings the family to ruin.

The sense of family and the sense of history are very strong in Faulkner's work and stem from his deep identification with the South. His next novel, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), is again the tale of a family, the Bundrens. It narrates how these poor white farmers transport the corpse of their wife and mother to Jefferson, the town where she wished to be buried. It becomes a nightmare journey through flood and fire, an ordeal during which one son breaks his leg, one is badly burned, while another goes insane. The story is told by various members of the family and a few other characters in short passages through which their relationship to the dead woman and to one another slowly emerges. Faulkner's mastery of the point of view and his command of the Southern vernacular are particularly distinct here.

Light in August (1932) juxtaposes the violent and tragic quest for identity by Joe Christmas with Lena Grove's placid, even comic search for a husband. As the orphan who may have some Negro blood in him, Christmas becomes symbolic of man alienated from society, belonging to no race, region or class. The novel offers a picture of the South, as obsessed with the past, guilt-ridden, closed to strangers, torn by racial divisions, peopled by narrow, prejudiced and even fanatical people, prone to violence – but also a land of rural peace and kindness among simple folk.

The picture of the South is given greater historical depth in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), again the tragic tale of a family's downfall. It is the story of Thomas Sutpen, a poor white boy, who, having once been turned away from a mansion by a Negro butler, puts all his energies into gaining a plantation for himself, building a mansion, and founding a dynasty. He succeeds, but the Civil War and his own inhuman obsession wreck his family and plantation. His daughter is courted by Charles Bon, a gentleman from New Orleans, who turns out to be Sutpen's son by a previous wife, repudiated by Sutpen when he found she had a small amount of Negro blood. Sutpen not only forbids the marriage, but even refuses to acknowledge Charles as his son, because of his Negro heritage. Finally, Thomas' other son, Henry Sutpen, shoots his best friend and half-brother promoted, however, not by the fear of incest, but of miscegenation. The racial divisions within Sutpen's family destroy it so completely that at the end, when even the house has been burned down, a Negro idiot remains as the sole survivor.

The narrative is made up of several stories and various conjectures pieced together by Quentin Compson (of *The Sound and the Fury*) while approached by his Harvard classmate, who is curious about the South. The story of Sutpen is to provide an answer to the riddle of the South. Although different voices are speaking, the frenzied pitch and the ornate style are similar for all; although at times so complicated and abstract as to become monotonous, Faulkner's style often proves a brilliant way of presenting an oblique and complex picture of the past, as when Quentin visualizes the confrontation of the two half-brothers:

They faced one another on the two gaunt horses, two men, young, not yet in the world, not yet breathed over long enough, to be old, but with old eyes, with unkempt hair and faces gaunt weathered as if cast by some spartan and even hand from bronze, in worn and patched gray weathered now to the color of dead leaves, the one with the tarnished braid of an officer, the other plain of cuff, the pistol lying yet across the saddle bow unaimed, the two faces calm, the voices not even raised: *Don't you pass the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles;* and *I am going to pass it Henry!* „ – and then wash Jones sitting that saddlesess mule before Miss Rosa's gate, shouting her name into the sunny and peaceful quiet of the street, saying 'Air you Rosie Coldfield? Then you better come on out yon. Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as beef.' ”

The labyrinthine sentences offer a total impression of the scene, with glimpses of the past and future incorporated into the vivid representation of the moment described. The past is present and seems to brood over the actions of all the characters as it broods over the whole of Faulkner's South.

Absalom, Absalom! shows the decline of a family, but unlike the Compsons, the House of Sutpen is founded, flourishes and falls during the lifetime of one man, Thomas Sutpen. He brings it down through his lack of human affections and emotional responses similar to Hawthorne's "Unpardonable Sin"), his complete obsession with his "design" of founding a plantation dynasty, and his utter disregard of the Negro as a human equal. In regard to the Black man he is a representative of the South and his downfall is symbolic of the collapse of the whole region. Through his belief in energy and willpower, Sutpen rises "from rags to riches" as promised by the American dream, only to be finally destroyed. In his rationalistic attitude and rejection of traditional moral values Sutpen represents modern man. Thus the story of Sutpen takes on wide implications: it illuminates not only the condition of the South, not only the condition of Black and White in America, but the condition of mankind.

The theme is again taken up brilliantly in the short story "The Bear," from *Go Down, Moses* (1942), whose hero, Ike McCaslin, is tutored by an Indian (who also has Black and White blood) in hunting and mythic lore. He learns to accept the wilderness and all of nature in humility and the spirit of brotherhood, an attitude he extends towards the Negroes; he gives up his plantation to live a life of poverty and renunciation. "The Bear" ends with the image of a diminished and depleted wilderness: the great bear of the title is dead and the forest is being cut down by industrialists. This sense of the decline of the South, of the passing of traditional values, giving way to the materialism of the industrial North, the Yankee go-getter mentality, is the theme of Faulkner's trilogy – *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959). Faulkner depicts in it the rise to wealth and power of the Snopes clan, poor whites who better themselves at the expense of the community through dishonesty and unscrupulousness. Acquisitiveness and a lack of moral scruples allow the Snopes to gain wealth and power in the community, while the old aristocratic families, the Sartoris, the de Spains, the Compsons, that upheld the traditional values of the South, are in decline, losing their integrity and importance. The movement is from a traditional, stable rural society with clear ethical and moral norms – even if tragically flawed by the institution of slavery – to the disintegration of stable family ties, the dissolution of religious and moral conventions, and the consequent disintegration of personality faced by modern man.

This bleak vision is alleviated by instances of human dignity and endurance – Lena Grove and Byron Bunch in *Light in August*, Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, the convict in *The Wild Palms* (1939), the sewing machine agent Ratliff in *The Hamlet*, the Negro Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Ike McCaslin and his tutor Sam Fathers in "The Bear." Faulkner's later works show a mellower quality, especially *The Reivers* (1962), his last novel, a warm and comic tale of a boy's first adventures in the adult world. There is even a strain of didacticism in the later novels, usually introduced through the lawyer Gavin Stevens, as in *Intruder in the Dust*.

Humor is also present in Faulkner's works – usually broad country humor or the equivalent of a "tall tale" – as in the last scene of *Light in August* or in several scenes of *The Hamlet*. The overall impression is, however, one of doom and of tremendous forces in conflict, expressed in a rhetorical style that at times seems too rich, too complex, even tortured. Alfred Kazin raises a valid objection when he asks: "Yet why must everything in Faulkner's novels be raised to its tenth power?" Faulkner's dark vision of the South and modern man is expressed through his tortuous prose, erratic and difficult to follow at times, full of associations, conjectures, and conflicting viewpoints – all of which he combines with elements of detective fiction and Gothic romance to heighten the horror and violence of which he writes. Faulkner strains the English language to its limits, and his complicated syntax, and complex, winding sentences require as much effort from the reader as poetry. At their best they force the reader to work devotedly at recreating the story as though piecing together a mosaic, and thus immersing himself completely in Faulkner's imaginary world.

With few exceptions, all of Faulkner's novels and stories are set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County ("Area: 2400 square miles, population: whites 6298, Negroes 9313"), a region he created and drew a map of, signed "William Faulkner: Sole Owner and Proprietor." He provides a wide spectrum of characters and is able, in his own words, to "move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too." His works are significant achievements in themselves, but viewed as a whole his fiction is an extraordinary story of a region and people, as well as a profound examination of the dilemmas and moral choices faced by man in whatever latitude. As the critic Irving Howe has pointed out, Faulkner has produced "a moral fable of which the materials derive from Southern life but the meanings – at Faulkner's best – are quite without geographical reference or limit." Faulkner achieves this universality by concerning himself primarily with those "eternal verities of the heart" that he stressed as the necessary theme of the writer in his Nobel prize speech.

The Nobel prizes awarded first to Lewis, then to Faulkner and Hemingway (not to mention Pearl Buck) testify to the recognition attained both by their individual talent and by American letters in general. The writers of the 1920s brought American fiction to the forefront of world literature. As America's lifestyle, films, and other products began to influence the world, so too did its fiction, which seemed uniquely qualified to speak of the conditions of 20th-century man. Starting with fin-de-siècle attitudes and an ornate style, these writers moved towards a form that could more adequately express the violence and disillusionment of their times. Hemingway forged the famous tense and dramatic "Hemingway style," to match the post-World War I temper; Dos Passos evolved a technique of narrative "collages" to render the texture and pace of American life; Fitzgerald and West painted in symbolic terms the dissolution of America and the degradation of the American dream; Wolfe, Miller and Nin delved into the unconscious of man; Faulkner made of his elaborate chronicle of the South a significant statement on all of America and all of mankind.

These writers avoided mere surface realism and often disrupted the traditional linear flow of narrative to demonstrate the complex workings of the human mind and to stress subjective ways in which we experience events. Their literature brought new insights into the human psyche and new forms to express these insights – as well as major changes which took place in the first half of the 20th century.

The period between the two world wars is usually referred to as modernism, and was dominated by such writers as Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Andre Gide, Jean Cocteau, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. Also in American literature, which continued to have its share of older, more established writers (Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson), a new literary generation came forward to record the period they considered most particularly their own. Profoundly influenced by World War I, inspired by the literary possibilities opened by Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (both published in 1922), these young writers, led by Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, produced an unparalleled outburst of great creative talent, and thus formed a unique period in American letters.

Zbigniew Lewicki

Chapter 10: Post-War “Traditional” Fiction

The preceding chapters discussed American literature as perceived from a certain historical perspective. It is all too obvious that our judgement of works of art changes with time and writers who were very highly regarded by their contemporaries may be subsequently reduced to a two-line mention in literary histories; the reverse is just as frequently the case, as indicated by the example of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. There is nothing particularly upsetting about it; for instance, studies of changing critical attitudes towards Shakespeare provide us with valuable insights into systems of values accepted by successive generations. However, it also accounts for a feeling of uneasiness which accompanies a discussion of contemporary literature in a book like this: while other essays are based on accumulated critical judgements on writers who have passed the muster of time, our perception of living writers can be influenced by such non-literary factors as the congruence – or lack of it – between our interpretation of topical events and theirs. Therefore, this chapter will differ from the preceding ones inasmuch as it will not propose a uniform critical picture of the period under consideration. Instead, the outline of “traditional” post-war American prose presented here is meant as a guide rather than as an elaborated critical essay. It will be an attempt to present main trends and currents that characterize American fiction of today with suggestions concerning further reading. If, in twenty years or so, these lists look hopelessly obsolete, it will be but another proof that literary values do change with time.

The present discussion will not deal with the full scope of contemporary American prose. Postmodern fiction is discussed in a separate chapter, and so is Black literature. In other words, the most distinctively ethnic, as well as the most innovative types are excluded from this presentation. And yet we must remember that American fiction derives its strength from the influx of various cultures as they make their contribution to the mainstream of American civilization, as well as from its ability to come up with innovative ideas. So it is with the awareness of such self-imposed limitations that we can proceed to the discussion of individual writers.

There is probably no literary figure in contemporary America whose greatness would be accepted and recognized by everybody; variety of literary trends and convictions is such that what is sacred for some, can be an anathema for others. Yet there are writers whose art is generally recognized even if their artistic taste is not, and the most prominent among them is Saul Bellow (b. 1915). In the words of one critic, “Bellow has been described as a great realist; a follower of Dreiser and the American urban naturalistic tradition; a great fantasist...; and as the last of the Yiddish storytellers.” Bellow is indeed all of the above and a closer look at his writings from these four angles can help us understand his position in American fiction.

There are at least three basic meanings of the term “realism” in literary criticism: as a *Weltanschauung*, a writing technique, and a literary period. The last of the three is purely conventional and can be used in ways that are mutually exclusive (e.g. “magic realism,” “socialist realism,” “minor realism”) but the first two can indeed contribute to the description of a writer. Bellow is a realist not because he describes the typical and the representative, but because the world he creates has the quality of being recognizable even if we have never encountered people who inhabit it.

Bellow’s first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), may not make an exciting reading as it is a quasi-philosophical discourse rather than a good novel, yet even here we can recognize Bellow’s gift for allowing us to identify with his characters not so much through events that befall them as through problems and questions they have to face. Joseph, the book’s protagonist, is “dangling” because he expects to be drafted and cannot sensibly do anything in the indetermined period of the civilian life left to him. In fact, this period lasts for almost a year, and in the meantime Joseph is faced with dilemmas pertaining to freedom and honest life. No one is free of such problems, which accounts for the fact that we recognize the nature of Joseph’s ordeal even if we are not moved by the book itself.

The plot of Bellow’s next novel, *The Victim* (1947), seems at first to be only loosely connected with the readers’ everyday experience. Asa Leventhal, a rather boring character, is accused by one Kirby Allbee of causing the latter’s loss of a job. The charge is groundless, but it also functions on a broader plane. Allbee attacks the coward in Leventhal, senses his weakest spot and strikes at it. Consequently, what Bellow seems to be saying in this accomplished and mature novel, is that we all have such spots and can therefore fall prey to ruthless bullies.

Bellow’s early works had gained him considerable critical acclaim, but it was due to his later, “big” novels that he achieved fame and lasting recognition. The first of these was *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a rich, picaresque, panoramic novel which takes place not only in various places in the USA, but also in Mexico and Europe. We can see here Bellow the stylistic realist who can create not only Augie March’s world, but also his linguistic reality which changes just as fast as Augie’s impersonations. A true picaresque hero, he is in constant movement, and so is his language, which develops, changes – and shares some of the book’s imperfections. For *Augie March*, in Bellow’s own admission, and in the opinion of many critics, is a novel that tries to tell too much. Obviously enough, such reservations are made only on a very high level of literary perfection, as *Augie March* was awarded the National Book Award and is considered to be one of the most interesting post-war American novels.

Saul Bellow was also called “a great fantasist,” and nowhere is it more obvious than in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), perhaps the most puzzling of all his books. It takes place in Africa (treated here more as a fantasy land

than the real continent), where the main character, Eugene Henderson, bored and very rich, tries to find the sense of life. It is also a comic book which once again proves Bellow’s versatility. He feels at home not only with the rhythm of Chicago, where he has spent almost all his life, but can also present a beautifully funny scene in which Henderson enters a lioness’ den, pretending to be a lion himself.

It is, however, the city where Bellow, an admirer of Theodore Dreiser, feels most at ease and which is, fully or in a very significant part, the setting of his three “big” novels: *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975). They differ from one another in many respects. *Herzog* is a study of one man’s critical summer when his worst fears are confirmed, new calamities added, and a feeling of loneliness dramatically increased – and the center of the narrative is placed in Herzog’s own, deteriorating mind. *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is a book of a much wider scope, whose title hero “escaped alone to tell” the story. After his miraculous survival he has lived in the New World which is not his world. It is a bitter book, in which an old Polish Jew symbolizes the paradox of the modern world whose inhabitants are so painfully aware of humanitarian principles – and have done so much to destroy one another. What can be the position of art in such world? Bellow does not deal with this question directly, but *Humboldt’s Gift* offers at least a partial comment on it. Charles Citrine’s wordly success is juxtaposed with the failure of Von Humboldt Fleisher (based on the poet Delmore Schwartz) and we are made painfully aware that success comes with a very exacting price. But with all their differences, these novels offer the best of Bellow, who moves around big cities of America with relish and expertise, and who provides us with a true sense of what life in the contemporary megalopolis is like, just as Dickens or Balzac gave us not only their plots but also memorable sense of life in the 19th-century London or Paris.

Bellow’s works have achieved both a popular success and critical acclaim. He won two more National Book Awards (for *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*), and in 1976 received the Nobel Prize. He continues to write fiction, where he tries to explore new territories. His most recent book, *The Dean’s December* (1982) is set mainly in Bucharest, possibly no more real than Henderson’s Africa, and while it is not among his best works, one cannot help but admire his willingness to leave the known and try the unknown. He is also the author of several stories (*Mosby’s Memoirs*, 1968, is a collection of these), a play (*The Last Analysis*, 1965), and a journalistic account of Israel, *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976). He is the subject of at least a dozen book-length studies, as he continues to fascinate the critics with his ability to understand man’s mind and nature, and to express the universal through the particular. He is a deep, widely educated writer, who would frequently leave the narrative in order to present a philosophical statement. He is by all accounts a major voice in contemporary American literature.

American fiction today is so complex and varied that it is all but impossible to discuss it without some auxiliary categories, though categorizing can never do justice to a good writer. One criterion for such classification is by the authors’ main interest and setting. Accordingly, Saul Bellow is frequently discussed under the heading of Jewish urban novel, and while he does not limit his interests to the Jewish American culture, there are other major American writers for whom it is the main frame of reference; Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud seem to be the best-known ones.

Philip Roth (b. 1933) made a very strong appearance with his first book, a collection of stories called *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). The title novella, as well as the frequently anthologized stories, all deal with the problems that arise when the traditionally impenetrable Jewish culture confronts the American reality: basically friendly yet different and much less conservative. Neither here, nor in such books as *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) is Roth really concerned with the question of anti-Semitism. Instead, his Jewish characters, who belong to the young generation, try to define themselves against older family members who strive to preserve the Jewish identity regardless of obvious social changes. Another side of this problem appears in the case of a Jewish writer who wants to write about his own experience. In his Zuckerman trilogy, begun with *The Ghost Writer* (1979) Roth attempts to deal with this problem, which is not an abstract concept for him. In his essay “Writing About Jews” (1963) he presents the dilemma of all “ethnic” writers. If one wants to depict his community faithfully, it is impossible to disregard its less attractive aspects, yet presenting such elements would inevitably lead to the community’s displeasure and rejection of the writer.

With all his preoccupation with the Jewish problems, some of Roth’s best fiction does not deal with them. *The Breast* (1972) grows out of his two other obsessions: with Franz Kafka and with sex. The protagonist of the novella wakes up one morning to discover he has been turned into a female breast: a take-off from Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*, to be sure, but where Gregor Samsa discovers the meaning of life, Roth’s David Alan Kepesh, while understandably shocked, is very much concerned with various erotic possibilities his new situation offers. We may also mention here Roth’s *The Great American Novel* (1973), a story told within the framework of baseball, the sacred sport of America. It is a metaphorical portrait of the USA, and yet another attempt to realize the dream of all American writers: “to write the great American novel.”

Interesting enough, Bernard Malamud (b. 1914) also devoted one of his novels, *The Natural* (1952), to the world of baseball, though his later works almost invariably deal with one aspect or another of the Jewish culture in America. He is the author of several novels, such as *The Assistant* (1957), the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award winner *The Fixer* (1966), or *The Tennants* (1971), which discusses the relationship between Jews and Blacks. He is also the author of three books of stories: *The Magic Barrel* (1958), *Idiots First* (1963), and *Rembrandt’s Hat* (1973) which have earned him several awards and are frequently anthologized.

The discussion of post-war Jewish American fiction cannot be complete without mentioning J.D. Salinger (b. 1919), the author of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), as well as a number of stories, some of which are strongly autobiographical. One cannot overestimate the influence of *The Catcher* on the generation of the 1950s: Holden Caulfield, whose rebellion is basically without a cause, became the embodiment of the frustration of his generation which was only discovering the tensions that would erupt some fifteen years later. After this immensely successful novel, Salinger wrote some more stories, the last of which appeared in 1963. Always a recluse who shunned all publicity, he then stopped publishing anything. He continues to live in Connecticut, and the people who discovered the world through Caulfield's eyes refuse to believe they will never hear from Salinger again: every time a surprisingly accomplished new writer appears, the first rumor is always that it is Salinger writing under a pseudonym. As an aside from the discussion of American ethnic fiction, let me only mention the latest of such "salingers": William Wharton, whose *Birdy* (1979) is an extraordinarily powerful and beautiful book. Wharton (which in fact is a pseudonym, though not Salinger's) went on to write *Dad* (1981) and *A Midnight Clear* (1982), both fine achievements, even if of a somewhat lesser order.

The other large group of ethnic writers, the Blacks, are discussed elsewhere in this book. It is probably here, however, that one should mention Jerzy Kosinski (b. 1933). Probably – because while he himself was born in Poland, his fiction is not really ethnic in character. Books like *Steps* (1968, winner of The National Book Award), *Being There* (1971), or his latest novel to date, *Pinball* (1982) draw on the author's American experience, with only an occasional mention of Eastern Europe. Yet his first novel, *The Painted Bird* (1965), probably his best, or even, as some believe, his only great fiction, takes place in the country of the author's childhood, East of today's Poland. Kosinski is a very popular writer and also a respected literary figure (he was the President of American Center of P.E.N.), and the fact that he frequently talks about his Polish roots certainly helps the Polish image in America.

Other than the ethnic one, the main classification of American writers is geographical, according to what part of the United States, together with its history and tradition, constitutes the main area of a writer's interest. We can therefore talk about California writers, or the East Coast city novelists, but the largest and most distinctive of such groups has always been that of the Southern writers, despite the continuous process of the disappearance of regional differences. Few would also question that the most controversial of this group is William Styron.

An heir to an established and distinguished Southern family, William Styron (b. 1925) inherited the full measure of what is usually referred to as the Southern tradition. Brought up in the atmosphere of gentility and good manners, sent to good schools, this Virginia gentleman was also painfully aware of the two basic problems that all enlightened Southerners had to face: one was the lingering sense of humiliation at being, at that time, the only Americans who had ever lost a war, the other, the acute question of the Blacks, who in the 1950s were still far from emancipation in the South. In what was almost a rebellious act, Styron moved to New York City where, in 1951, he published his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*. It is a very perceptive portrait of a Southern family entangled in a web of destructive feelings. The decay of the South is shown through the fate of Peyton Loftis, and young and lovely girl, who cannot regain her childhood innocence and is doomed to destruction. The book can also be interpreted as an act of Styron's own catharsis, who could now emerge from his Southern enclosure and become a writer who does not belong to one segment of the society only.

However, he was not entirely free of his own haunting past and in 1952 he published *The Long March*, a short novel which dealt with the senseless cruelty of the Marine corps and which was largely autobiographical. The conciseness of the novel heightens the effect of tragedy as young Marines die because of their superiors' stupidity and errors. Styron's next novel, *Set This House on Fire* (1960) confirmed the considerable talent, though it did not offer any new insights into his creative abilities. He seemed to be destined for a safe place among good, if somewhat predictable, writers of domestic tragedy and individual frustration, when his fourth work of fiction, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) changed the situation dramatically.

Nat Turner was a nineteenth-century Virginia slave who, thinking of himself in terms of Moses leading his people out of bondage, plotted a rebellion against the white owners. It called for murdering not only the farmers, but also their families; the rebels planned to conquer the city of Jerusalem, Va., get guns there and proceed to establish their own state. These plans were, obviously, thwarted by the state militia, yet the two-day revolt resulted in the death of 55 whites, 24 of them children. Nat Turner and 16 of his followers were executed (there were more participants, but the owners had to agree to have their thousand-dollars-worth "property" prosecuted and some did not). For the purpose of his novel, Styron resurrected historical material that had been long forgotten, reconstructed the mood and atmosphere of the 1830s and, perhaps predictably, arrived at a highly controversial picture of Nat Turner. For all his efforts of fact and fiction he was immediately attacked by Black writers and historians. They not only claimed that the memory of Turner had been sacred among the Blacks (in fact he had been all but forgotten before Styron published his novel), but also accused Styron of racial prejudice and willful distortion of facts. The charges were unfounded and were subsequently repudiated by such historians as E. Genovese, whose sympathy to the Black cause is beyond doubt, yet Styron was deeply hurt. In his own view, he worked hard at overcoming the anti-Black attitude of the South, succeeded at it – and was then unfairly criticized for what he believed was an accurate account of a very controversial historical figure. What we may not, however, forget is that the book was published during the critical stage of the Black Americans' struggle in the 1960s: "hot summers" resulted in many more deaths than Turner's uprising and liberal

Americans were torn between the support for the Black cause and rejection of violent means used to achieve the emancipation. It was quite natural that a new novel by an established writer was read from the perspective of topical events.

Entangled in such unfriendly publicity, Styron fell silent as a novelist until 1979 when he published *Sophie's Choice*. His longest and probably the most complex book to date, the novel is set in post-war New York where the narrator (clearly based on Styron himself) meets an odd couple: a beautiful refugee from Poland, Sophie, and her Jewish lover, Nathan who, being mentally disturbed, is given to outbursts of uncontrollable rage. Intertwined with this is the story of Sophie's past – first in the pre-war Krakow as the daughter of a despotic and virulently anti-Semitic father, and then at Auschwitz, where she is faced with the title's choice. The book is far too complex and rich in details to be easily outlined, and it certainly confirmed Styron's special place in American literature. While even in *Sophie's Choice* he returns to the Southern problems (the narrator comes from the South which figures prominently in his thoughts), he has been able to project them upon the larger plane of American, or human, reality.

The same is true of another major Southern novelist, Walker Percy (b. 1916), though in his case the "Southern" label seems to be even less appropriate. His roots are in the South, which is also setting of his novels, but their subject-matter is only incidentally related to such regional problems. *The Moviegoer* (1961) can be perhaps best characterized as an existential novel, with its main character trying to define his place in the world which for him is a combination of the outside reality and the reality of the movies he loves to watch. The protagonists of Percy's other novels (*The Last Gentleman*, 1966; *Love in the Ruins*, 1971; *Lancelot*, 1977) are invariably heirs to established Southern families who are alienated from their environment. They are attractive and bright, and they do not dramatize their predicament. They try to live with it rather than fight against it – unless they are forced to act by somebody else's behavior. Percy is what one can call a philosopher-writer and even if his treatment of ultimate problems is not always quite serious (*The Second Coming*, 1980), the depth of his thinking is evident not only from his fiction but also from a surprisingly insightful volume of essays *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), in which he deals with problems of existence, human communication, and various theories of meaning and symbol.

As can be inferred from the above, the most prominent Southern writers reject the confinement of regionalism, and the division of American literature into such categories is in the process of becoming a thing of the past. Yet the Southern tradition, which goes back to the 19th century – and which was so powerfully realized in the works of William Faulkner – had some of its best representatives in the recent past, when both Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers were creating their versions of the South.

Flannery O'Connor was a writer of great promise which, due to her untimely death, she could fulfill only partially. She is the author of two novels and several short stories grouped in two collections. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), which title is borrowed from the French Catholic philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, presents a gallery of Southern types who are in various states of mental instability, who are misadjusted to their world, whose loneliness leads them to cruelty, or whose stubbornness makes themselves and others unhappy. All these features are by no means typically Southern, yet O'Connor seems to be saying that the region's backwardness joined forces with its intolerance, and the resulting horrors are self-destructive.

Finally, there was Carson McCullers (1917-1967), who loved the grotesque and whose writing is sometimes dismissed as "Gothic." It is true that the world of her fiction frequently borders on the supernatural and her characters' behavior sometimes escapes rational explanation. Yet she differs from the Gothic fiction in that her aim is not just to scare, or even to shock the readers. Behind the moments she depicts, however bizarre, there is a deeper sense of some higher order, of the ultimate reason that is in turn rooted in the Southern tradition and way of life. This central principle, the kernel of her universe, is not really God, but love in McCullers' broad and unusual understanding of it.

At the beginning of what is probably her best story, "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," she discusses the meaning of love in the well-known paragraph which begins with: "First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons – but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved." There seems to be nothing particularly revealing about this statement, until we discover what McCullers means by this dissimilarity of experience. The ones who fall in love, she seems to be saying in "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," are doomed to lose, for love not only is not harmonious, but it is in fact nothing short of being a destructive force. The tension, immanent to the relationship, is at the core of McCullers' story – and of her other writings as well. The collection begins with the title story where Marvin Macy, Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon all lose their position and have their security destroyed because they fall in love – and it ends with "A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud" which concludes that love for a woman is so destructive to a man that it should be substituted with other types of love: a conclusion which is so obviously self-defeating. The world of McCullers' fiction, entangled in its own contradictions, is yet another example of the complex reality of the American South.

Some Polish critics like to point out similarities between Polish literature and that of the American South: sense of history, chivalry, and the concept of honor are among the most frequently cited analogies. Even if such arguments are strained, they at least provide a framework within which an uninitiated foreign reader can place Southern fiction. No such pattern is available in the case of John Updike's "middle America" novels.

John Updike (b. 1932) has written fiction and criticism on a wider scope of topics than any other contemporary American writer. Mythological patterns and satire, short stories and poems, permanent book review columns and a long

list of successful novels – all these indicate the unique character of a true man of letters that John Updike is. For the purpose of this brief review, however, his Rabbit trilogy seems to be best suited.

There have been three books so far about Henry Angstrom: *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), each of them addressing problems of the decade preceding its publication date. When we first see him, Rabbit almost belongs to the middle class. "Almost," because despite his family pressuring him to accept his lot, he desperately tries to find some other way of living his life. In order to understand Rabbit's predicament one has to realize the meaning of "middle America." What Rabbit is most scared of is what constitutes the essence of the American middle class – its mediocrity. Unlike European bourgeoisie, it is not primarily characterized by intricate codes of behavior, lack of tolerance, or strong caste feelings. On the contrary, it is capable of most outrageous acts as Updike shows in his *Couples* (1968) or, for that matter, in *Rabbit is Rich*. What is central about it, and what Rabbit tries to avoid as he longs for his high-school days of fame, is the concept of being "in the middle."

He remains faithful to his rebellion in the 1960s when, as seen in *Rabbit Redux*, he proves capable of radical behavior. Not only does he live with a young hippie girl, but also extends his hospitality to a militant black boy, which ultimately leads to a real tragedy. In both books Rabbit seems to attract death – not his own but of persons he associates with. He never attains a tragic dimension himself as he moves around so many moribund people because he seems to be unaffected by all this. He is portrayed as the archetypal outcast, a character who can win readers' sympathy but who is constitutionally unable to blend with the rest of his community. Which would have been true if not for *Rabbit Is Rich*, which altered it all.

Perhaps it should not have been such a surprise: after all, the leaders of the 1960s "youthful revolution" are today's mayors, Wall Street bankers, pillars of the "middle America." Perhaps Harry Angstrom could no longer remain outside the society simply because there is no more outside: the forces of protest have been integrated into the system. Perhaps Updike needed to pit such Rabbit against his son in order to show, once again, that fathers and sons never agree. Perhaps, finally, it is more comforting for the reader to see Rabbit as a winner, rather than as a constant loser. Yet Rabbit a successful used-car dealer, golf player, wife-swapper is a great disappointment. The feeling comes from the fact that Updike could not sustain the pattern, find a cause, or at least a reason for Rabbit to continue his blameful life. Rabbit of the first two novels, while a sorry character, was a "huggable" one; Rabbit of the third novel is neither.

What makes Updike an enjoyable writer is his ability to create characters that readers can identify with to overcome the barrier of artificiality which plagues even best books. It seems that Norman Mailer (b. 1923) is one author who almost enjoys distancing the reader from the events he describes rather than creating the illusion of immediacy.

Mailer's first book, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), brought him instant fame and remains to this day one of the best American war novels. Its three central characters, General Cummings, Lieutenant Hearn, and Sergeant Croft represent not only three levels of the military chain of command, but also three different approaches to war – and to life. What they have in common, and what is so characteristic for all of Mailer's fiction, is that the best way to describe them is through their relation to power. Mailer is fascinated by it, be it physical, political or intellectual power. In his semi-autobiographical novel *An American Dream* (1965), first misunderstood and then still underrated, Stephen Rojak's thirty-two hours in New York City are centered around the same concept. Events, even as violent as death, serve to underscore Mailer's constant fascination with the ways in which power can be used either to intimidate people, destroy them – or make them immune from any responsibility.

This is not to say that Mailer is always disposed positively towards power. A good part of his writing career has been devoted to journalism, and while it is of a very special, personal kind with either Norman Mailer or Aquarius (his Zodiac sign) annoyingly cast in the role of the central character, Mailer comes down against what he sees as abuses of political power, most notably during the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968. One has also to appreciate Mailer's versatility: in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), a book about the flight of Apollo-11, his grasp of technical problems makes one forget he is not a specialist; *The Executioner's Song* (1979), "a true life novel" of Gary Gilmore's crime and death, offers a view of American society that surpasses by far the Gilmore case itself; and his latest book to date, *Ancient Evenings* (1983), takes place in ancient Egypt, with a host of accurate information about the life at the Pharaoh's court. Both as a writer and as a personality, Mailer can be unnerving, yet one cannot but marvel at his versatility, power and an unparalleled scope of interests. He indeed seems to be, as Ihab Hassan says, "the chief representative of the age."

The above review is far from exhaustive. Many established writers have been omitted for the lack of space, to mention only Robert Coover, E.L. Doctorow, Stanley Elkin, Joyce Carol Oates, Joseph McElroy, Gilbert Sorrentino, Gore Vidal – and at least a dozen or so more. One could also argue that Jack Kerouac or Ken Kesey deserved some attention despite the fact that their heyday is over. However, let us not forget that the briefest of sensible introductions to post-war American writing, Ihab Hassan's *Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972*, devotes over sixty pages to what could be described as "traditional fiction." This essay had to be much briefer and had thus to leave out more than it could take in. It can only be hoped that those who are interested in the subject will find their own way both to fiction itself and to more exhaustive critical commentaries. It seems quite obvious that contemporary American prose is worth the effort.

Elzbieta Foeller

Chapter 11: Recent Innovations in American Fiction

Nabokov, Burroughs, Hawkes, Pynchon, Barth, Coover, Purdy, Heller, Vonnegut, Barthelme, Brautigan, Elkin, Donleavy... These names and many others represent a turning away from strict realism in American fiction towards what is sometimes known as “irrealism” or “fabulation.” Dating back to Cervantes and the beginnings of the novel in European literature, superbly represented by Laurence Sterne in English fiction, this is the tradition of regarding the novel not as a more or less faithful representation of reality, but as independent art form creating its own universe with its own set of rules.

This attitude has been strengthened by developments in twentieth-century psychics and psychology. After Einstein’s formulation of the theory of relativity and Heisenberg’s discovery of the uncertainty principle, the universe presented by science is no longer the stable, ordered clockwork world of the 18th century, or the 19th-century world dependent on the straightforward mechanics of cause and effect, but a universe subjected to chance, devoid of absolutes, and ultimately unknowable. Whitehead, as well as phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger, point out the existence of a dynamic, conscious self as the only central and unifying observer of experience. Wittgenstein’s insistence on the importance of language – “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” – is echoed in the fiction of many contemporary writers, of whom Barth and Pynchon quote Wittgenstein in their works. The existentialists (Sartre and Camus) have influenced contemporary literature by their stress on man’s freedom in the face of the void and the consequent necessity for role-playing and consciously choosing one’s own values. Huizinga’s notion of civilization based on play (*Homo ludens*), which is a way of consciously confronting the determinism of reality, also coincides with the current delight in artful design and the playful treatment of literary material present in much contemporary American fiction.

These tendencies are present in the great works of the modernists – such as Joyce, Mann, Kafka, Gide – which stressed the artifice and autonomy of literary art and revealed the process of literary creation itself. Finding the outside world ultimately unknowable, and influenced by the discoveries of Freud and Jung, these writers delved inwards into the psyche of the individual, and backwards into the mythic past and its illumination of the collective psyche of mankind. Whether contemporary innovative American fiction, often dubbed “postmodern” or “post-modernist,” constitutes a further development of modernism or a new movement altogether is much discussed by critics and writers alike. The exact nature of “postmodernism” has also been a subject of intense debate; it is usually taken to denote contemporary fiction which displays formal experimentation and stresses the artificiality of its worlds. The work of literature is presented to the reader as fictive, as an artificial construct of the author’s mind, an arbitrary pattern for ordering phenomena. Hence postmodern fiction is often treated as a game between author and reader, through the medium of elaborate design that calls attention to itself or through “naïve,” childlike narration, with episodic structure. The fictional characters tend towards two-dimensional, “flat” types, and the works in general display “black humor,” unstable irony and pervasive satire. Actions and characters are grotesque, rendered absurd through exaggeration and repetition. Elements of fantasy, fairy tales, or myths are present, often combined with parody of traditional fiction or popular formulaic genres (e.g. the thriller, Western, Gothic romance). Therefore language experiments constitute an important element of postmodern fiction and among its antecedents are not only Cervantes and Sterne, but also Gertrude Stein with her language experiments and Nathanael West with his use of the grotesque and surreal in fiction.

One of the earliest practitioners of postmodernism was William Burroughs. In his works he presents a nightmarish science-fiction world, colored by the imagination of a drug addict. He produces fictions (most notably in *Naked Lunch*) of episodic structure, which emphasizes randomness and lack of continuity. In his later works Burroughs employs a “cut-up method,” in which he uses his own text, as well as newspaper clippings, all cut up and rearranged in a collage. His purpose is to break the power language has of structuring existence and elucidating standard responses from the reader. The method harks back to Tristan Tzara and the Surrealists, besides being influenced by the “Camera Eye” sections of Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy. Burroughs presents reality as a wasteland manipulated by hostile and omnipresent forces of evil (sometimes extraterrestrial in origin), as well as a distorted circus, amusement park or vaudeville show. Through the disruption of the linear flow of cause-and-effect narration Burroughs wishes to liberate the reader from conventional responses and limitations of traditionally conceived time and space.

In his second novel, *JR*, William Gaddis discards conventional narrative for a jumble of nearly simultaneous voices which the reader must decipher, as though he were listening in on a telephone conversation. Indeed, the telephone is important in the novel – the eleven-year-old JR of the title uses it to conceal his identity and build a great business concern. The form stresses the confusion of present-day language and the break-down in communication, while the subject matter satirizes American big business and the American obsession with money, the word that opens the book.

In his first novel, *The Recognitions* (influential with younger writers, especially Pynchon, though critically almost ignored), Gaddis offers a meditation on creation as opposed to reality, and on imitation versus originality. He

does it by recording the experiences of a gifted painter who devotes his considerable talent to copying or counterfeiting old Flemish masters in recognition of their greatness. The whole novel, enormously complex, witty, multi-layered, in itself evokes the “Old Masters” of modernism, most notably Joyce and his *Ulysses*, with echoes of Gide’s *Counterfeiters*.

Vladimir Nabokov, coming to American letters from the European traditions of Russian and French literature, even more clearly poses questions on the nature of reality versus creation and undermines the reader’s traditional assumptions of a reliable narrator. *Pale Fire*, for instance, is a novel written in the form of a long narrative poem by an American poet Shade, with notes by a certain Kinbote, who uses the notes to present himself as a king in exile, threatened by an assassin. Nabokov deliberately leaves it unclear whether Shade (a telling name?) is a figment of Kinbote’s imagination, or vice versa, or whether both “exist” at all. The novel is a riddle, to which several equally valid solutions are possible, full of literary allusions and puns (which also fill the pages of Nabokov’s best-known novel, *Lolita*), as well as an elaborate parody of literary scholarship.

Parody is a pervasive element of contemporary innovative fiction in America. John Barth in his influential essay on “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) argues that at present certain literary forms or genres have become exhausted and can only be revived through the use of irony and parody, as the imaginative and original fictions of J.L. Borges demonstrate. The postmodernists have comically transformed such traditional genres as the picaresque (Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, Pynchon’s *V.*, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Brautigan’s *Trout Fishing in America*, Donleavy’s novels), the epistolary novel (Barth’s *Letters*), or the historical romance Brautigan’s *The Abortion: A Historical Romance*). They also employ the framework of popular formulaic genres such as the thriller (Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Burrough’s *Nova Express*, Hawkes’ *The Lime Twig*, Pynchon’s novels), the Western (Brautigan’s *The Hawkline Monster*, Berger’s *Little Big Man*, Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times*) as well as such popular genres as science fiction (Vonnegut), the war novel (Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Heller’s *Catch-22*), the political novel (*The Public Burning* by Coover, Heller’s *Good as Gold*), or the business novel (Gaddis’ *JR*). Familiar conventions are taken and given a new twist, made unfamiliar and arresting through irony, exaggeration, repetition, distortion, or an unexpected viewpoint. For instance, picaresque adventures on the road and the historical background of Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* are elaborated to such an extravagant extent that they finally undermine their own validity, creating humorous distance between the reader and the text. Pynchon’s encyclopaedic novels *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* offer a wide variety of parodies of the spy thriller, war story, novel of intrigue, picaresque novel, quest novel, pornography. The parody provides humor, as well as distance and an unconventional perspective for viewing the dilemmas of contemporary man, particularly his loss of stable, traditional values.

To many contemporary writers the world is disordered, chaotic, even entropic (i.e. moving towards inert uniformity and disintegration). What to previous generations seemed stable and recognizable, now appears fragmented and ultimately unknowable; hence the tendency to consider all man’s endeavors to find meaningful patterns in existence – through myth, religion, history – as arbitrary constructs of the human mind, which craves order and explanation. As Vonnegut states it in his typically laconic and simple manner, using the form of a calypso song:

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, “Why, why, why?”
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

This little poem comes from the novel *Cat’s Cradle*, where the pattern made of string, in which there is “no damn cat, and no cradle,” serves as a symbol of human mystification through language. Tony Tanner, in his admirable study of contemporary American fiction *City of Words*, rightly sees the American writer as trying to find a middle ground between the human mind’s tendency to overorganize existence into rigid structures and the chaos that threatens man if he does not impose order on the outside world.

Man’s patterning of existence is usually recognized by these writers as necessary, but not inherent in nature. Hence much spoofing of myth and religion (Barth’s *Chimera* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, Gardner’s *Grendel*, Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*), as well as history, usually through the overelaboration of plot, evident tampering with historical “facts,” and the introduction of grotesque characters and happenings. At the same time elements of fantasy, fairy tale and myth are used more often and with greater assurance than before. Barthelme and Coover have produced parodies of fairy tales in *Snow White* and *Pricksongs and Descants* respectively, while Donleavy entitled one of his novels *A Fairy Tale of New York*. Archaic genres and literary situations are treated playfully. As in the case of Barth’s mythological heroes in *Chimera* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, Gardner’s monster protagonist Grendel, Pynchon’s weirdly named characters, or Donleavy contemporary *picaros*, characters are reduced to certain tricks or mannerisms, like cartoon characters or puppets. Thus Barthelme’s Snow White and her seven lovers (not dwarfs), like most of Barthelme’s protagonists, move in an unspecified urban environment and talk in an intellectual jargon which becomes funny in the “fairy-tale” context. Snow White lets down her hair from a window and muses that “this motif, the long hair streaming from the high

window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms. Now I recapitulate it, for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life.” The coolly self-conscious stance of Snow White is put into the naïve framework of a familiar fairy tale. This juxtaposition of two familiar modes that “clash” causes a dislocation, present in much of contemporary American fiction. Contemporary reality, particularly American reality, is presented from an ironic distance, achieved by the means of such a dislocation or extravagant exaggeration.

A similar ironic effect is attained through the use of an unusual viewpoint such as that of a long-lived, bored and thinking monster observing and musing over the history of mankind (*Grendel*), or of a simpler man of the future (Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*, Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*). The reader is lured into the familiar formulaic world of myth, fairy tale, Gothic romance, thriller, or science fiction, and then discovers a dislocation or distortion in the usual pattern, which serves as the vehicle for conveying ironic perceptions of the contemporary world.

Often, different perceptions of reality are offered in one and the same work as alternatives for the reader to accept or choose for himself, such as the varied and even mutually exclusive events in Coover’s famous story “The Babysitter” or the conspiracies hinted at by Pynchon in his novels. Thus the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* speculates to herself on the events of the story:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images all over San Francisco, bribing of librarians, hiring of professional actors and Pierce Inverarity only knows what-all besides, all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor of Pierce Inverarity’s estate, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull.

These alternatives, all of them valid to the end of the novel, suggest the multiple possibilities latent in reality and the arbitrariness of the patterning activities of the human mind.

There is a danger here of lapsing into moral relativity and lack of concern, which the postmodernists have frequently been accused of (among others by John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction*), because the pervasive irony undercuts all pronouncements. Violence, death, and sex are frequently treated as a source of humor by postmodernist writers, and they tend to stress the basic absurdity of the human condition; writers such as Heller, Vonnegut, Pynchon, and Barth have been called novelists of the absurd, and black humorists. One cannot doubt, however, the moral purposes of an author like Vonnegut, and even Barth, who points out the absence of absolutes but still affirms such traditional values as love, duty, and the pursuit of immortality through creativity.

Vonnegut and Barth represent two poles of recent American innovative fiction, simplicity and seeming naïveté opposite elaborate parody and self-conscious sophistication. Vonnegut’s fictions are written in short episodes and the simple language of a child. Barth’s enormous and complicated pastiche of the eighteenth-century picaresque historical romance, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, has the same effect of debunking the convenient stereotypes of American history, but it is conveyed through self-consciously overelaborate design, and a variety of interpretations of historical events.

In both cases the reader is asked to participate in a game between reader and author. Authorial presence is stressed, as when in *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut „releases” his characters, or Barth „recycles” the characters from his earlier books in *Letters*, making them exchange letters with one another – and with himself. Barthelme gives his reader a questionnaire in the middle of *Snow White*, where he asks, among other questions:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes () No ()
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes () No ()
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes () No ()
5. In the further development of the story, would you like more emotion? () or less emotion ()
13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the War, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far? (Please circle your answer)
15. In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? () Two sets of shoulders? () Three? ()

This kind of self-consciousness is very typical of contemporary American writers, who are intensely concerned with the problems of literary creation. As the above passage demonstrates, they are also aware of the comic

aspects of their preoccupation and the efforts of critics to explain literature. Many of Barth's fictions, especially in *Lost in the Funhouse*, and Coover's stories in *Pricksongs and Descants* are meditations on the act of writing. In "Life-Story" Barth's writer-protagonist is having difficulties with his story:

Discarding what he'd already written as he could wish to discard the mumbling pages of his life he began his story afresh, resolved this time to eschew overt and self-conscious discussion of his narrative process and to recount instead in the straightforwardest manner possible the several complications of his character's conviction that he was a character in a work of fiction, arranging them into dramatically ascending stages if he could for his reader's sake and leading them (the stages) to an exciting climax and denouement if he could.

The difficulties and pleasures of writing in the second half of the 20th century are explored by Barth, Coover, Purdy (*Cabot Wright Begins*), Nabokov, and Barthelme. They all reveal the fictiveness of their literary creations, but also point to the necessity of such human patterning activities as writing literature. Despite frequent prophecies on the death of the novel, the genre still flourishes. It has even come up with a new sub-genre, known as the non-fiction novel – a paradoxical term which points to the merging of fact and fiction in literature. It denotes works of journalism written in the manner of a novel, a trend started by Truman Capote with his account of an actual murder *In Cold Blood*, and continued by Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, who gave it the name of "New Journalism."

Contemporary American fiction can be summed up by Barth's "Frame-Tale" in *Lost in the Funhouse* – the words "Once upon a time there was a story that began" on a strip of paper which should be cut out and pasted together to form a Moebius strip, which then reads as a continuum. The text stresses the enduring and even repetitive nature of storytelling, while the form is new and ironically humorous. American fiction today displays both a consciousness of its literary past and an eagerness to enrich the long tradition of narrative with its own innovations.

Kathe Davis Finney

Chapter 12: Afro-American Literature

Although ultimately Afro-American literature will probably best be seen as an integral part of American literature as a whole, at the present time the most important single effort of this literature is still toward the achievement of proper recognition and appreciation of Black life and culture, of the uniquely Black historical experience, and of Black perceptions and talent.¹

Black literature has of course been shaped by the same forces that shaped American literature in general. In genre terms it began similarly in expository and autobiographical writing, moved to religious and political subjects, and only relatively late to fiction. It has followed a similar trajectory of millennialist hope and subsequent frustration, disappointment, disillusion, and then regrouping, defining new goals as well as searching for new paths to the old goals. But Blacks have suffered a painfully distinct version of those forces, and most Afro-American authors have felt the differences more strongly than the similarities. Whatever pride and hope in their country they may retain, they tend to write as Blacks first and Americans second.

Afro-American literature is usually talked about as if it appeared out of nowhere in the 1920s – and indeed, that may be the White perception. Roger Rosenblatt even says in *Black Fiction* (1974) that the genre “runs the full course of its history within what we know as the modern literary period.” While that may be true for fiction, Afro-American literature more generally is almost as old as American slavery. But a great deal of the energy spent on writing was devoted to work outside the conventional literary genres of fiction, poetry, and drama, simply because Blacks were not part of the literary world. When their more urgent political and social material is taken into account, then a much longer and stronger Afro-American literary tradition emerges. Since an important part of the present Black literary endeavor is to recover this buried past, this essay devotes more space to it than is usual in brief surveys. The earlier authors and works are not names which need to be committed to memory, but the reader should be aware of their existence.

The first known Afro-American poem is “Bars Fight,” a verse narrative of an Indian raid, written by a slave girl, Lucy Terry in 1746. Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784) was a much better-known slave poet, whose actual life made a special appeal to the imagination. She was born in Senegal, West Africa, and sold into slavery as a young girl. Brought to Boston in 1761, she was educated by her owners and eventually earned her freedom through her poetry. She followed the literary models of her time, and her poems are conventional and didactic. Her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) printed in London, was the first book to be published by an American Black.

Earlier Jupiter Hammon (1720-1806), another educated domestic slave, had become the first Black in America to have a poem published. His religious poem “An Evening Thought” appeared as a broadside – also printed in London – in 1760. Though literarily inferior to Wheatley, he was also used by abolitionists as proof of what Blacks could do given a Christian education. Arna Bontemps, one of the best-known modern anthologists of Black literature and himself a poet as well as a significant historian of Black literature, places these poets in “a tradition of writers in bondage which goes back to Aesop and Terence.”

But in a period of revolution throughout Europe, the American governing groups feared similar uprisings, and a series of laws made it illegal to educate Blacks. Black literature therefore went “underground.” The rich African heritage of folk literature thus remained mostly an oral tradition. That tradition is one which persists to the present day, in inner-city ghettos as well as in isolated rural areas. It has been documented and studied by folklorists and other scholars, and by contemporary linguists (notably George Lakoff). Music formed an important part of this tradition and was an important expression of this people’s poetic impulse. (A modern poet, James Weldon Johnson, has celebrated the anonymous makers of these powerful spiritual and work songs in his famous poem “O Black and Unknown Bards.”)

The ban on Black literacy during slavery also meant that documentation of Black experience became one of the most important functions of Black literature. The life story was one of the two major genres of Afro-American writing before the Civil war, when Black art was mainly, in the words of one critic, “an expression of suffering and an affirmation of manhood in the quest for freedom.” *The Narrative of William Wells Brown* (1847) and Samuel R. Ward’s *The Autobiography of a Fugitive Slave* (1855) were particularly important. Both writers were widely known as anti-slavery lecturers, and both contributed to *Freedom’s Journal*, the first Black newspaper in the U.S. (which began publication in New York in 1827). Brown also wrote the first play by an American Black, *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom* (1858). By far the best and most famous pre-Civil War autobiography, however, was *The Narrative*

¹ Terminology remains an unsettled issue, but some distinctions are clear. The old-fashioned name “colored” has come to seem demeaning and condescending, and is virtually never used by sympathetic writers today. The term “Negro,” which seemed respectful enough in the earlier part of this century, has also become objectionable to many. The term “Black” began to be widely used during the 1960s. Finally, “Afro-American” has come to use, especially among literary scholars, as more accurate and freer of political associations. In this essay the last two terms are used interchangeably.

of the Life of Frederick Douglass. It was immediately popular at its publication in 1845, and a revised edition was reissued ten years later under the title *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

The other chief pre-Civil War genre in Afro-American writing was the oration, again based on the Black tradition of oral literature, and especially of powerful pulpit preaching. From this anti-slavery polemic emerged. David Walker's pamphlet *Appeal* (1829) merely described Black oppression without recommending action, but it was so powerful that it was outlawed.

In 1850 *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published, telling the life of a fighter for Black freedom who has since become as legendary a figure as Harriet Tubman, who became famous assisting slaves on the Underground Railroad (the system of escape routes and refuges through which Blacks made their way secretly to the North and freedom).

By the 1850s opinion had hardened on both sides of the slavery issue. Black protest expressed itself in many ways, including support of the Underground Railroad, lectures, and anti-slavery resolutions. Frances E.W. Harper made her poetry famous in the 1850s by giving remarkable public readings. Her poem "Eliza Harris" describes the heroine of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most important novel to inflame the popular imagination in the support of anti-slavery cause.

The events of the 1850s moved inexorably toward Civil War. In 1854 the Kansas and Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had kept equal number of slave and free states, further encouraging the spread of slavery. In 1857 the Supreme Court's Dred Scott Decision sanctioned slavery in Federal Territory. In 1859 John Brown led an armed raid in a failed attempt to provoke a slave uprising which he hoped would then spread throughout the South. His execution made him a martyr. When the 1860 presidential election was won by Abraham Lincoln, the South seceded, fearing that his election would mean abolition of slavery.

The Civil War ended in 1864. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had declared slavery at an end, and the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution completed the process of liberation two years later. However, the hopes raised by the prospects of freedom were quickly dashed. Strict segregation was established by a series of laws, the Ku Klux Klan flourished, and lynchings were frequent. Almost no official provisions were made for the education of Blacks, or for their integration into the work force. Nonetheless, these years saw the founding of major Black universities, of important Black periodicals, and of various groups for Black advancement.

The white literature of "The Gilded Age" seemed especially irrelevant to Afro-American concerns, whether it was popular and sentimental fiction focused on material success, or William Dean Howells' or Edith Wharton's portrayals of a moneyed leisure class. Even Henry James' delicacy of psychological and social exploration, in its appropriate literary medium, was a luxury few Blacks could afford.

The two outstanding Black leaders of the period were Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Washington was like a real-life version of a rags-to-riches hero. His autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), simplistic in style and substance, presents such values as uprightness, cleanliness, and mother-love, and suggests that those virtues alone will be properly rewarded by material wealth.

DuBois' collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is a deliberate reply to Washington, expressing DuBois' very different values and goals for Blacks. In his historical and social essays – and one short story – DuBois presents some of the multiplicity and complexity of Black experience and history. He repeatedly uses the metaphor of the veil to suggest the doubleness of Black life, and both the form and rhetoric suggest the nineteenth-century oration rather than the simple linear narrative of the life story.

Politically very powerful, Washington advocated a melioristic or conciliatory policy for Blacks education, and especially vocational training and "moral" improvement leading only gradually to full civil rights and the vote. DuBois was both much more militant and more intellectually oriented, stressing the need for higher education for Blacks and demanding immediate civil rights and the ballot as a means to education and economic advance rather than as a reward for it.

These two men and their views marked the boundaries of the field in which the Afro-American future was debated for years to come. DuBois may be said to have "won," however: Washington's views had already begun to seem old-fashioned by the time of his death in 1915.

The essay was far more important than fiction or poetry during these years of trying to map a plausible future and otherwise find solutions to what was known as "the Negro Problem." A book by that title was published in 1903, containing essays by Washington, DuBois and other Afro-American intellectuals of the day. Scholarship developed as Blacks investigated and documented their past in such works as William Wells Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867) and William Still's valuable collection *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters* (1872). The most distinguished history, still valuable today, was W.E.B. DuBois' *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States* (1896), and his *Black Reconstruction* is even finer. In a less political vein, Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* (1910) offers such careful scholarship that it is also still useful, as is Irvine G. Penn's *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (1891).

Biography and autobiography continued to be important, but their function shifted somewhat to focus on Blacks of achievement and distinction. The point was to prove Black worthiness and capabilities, as indicated, for

instance, by the title of William J. Simmon's *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive Rising* (1887). Washington's own *Up From Slavery* was the most popular autobiography and he also wrote *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1907).

What fiction there was tended to depict stereotypical characters in sentimental plots. In these works, in the words of one critic, "simple child-like Negroes dance, make love, and weep, talking all the while in plantation dialect." Novels written for inspirational purposes were equally unrealistic. Charles W. Chesnutt almost alone is still valued from the period. His stories appeared in two collections, *The Conjure Woman*, and *The Wife of His Youth* (both 1899), and one, "The Goophered Grapevine," was the first Afro-American story to appear in a major publication, when it was printed by *Atlantic Monthly*. He also published three novels, all powerful, controversial, and directly addressed to the issue of race relations.

In poetry, Frances W. Harper continued to publish, and such "mockingbird" poets as Albery A. Whitman imitated earlier traditional forms and techniques. But it was only with the beginnings of the modernist period in the 1890s that Black poetry came into its own, in the work of "the first professional Negro poet," Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1908). Dunbar, who wrote both in dialect and standard (or non-dialect) English, faced the difficulty of balancing the constraints of being a minority poet with writing about the tragic condition of Black people in pre-Civil Rights Era America. His poem "We Wear the Mask" explains, with quiet protest, the irony of the Negro's life:

We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.

A son of former slaves, he wrote dialect poems such as "When de C'on Pone's Hot," and it is these which made his fame. He has been criticized or rejected later for his sentimentalized and demeaning version of Black life and even nostalgia for the plantation, but it can be argued that Dunbar was writing within the limits established by his audience, both Black and White, at a time when other Black Americans were struggling even to attain basic civil rights. Unfortunately, Dunbar's dialect did not capture the resonance and rhythm of actual speech, but rather the conventionized talk of minstrel show "darkies." Other poets of the period tried to capture dialects more genuinely, as did James Edwin Campbell in his *Echoes from the Cabin and Elsewhere* (1905). But such poetry was difficult to read and lacked popular appeal. Other poets, such as William Stanley Braithwaite, rejected Black subject matter and speech altogether, and wrote in standard English on traditional topics. Success in accurately rendering Black speech had to wait.

The period between the two World Wars, was the one which saw Afro-American literature arrive at full maturity, flowering first in what came to be called "The Harlem Renaissance." During the twenties the Harlem district of New York became the center of Black music, art, and life. Harlem had historically been inhabited by a succession of immigrant populations. During the twenties it became a "promised land" for Blacks, drawing people from other regions of the U.S., from Latin America and the West Indies, and even from Africa. By 1930 almost the entire area was exclusively Black. This area became the home for one of the greatest periods of Black art and entertainment, the Harlem Renaissance, when large number of writers, artists, and musicians lived and visited there.

Of the many fine writers to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance, those who remain best-known are Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Claude McKay (1891-1948), Countee Cullen (1903-1946), and Jean Toomer (1894-1967). Langston Hughes has been compared to Whitman and Sandburg as a "poet of the people." His work is always concerned with the Negro's tragic cultural and social situation. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" he portrays the cosmic history of the Negro as demarcated by the rivers of the continent he left (the Nile and the Congo) and those of the continent to which he came as a slave. In other poems such as "I, too, Sing America" Hughes puts his faith in the American ideal which he hopes will help his people.

A contemporary of Hughes, Countee Cullen is less a social poet. Still, he is at his best when his poems gently take up the subject of race, as in "Heritage," in which he questions whether the American Negro, after centuries of separation, has any affinity with Africa.

Claude McKay came from Jamaica, in the West Indies, and felt more alienated in America than Hughes and Cullen. He lived abroad for a time, in self-imposed exile, and upon his return he wrote the award-winning and best-selling novel *Home to Harlem*. Perhaps the most ambitious single work of the Harlem Renaissance was Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a mixed collection of poems, semi-dramatic sketches, and fiction, based on his brief but affecting experience as superintendent of a rural Black school in Georgia. The book was acclaimed as a significant contribution to the experimental fiction of the period as well as to Afro-American literature. In 1927 James Weldon Johnson's (1871-1938) *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, originally published in 1912, was reissued, and his poems were published in *God's Trombones*.

With these developments came the idea of "The New Negro," a phrase (used as the title of an important anthology of Black literature and art, edited by Alan Locke) which expressed a new Black pride and sense of dignity. There were many contributing factors. World War I had provided employment for many Blacks who had migrated from the South to the industrial Northeast. And of course many Black soldiers fought in the war, some of them at least in this

way seeing the world beyond the U.S. Black leadership shifted from Tuskegee, Alabama, the center of Black education, to New York. The “Back to Africa” movement, a Negro nationalist movement led by the charismatic Marcus Garvey, created a greater sense of cohesion and solidarity among Blacks. The modernist interest in anthropological studies, especially concerning primitive cultures, created a new attention to and respect for African and Black culture. Many White writers wrote works celebrating qualities they imagined characteristic of Black life: Eugene O’Neill (*The Emperor Jones*), Carl van Vechten (*Nigger Heaven*), and DuBose Heyward (*Porgy*).

The artistic excitement of the 1920s came to an abrupt end with the stock market crash in 1929. The Great Depression of the 1930s affected Blacks even more harshly than the rest of the population. American writers in general turned to more political and social issues, and Black writing seemed a natural enough part of a larger concern with social and economic justice. However, at least one important poet first published in this decade: Sterling Brown (b. 1901), with *Southern Roads* in 1932. Also a scholar of Black literature, he had long been honored among Blacks but has only recently gained wider recognition.

The best-known novelist to begin writing in the thirties was Richard Wright (1908-1960). In his fine autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) he tells of his troubled youth in the South and his escape to Chicago. Like many American writers during the Depression, Wright looked to Marxism in the hope of economic justice and social equality. He joined the Communist Party and in 1937 moved to New York to become Harlem editor of the Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*. He published his first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas*, the next year, and *Native Son* in 1940. The well-known social and literary critic Irving Howe has said, “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever.” What he meant was that no one reading the book could continue to accept the old excuses for the Afro-American condition: “it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. The book was an instant success, and that success was repeated by *Black Boy*. Wright became the first Black on the national bestseller list. But his own recognition only made him more unhappy with the persistence of racism. In 1944 he left the Communist Party and in 1947, further embittered, left America. In Europe, where he lived until his death, he continued to write, both fiction, such as *The Outsider* (1953), and essays, notably those collected in *White Man, Listen!* (1957). But there is general agreement that his later writing does not possess the power of the early work.

The other two Black novelists who, with Wright, tower above the others are Ralph Waldo Ellison (b. 1914) and James Baldwin (b. 1924). When *Invisible Man* appeared in 1952 it had an even greater initial impact than *Native Son*. A panel of literary critics in 1965 called it “the most distinguished single work” published in the U.S. in the previous 20 years. Like Wright, Ellison moved from an academically successful boyhood in the South to Harlem, where in fact he met Wright and was befriended and encouraged by him. Though he also involved himself in left-wing politics, his disillusion came quickly, and his description of Brotherhood in *Invisible Man* clearly bespeaks his feelings about the American Communist Party. He was editor of *Negro Quarterly* and saw active duty in World War II before writing his novel. Since then he has taught and continued to write occasional stories and essays. An important essay collection, *Shadow and Act*, appeared in 1964, but he has yet to publish a second novel.

Invisible Man has been criticized for not being militant enough, and accused of lacking the instant emotional impact of, for instance, *Native Son*. But this is precisely its greatest accomplishment. Through the use of myth and symbol it achieves a universality any critic can recognize. Ellison’s aim, he said, was based in his early “passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond.” In *Invisible Man* he succeeds.

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, and at the age of twenty met Wright, who encouraged him to write. He has spent much of his life in Europe, first publishing from there. His first book, the heavily autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is still often considered his best. His subsequent novels deal with homosexuality, interracial love, and racial conflict; the best-known are *Giovanni’s Room* (1955), and *Another Country* (1962). But it is also because of his essays that he has been called the most important American Black writer of the twentieth century: *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) include some of the best. More recently he has published *A Rap on Race* (1971), a series of dialogues with the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead. He has also written a successful play, *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964). Although he, too, has been accused of not being militant enough, his brilliant verbal force has often exploded in articulate anger, and he has always maintained that the fate of American Whites is inseparable from that of Blacks.

The most prominent novelist to emerge from the next generation is unquestionably Ishmael Reed (b. 1938), with such exuberant, absurdist works as *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969). Of more extreme Black voices, the best-known is LeRoi Jones (b. 1934), who at 32 took the name Imamu Amiri Baraka to show his connection to Africa and his rejection of White culture. He is better known as a poet (*Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, 1961) and playwright than as a prose writer, though he has also published fiction, essays, and two books on Black Music. In “Black Arts” he writes “We want poems that kill, Assassin poems that shoot guns.../ We want a black poem. And a Black world.” Such plays as *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (both 1964) are at least equally savage.

Such anger was partly a development from the Harlem Renaissance, which made Black poetry a poetry of open protest against the inferior role forced on Blacks by white society. Beginning in the 1950s, both the leadership of Malcolm X and a new renewal of Black separatism, and the moral idealism of Martin Luther King inspired social and

political poetry among Blacks. The Civil Rights Marches and confrontations of the 1960s gave Black writers a new context for their poetry, though were far from unified in their approach.

A more moderate reaction to the same period is the humanistic protest poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917), and Margaret Walker (b. 1915). Brooks is perhaps the most accomplished Black poet after Hughes. Her poetry is realistic about the tragic plight of the American Black, but is without rancor, for she is imbued with the moral idealism of Dr. Martin Luther King. She has reached a wide audience of Black and White readers, and won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. In one poem, "Riders to the Blood Red Wrath," she comes to the conclusion that the American Black's suffering gives him a unique insight into humanity:

But my detention and my massive strain
And my distortion and my Calvary
I grind into a little lorgnette
Most slyly: To read man's humanity.

But after the assassinations in the sixties of President Kennedy, Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy, most Blacks found it difficult not to be cynical. Some, like Baraka, began to write what has been called "the poetry of hate." "It is a poetry based on and motivated by "poetic" hatred for white Americans and everything associated with them, including middle class Negroes," writes critic Arthur Davis.

Younger Black poets such as Don L. Lee (b. 1942), Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934), and Nikki Giovanni (b.1943) have all been strongly influenced by Baraka's experiments in poetry and his militant stance. These poets write what has been termed protested literature, but it is also a poetry which upholds the values of Black families supporting each other, the strength of Black women, and the need for Blacks to achieve a self-actualizing identity by which they accept themselves without wanting to be White.

These poets, regardless of their particular stance, have inherited an emphasis on the Black vernacular, and a recognition that Black poets can and must address the Black experience in their poetry. From the ambivalence of Claude McKay, to the humanistic protests of Gwendolyn Brooks, to the revolutionary militancy of Sonia Sanchez, the Black writers persist in a commitment to ejecting racism and its effects and to speaking out against a dishonest, unjust establishment.

(Mary McGann has contributed to the discussion of Black poetry.)

Mary McGann, Kathe Davis Finney

Chapter 13: American Poetry 1900-1980

With the death of Walt Whitman in 1892, American poetry came to a longer pause. In the second half of the nineteenth century American life changed rapidly: the western frontier had all but disappeared by 1890, the industrial revolution had mechanized American labor and industry, the number of farms was shrinking as the children of farmers moved to cities, and huge waves of European immigrants swelled the populations of cities. The language and the conditions of modern life were changing radically. A new poetry seemed needed. With few exceptions, however, the poets of late nineteenth century America wrote an artificial verse, derivative of Romantic and English models, full of classical allusions and lofty ideals, with little reference to the changing social and political realities around it. As the critic Roy Harvey Pearce put it, these poets, whose names are hardly recognized or remembered, were “utterly at a loss to deal with live situations in live language.”

What the United States needed at the turn of the century was a poet or poets to carry on the Adamic tradition of earlier American writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Whitman, and to translate that tradition into modern terms. Those writers had seen themselves and their fellow Americans as the new men who would create a new world. Pearce points out that the strength of American poetry had derived from “the poet’s inability or refusal at some depth of consciousness to wholly accept his culture’s system of values.” The poet is not only an Adam, a newly created and self-creating pioneer, he is a prophet and a rebel, warning his culture, and if necessary, opposing it.

American poetry became independent sometime between 1910 and 1920; 1912 is the year often named. That year Robert Frost went to England, where he published his first book. There he met and was promoted by Ezra Pound, already busy forging transatlantic modernism. Imagism, which has been called the most important single literary movement of the 20th century, is also usually dated from 1912. and the same year also saw the founding of *Poetry* magazine by Harriet Monroe in Chicago, with Pound as European editor. *Poetry* would help launch the major experimental movements in American poetry. It introduced a vigorous naturalistic movement by publishing the poetry of E.A. Robinson, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, and Carl Sandburg.

The Beginnings of Modern American Poetry.

A slightly older contemporary of Pound’s, Edward Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) had already published several books of poetry by 1912. Although his work seems old-fashioned now, he was the first of the modern poets to reject the nineteenth-century conventions and artificial forms which had dominated it for several decades (with the exception of Whitman who died in 1892 and Emily Dickinson who remained outside the mainstream and undiscovered and unpublished until the 1920s). Robinson took a novelist’s interest in the foibles, ironies, and failures inherent in human existence. Like Frost and Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters in his popular *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Robinson sought to define human life in terms of actualities. Also like Masters, he felt a strong affinity for Walt Whitman and his poetry. He shared with Whitman a passionate interest in the ways in which internal psychological reality is reflected in external reality. Robinson’s poetry reflects a desire to express and explain human problems – failure to communicate, alcoholism, suicide, illusions, loss of love.

Philosophically, Robinson was strongly influenced by Emerson’s ideas, and by the spiritual philosophy of Emmanuel Swedenborg, who emphasized a Unitarian concept of God, a rejection of materialism, and a transcendental reliance on one’s inner spirit. From Swedenborgianism Robinson developed the notion that each individual is responsible for himself or herself, that everyone creates one’s own heaven or hell. These are theses which surface again and again in his poetry. However, these notions of self-reliance and individualism are combined with what he called “a sort of deterministic negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of ‘rational thought,’” his sad and ironic realization that one’s choices are limited and shaped by social environment. Characters like Richard Cory (who “went home and put a bullet through his head”), Luke Havergal, who seemed haunted by inexplicable loss, Miniver Cheevy, “who wept that he was even born,” and Eben Flood, whose alcoholism and loneliness make him a pathetic figure – these are the people of Tilbury Town, Robinson’s fictitious community based on Gardiner, Maine, where he grew up. Most of his characters, while nostalgic for traditional humanistic values, have themselves lost touch with higher values. They end up defeated by greed, sex, and the struggle for social status, as well as by the growing depersonalization of their society.

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was a contemporary of Robinson’s, and also committed himself to New England portraits, although his vision is at once more local and more universal. The farm life he celebrates in so many poems was never his main occupation, though he did eventually own a farm in New Hampshire, where he lived till the end of his long life. The rural and the local provide his characters, events and setting, as even a random sampling of his titles will show: “The Wood Pile,” “Mending Wall,” “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” “An Old Man’s Winter Night.” Rejecting Robinson’s poetic diction, he seemed to offer an even greater realism.

Like Robinson and the Georgian poets with whom he was sometimes grouped, Frost stayed with traditional verse forms, and his declaration that free verse was like playing tennis without a net has become famous. But he was a

radical if subtle innovator, whose technical accomplishments are still being recognized. His greatest achievement was to capture in formal verse the sound of colloquial, spoken, **American** English. More specifically, “his idiom is educated but talked American, with a slight wash of country vocabulary and often a Yankee intonation,” in David Perkins’ description. Wordsworth’s “language such as men do use” is echoed in Frost’s insistence on what he called “the speaking tone of voice.” We may hear this tone in a flat statement like “Ice storms do that” (“Birches”), or from the same poem,

... Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.

He often tends toward the aphoristic as in “The Death of the Hired Man”:

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take your in.”

This illustrates also his frequent humor, dry, perhaps wry, and subtle, even sly.

His apparent simplicity is deceptive. His poems are nearly always more subtle and complex than is obvious at first reading. Richard Poirier, one of his best critics, has pointed out that his work is as allusive as Pound’s or Eliot’s, though the allusions are never obvious or insisted upon. Frost was deeply familiar not only with the English poetic tradition but also with the classics, particularly Horace, from whom he seems to have taken his idea of reserve, the deliberate self-limitation he practiced in language, theme, region, and genre.

Frost was a modern master of the narrative poem, a traditional and popular form, at a time when narrative was being rejected even by novelists in favor of mythic structures and other non-narrative forms of continuity. Frost deliberately encouraged a simple reading, creating the public persona of a rough, blunt-spoken but kindly old homespun Yankee sage. This was the image which Americans took to their hearts. He became the only great American poet to enjoy a national popular following during his own lifetime. His books sold over half a million copies and he won four Pulitzer Prizes. In 1960 he was asked to read a poem at John F. Kennedy inauguration. Later he toured Russia as a goodwill ambassador, and met Khrushchev. He hoped through his own honors to win a more public place for poetry in American life.

In recent years critics have reacted against Frost’s simplistic, folkloric public image. Especially since the publication of Lawrance Thompson’s three-volume biography – which Frost had forbidden during his lifetime – critics have uncovered a “darker” side of Frost. It is indeed possible to read a very bleak view of humans and their place in the universe in such poems as “The Subverted Flower,” “Out, out–, “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “The Oven Bird,” “Design,” and the late, stark “The Draught Horse.”

Certainly Frost did not have an easy life. Abused by his father, he learned his love of poetry – and some Swedenborgianism – from his schoolteacher mother. He dropped out of college almost immediately after beginning. His early life was so grim he contemplated suicide. Five children were born before Frost took a teaching job in 1906. He was still unpublished when he sold his farm five years later and made the trip to England that changed his life. His sister was institutionalized for insanity, a son committed suicide, his wife died in 1938.

A psychological interest is apparent in much of Frost’s work, especially in many of the dialogue poems. In “The Witch of Coos,” a widow breaks a 30-year silence to tell a stranger her bizarre story of betrayal and guilt. In “The Hill Wife” a young woman impulsively abandons her husband and home:

-Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

Frost’s powerful descriptions of the natural world always suggest correspondences in internal human reality, what he called the inner and the outer weather. Frost seems to continue the romantic tradition, with his obvious affinity for Wordsworth, his brooks and trees and villages, his homely characters and simple talk. But he is committed to a “classical” ideal of restraint, control, and balance. He spoke approvingly of “retreat,” pointing to the word’s religious sense. He pokes fun at aspirations to the transcendent or to ultimate truth. As David Perkins says about his metaphors of ascent, as in “After Apple-Picking” or “Birches”: “you do not get very far and come down soon.”

Frost might be said to write, as “The Oven Bird” sings about “what to make of a diminished thing.” In this is he like Eliot, although their styles are so different. He is modernist also in his focus on craft and form, and in his pervasive irony. What he rejected were cosmopolitanism, any obvious use of anthropology or myth, and the radically experimental. Like the realistic and naturalistic novelists before him, he seemed to be recording a chunk of democratic American reality.

Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) genuinely possesses the simplicity of which Robert Frost is accused. He cast himself energetically into the Whitman tradition of bard, singer, and yea-sayer, though it has been pointed out that he is “more immediately sociological than Whitman.” He said he wanted to “come to grips with life in the United States as might manifest its very quality and meaning.” Many of his techniques also echo Whitman’s: apposition and direct address, personification, apostrophe, and most of all cataloguing. In his famous “Chicago” he sings to the city, characterizing it by naming it: “Hog Butcher for the World,/ Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,” and so on. Like Whitman he accepts what convention would condemn. “They tell me you are wicked and I believe them,...” but “I give them back the sneer and say to them:/ Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.” In *The People, Yes* he uses his poetry not to analyze or question, but to affirm the value of the people as a social, cultural, and political entity. Like Whitman, Sandburg was a travelling journalist, a populist and political idealist whose vision for America centered on Abraham Lincoln as a democratic hero. Sandburg’s monumental six-volume biography of Lincoln views him as a product of the common people and a symbol of populist Democracy.

When Sandburg is criticized, it is for his one-sided and simplistic vision, and for the limitations of his poetic technique. He cared much less about poetic form than about his message – and that was too often superficial, an idealized vision unsupported by industrial actualities. Leaving analysis to others, Sandburg seems content to be a bardic recorder and folkloric master-singer.

Sandburg is a lesser poet than Frost, and Vachel Lindsay lesser than Sandburg. But they share a commitment to the local, and to “democratic” colloquial speech. Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931) wanted to write verse that could be “two-thirds sung and one-third written.” His major strength as a poet is his use of euphony, rhythm, music and musical sound to create a musical poetry which he performed, recited, and sang on stages across the country. His use of motifs from jazz, folk ballads, and popular music energized his poetry and influenced such later poets as Langston Hughes. His most famous poems, *The Congo* and “General William Booth Enters into Heaven,” resemble chants or songs; the poem about General Booth even carries the notation “To be sung to the tune of ‘The Blood of the Lamb’ with indicated instruments.” Lindsay became a popularly acclaimed poet, travelling throughout the country to give performances of his poetry. The appeal of his poems seems to lie in their musical sound and rhetorical quality, but, like Sandburg, Lindsay is more a singer and recorder than a prober.

Poetry Between the World Wars: The Great Modernists

M.L. Rosenthal, one of the major commentators of modern poetry, suggests that “in modern poetry we are more and more presented with the need to counteract the apparent suicide or at least the self-betrayal of a culture.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in the poetry written between the two world wars, from 1918 to 1945. The generation of poets and writers of this time was the first truly international group of writers America produced: stunned by the terrible reality of world War I, which had killed or maimed millions of young men their own age, this generation became strongly concerned with history, with world events, with social and cultural phenomena, and with the relationship of European and non-Western cultures to their own.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was the most powerful shaping force upon modern Anglo-American poetry except possibly for Eliot. While Eliot became “the elder statesman” (his opinion was so influential upon others that it has been said that he could write a review without lifting a pen), Pound was always more active and energetically involved. As promoter and provocateur, he supported talent wherever he found it – and his taste was astonishingly unerring. He helped the great English poet W.B. Yeats to modernize himself. He delightedly recognized that the young Eliot had “modernized himself on his own,” and quickly saw to his first publication. He helped shape Eliot’s materials into *The Waste Land* we know, probably the most important single modernist poem. He was equally instrumental in James Joyce’s career, even providing money from his own meager resources, and to a lesser extent also helped Frost, Hemingway, and e.e. cummings, among others. He insisted upon a new discipline and professionalism for literature, but far from narrowing the field, he pursued music and art, studied history and economics and politics. He organized concerts and commissioned work from Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the sculptor (about whom he wrote a book). The interactions of these interests created not only his own cultural pluralism, but extended the range of literary modernism.

Born in Hailey, Idaho and raised in Pennsylvania, Pound left the U.S. in 1908 and never voluntarily lived there again. He died in Venice. Yet, cosmopolitan though he was, he liked to think of himself as an American of the frontiersman sort. “He kept up a rough-and-ready manner, an American bluntness in effete Europe,” says Richard Ellmann.

Pound entered the University of Pennsylvania where he met William Carlos Williams, who was to remain a lifelong friend and critic, and Hilda Doolittle, whom he christened H.D. when he launched her career. After a year’s fellowship in southern Europe and an abbreviated teaching stint in Indiana, Pound returned to Europe to stay. In 1910 he went to London, considering it the literary capital of the English-speaking world. In his twelve years there he kept up a creative turmoil with his developing ideas. He met and was deeply influenced by the novelist Ford Madox Ford and the brash young philosopher T.E. Hulme. Hulme’s famous and influential essay “Classicism and Romanticism” derided Romanticism, calling it “spilt religion.” He demanded a new, sharp, hard, clear, “dry” verse, free from “emotional slither.” These criteria became the foundations of Imagism, formally launched in 1912. Pound admired the

accomplishments of Stendhal, Maupassant, and Zola, and was among the first to recognize the modernism of Henry James's highly crafted novels. "Poetry must be as well written as prose," he said. He insisted on "objectivity and again objectivity," on clarity and on intensity achieved by simplicity. Poetry should contain "nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say." The Chinese ideogram seemed to him to embody the precision and condensation, the concreteness and visual immediacy which were his ideals for poetry. These ideas became the basis for his "ideogrammic method" in *The Cantos*. He spent three winters as Yeats' secretary, and altered the older poet's dramatic writing by introducing him to the use of masks and stylization in the Japanese Noh plays. Above all else, Pound "strove to resuscitate the dead art/ Of poetry," as he says of his character Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. Doing so meant both recovering the past and creating new poetry. This double aim is expressed in Pound's most famous dictum, "Make it new." "The best that has been thought and said" (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) is preserved, but perpetually transformed and renewed to make it usable for new generations.

Pound's own writing began with several volumes of poems in traditional forms. This apprentice work exercised and developed his technical powers, paid homage to historical figures, and especially to the medieval, Provençal poets who were his special interest; and they explored the mind of the past, as he was to do so monumentally in *The Cantos*. In *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts* (1920), he said his "farewell to London," and moved to Paris. That poem anticipates many of the techniques of *The Waste Land*, and similarly uses war as a major symbol of modern civilization's destructiveness, particularly for artists.

Pound's major work is *The Cantos*, begun in 1917 and continued throughout his life. *A Draft of XVI Cantos* first appeared in 1925; succeeding volumes were expected to bring the total number of Cantos to 100, on Dante's model, but finally there were 117. This monumental – and monumentally different – poem is designed as a modern epic, "the tale of the tribe." An Odyssean journey homeward is implied, but it has become largely internal aesthetic. Pound accepted from Confucian philosophy the idea of a series of direct connections from personal knowledge to precise accurate language to good government, so that the poet becomes cultural hero. The poem offers a compendium of history, philosophy, Confucian principles, myth, and economic and social critique.

No one has offered a fully satisfactory account of what the structure of the poem is. It has sections roughly corresponding to the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, but Pound also suggested musical analogies. The poem often seems like a puzzling collage, with unexplained juxtapositions of apparently unrelated materials, unidentified fragments, and scattered languages, including Greek and Chinese. The method can be seen as a kind of metamorphosis ("make it new"), presenting for purposes of instruction good leaders and good art in the different forms they have taken in different time and cultures. Some complain that too much of the synthesis is left up to the reader, but Pound wished his readers not to hear **about** these materials, but to experience them direct. His ideal of form is the wave, simultaneously fluid and stable, the same form perpetually renewed in different materials. The central idea of the Cantos is the necessity of free distribution – of money, goods, ideas. Thus the sea, the wind, the grass and the cattle that eat it symbolize this freedom and the natural fertility and wealth which follow from it. The central evil then is "usura," profit from withholding. Love is giving not holding: "what thou lovest well remains." Money is an attempt to imprison value, an abstraction because it has no value of its own, but represents something else of value. For Pound then, Jews became a scapegoat, because of their traditional association with money and banking – though he later repudiated his anti-Semitism as a "bourgeois prejudice."

During World War II Pound supposed that Mussolini's monetary policies agreed with his own, and made several broadcasts over Italian radio supporting the Fascists. When American troops arrived in Italy, therefore, Pound was charged with treason and imprisoned at Pisa. In a small cage in the detention camp he wrote *The Pisan Cantos*. Back in the U.S. in 1945, he was saved from trial and possible execution by being pronounced insane. He remained in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., until 1958.

Whatever his excesses, Pound had a reformer's zeal and commitment to education. His many volumes of criticism are all written in the voice of the master teacher. Despite the famous obscurity of *The Cantos*, increasing numbers of devoted readers testify to the way the poem repays study. In the work of contemporary poets, especially the widely-influential Charles Olson, Pound's presence is almost as pervasive today as it was when he was alive.

Imagism began with "the forgotten school of 1909" as Pound phrased it, a group of poets including F.S. Flint and T.E. Hulme, who met regularly to discuss free verse, Japanese verse forms, and other alternatives to what they considered the insipidity of English poetry at the time. In 1912 Pound, with his talent for publicity, supplied a name, and christened H.D. and her husband Richard Aldington "Les Imagistes." A now-famous statement of principles was printed in *Poetry* magazine in 1913, and an anthology edited by Pound appeared the next year. In 1915 another anthology was published, which included John Gould Fletcher and D.H. Lawrence besides those already mentioned. But by then Pound had grown impatient with the "democratic" notions and highhandedness of Amy Lowell, and, calling the movement "Amygism," had moved on to Vorticism, with its focus on energy rather than the relatively static image. Two more Imagist anthologies were issued. The movement faded out, but its impact on modernism was permanent.

The definition of an image is Pound's: "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." It is important to note that the image is not solely or even primarily visual. It is a "complex," both emotional and intellectual. Similarly, the first Imagist principle was 1) Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or

objective. The others were 2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation, and 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. To these Pound later added requirements for common speech, the exact word, new rhythms, and absolute freedom of subject. The overall emphasis of Imagism was on clarity, precision, and vigor, on simplicity and directness. It combined with other tendencies of the time to change the face of Anglo-American poetry.

The other chief architect of modernism was Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), poet, playwright, and critic. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he was to become one of the most influential men of letters in modern Anglo-American literature. Having graduated from Harvard, he spent one year in France studying at the Sorbonne. Subsequently he moved to England, where he worked as editor for the publishers Faber and Faber and for periodicals (in particular *The Egoist* and the *Criterion*). He was exceedingly erudite, possessed a deep knowledge of European culture and was well-acquainted with Eastern philosophy. In 1948 he received the Nobel Prize.

At the time of his arrival in England, the poetic scene was dominated by the descendants of the post-Romantic tradition, the Georgian poets (Walter de la Mare, Rupert Brooke, A.E. Housman and others) whose main achievements rested in composing popular, accessible lyrics about the countryside and the beauty of nature. Both Eliot and Pound, with their American perspective, perceived an urgent need for change. They wanted to introduce a truly modern, urban, industrialized reality into poetry, along with appropriate means of expression and diction as precise, clear-cut and flexible as prose. There was no longer room for the sentimental, archaic, hazy "poetry for ladies" of the Georgians.

To cut himself off from the Romantic heritage Eliot developed his own idea of classicism, the basis of which was the concept of an external, metaphysical authority, superior to man and anything human, personal or individual. In literature this meant the need to subordinate one's creative impulses to the idea of tradition understood as the whole body of past literary works. However, the latter functioned not as a fixed set of ancient models to be emulated by the poet, but as ever changing reservoir of archetypal patterns modified by subsequent works of literature. The poet was to be aware of his responsibility to alter, contribute to and enrich existing literary culture, but his personal impulses, inspiration and lights of imagination were to be strictly controlled. The problem of the interrelations of traditions and the poet's personality was fully discussed in Eliot's famous and influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

However "classical," impersonal and objective Eliot wished to be as a poet, he could not escape Romantic influences, since he chose the French Symbolists for his masters in verse. It was the Symbolists, mainly Baudelaire, who introduced the city into poetry and who, after E.A. Poe, rejected poetic inspiration in favour of poetry conceived as a "mathematical problem." It was in the poems of Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbiere that a sense of ironical distance from one's experience provided a note of bathos to the tragic sense of aimlessness and futility of human life. But subtle shades of emotion, the excesses of obscure passions, an acute perception of Evil in the world, all in the best Romantic tradition were also to be found in their poems, along with such Romantic means of expression as symbols, which suggested the poetic object, but never alluded to it directly. All these contradictions can be traced in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

The other significant models for Eliot's poetry, Dante and the English Metaphysical poets, were chosen because of their ability to unify sensory and intellectual experience. What began in the 18th century and was carried to the extreme in the 19th century, was a "dissociation of sensibility." Poets like Browning or Tennyson could no longer think through their senses, "they did not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." What they failed to achieve, in contrast to Donne or Marvell, was the unification of the most disparate kinds of human experience, which "in the mind of the poet... are always forming new wholes." The task of the modern poet was to recapture this ability of creating poetic order and coherence out of the overwhelming chaos and anarchy of the world, to be able to feel and experience thought, as we feel and experience "the noise of the typewriter, or the smell of cooking."

The poetic works of T.S. Eliot may be divided roughly into four parts. The first group, comprising the poems published between 1917 and 1920 (some of them written much earlier), opens with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," one of the most famous and best-loved of Eliot's poems. Composed as a dramatic monologue in the tradition of Robert Browning, it shocked the reader from the outset with its modern technique of "fragmentation" and film-like montage. Dislocated fragments of a city landscape blend in, apparently at random, with fragments of the interior monologue of a middle-aged, timid bachelor, who faces the dilemma of how to propose to a lady at the party he is about to attend. His situation is juxtaposed with the fates of mythical and literary heroes, takes on universal dimensions, and becomes a tragedy of the modern Everyman unable to love or live his life fully.

In this poem Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative" (developed from the concept of the image) finds its first perfect realization in the way Prufrock's feelings are evoked. As Eliot put it, "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding 'an objective correlative,' in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."

The poems of 1920 include the Sweeney satires, the main hero of which is an animal-like creature, only externally resembling a human being, who is motivated by blind instincts, by the urge to satisfy his earthly (mainly sexual) desires. Eliot's characteristic themes, such as the inability to love and the emptiness of life devoid of spiritual meaning, can already be seen in these poems, which form a kind of preparation for *The Waste Land*. The poem marks the second major phase in Eliot's poetic career, and is probably his best-known work.

The Waste Land (1922) was hailed as a poetic manifesto by the young modernist generation. It perfectly illustrates the international scope of poetry in the inter-war period. Its mythic setting is all of Europe, all of history, and the ancient world (represented by the blind prophet Tiresias) is juxtaposed with a Europe destroyed by World War I. The central question of the poem is “What are the causes of sterility?” Eliot finds no easy answers, but after the repeated visions of the devastation of Europe, the dead god, the empty chapel, the stony rubbish, the modern sterility of interpersonal relationships, he ends the poem with a tenuous balance between the chaos he has observed and described and a Sanskrit invocation of peace: “Shantih shantih shantih.” In contrast to Pound’s evolution as a writer writing more and more complex and allusive poetry, Eliot’s poetic development moves from the highly referential, almost allegorical systems he creates in early poems like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* to a clear, lucid, quasi-imagist poetry that attempts to combine language with musical techniques in the *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s influence on the poetic world certainly was in many ways as great as Pound’s: in fact one of the problems of the next generations of poets was to be the “agony of influence,” that is, poets who followed Eliot and Pound would have a difficult time avoiding poetry that would be derivative and imitative of their two great masters.

After *The Waste Land* Eliot expressed his darkest preapprehensions and despair at the emptiness of modern civilization in *The Hollow Men* (1925) – “This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper” – subsequently to find hope for himself and mankind in the Christian religion. This was not an easy process – it was not a question of sudden revelation, but an agonizing struggle to overcome doubts, and attachment to illusory temporal pleasures, so as to “search and explore,” seeking a path towards direct contact with God.

The third phase in Eliot’s career consists of the so-called “poems of transition” (transition from the “negative” poetry of *The Waste Land* to the “positive” religious affirmation of the *Four Quartets*) composed around 1930 and including the Ariel poems and *Ash Wednesday*. Here Eliot repeatedly makes use of symbolism borrowed from Dante. The main theme of these poems is the search for God and spiritual guidance amid the maze of illusions which confront man in his earthly existence.

The same theme is fully developed and enriched in the *Four Quartets* (“Burnt Norton,” 1935, “East Coker,” 1940, “The Dry Salvages,” 1941, “Little Gidding,” 1942), representing the final significant stage in Eliot’s poetic output. Here traditional religious symbolism (“rose,” “dove,” “stairs,” “star”) is interwoven with private symbols, so far avoided by this “impersonal” poet. The latter are usually taken from nature – a new element in the hitherto mostly “urban” poetry of Eliot – and often from the nature of the New England of his youth. The understanding of these symbols no longer depends on reference to external sources, as in *The Waste Land*, but on the context of the poem itself. God, the source and end of all, is evoked here through the central symbol of “the still point” located amid the motion and turbulence of the mundane. The theme of the unity of times present, past and future is expressed through the symbol of the sea. Other symbols include the four elements, seabirds, the yew-tree, dancing, the journey. *The Four Quartets* represent religious poetry in which direct contemplation of metaphysical and spiritual problems, revealed through symbols, reduces physical reality to a minimum. The latter occupies here much less space than in the early poetry and *The Waste Land*. Yet, there exists in all Eliot’s poems a basic thematic unity: they speak of the constant need to struggle, suffer and sacrifice in the search for the true, spiritual sense of human life.

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle 1886-1961) was an important member of the international group of young writers in London who – with their friends in Paris and New York – were reshaping literature in the 1920s. She has been credited with writing the most perfect Imagist poems. But she was often said not to have developed beyond the limitations of that small-scale mode. Only recently has her later work begun to be read widely and seriously. In the last ten years new work has appeared, and new scholarship seems to be uncovering a writer of major significance.

H.D. was born in Pennsylvania. In 1911 she went to England where she was an assistant editor of the literary magazine *The Egoist*. After the war she moved to Switzerland, which was to remain her home. But she spent the war years 1939-1945 in London, and on the basis of that experience wrote her great verse trilogy, *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946).

In Switzerland H.D. went to Freud for psychoanalysis, and became friends with him, partly on the basis of their shared fascination with Greek art and thought. Her *Tribute to Freud* appeared in 1956. With her companion, the writer Bryher, she travelled to Greece and Egypt. Besides the epic *Helen in Egypt* in the 1950s, she wrote several novels. *Bid Me to Live* tells of the London years, as does the roman a clef *Hermione*, published only in 1982. It seems likely that as the remainder of her work is published and reassessed, H.D. will take her rightful place among the powerful first generation of modernists.

Marianne Moore (1887-1972) is another poet of the period who long considered a fine but minor craftsman is now being reevaluated. Her poetry is very artful but never obviously so, employing syllabic meters, concealed rhymes, and other subtle effects. Her sharp observations, often of animals, are presented in meticulous and sometimes surprising detail, with understated, often wry commentary. It has been noticed that “the fact that her verse is patently verse, yet embraces many characteristics of prose, is almost revolutionary.” Despite her personal modesty, she has been acknowledged as an influence by poets as diverse as Ted Hughes and Elizabeth Bishop.

She is like Pound and Williams in her willingness to incorporate unlikely prose materials in poetry, but her quotations are usually shorter, always carefully identified as quotes, and relate more obviously to her themes. She is like Stevens in her focus on the physical world of animals, birds, and plants, and her delight in it, but she is far more

concrete, engaging in no metaphysical speculation, but only amusing generalization and ironic comparison. She is finally only herself, a highly original poet.

The other two giants of the generation which began publishing in the twenties are Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, though both had their main impact later. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was also like Williams in maintaining a lifetime career unrelated to poetry. He earned a law degree, at his father's insistence, and became an executive of a major insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. Like Williams, Stevens was influenced by the early experiments of Pound and Eliot and seems especially influenced by symbolist aesthetics which emphasizes the relationship between sound and idea. The central subject of all his poetry is the conflict between creative imagination and harsh reality.

Many of his poems emphasize the poet's perceptions of reality. For example, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a poem of 13 stanzas, each a phase in the poet's perception of a blackbird. In many ways, the poem is an elegant joke whose serious point is how ordinary people ignore the sensory perceptions around them.

O thin men of Haddam,
 Why do you imagine golden birds?
 Do you not see how the blackbird
 Walks around the feet
 Of the women about you?
 (Stanza VII)

Poetry, Stevens felt, must replace religion to invigorate life. The poet creates and recreates the world we know. One of the most famous poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination is "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a study in verse of the relationship between the musician-creator and the reality he expresses in his music. Several years after he wrote the poem, Stevens pointed out that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" deals with the balance between reality and imagination. Stevens' guitar-player plays his guitar and to his audience he says

... things as they are
 Are changed upon the blue guitar.

So the guitar here is like poetry – it perceives, expresses, and shapes life through the imagination.

Stevens expresses similar concerns about poetry, the imagination, and the poet's vocation to order reality which poetry expresses in one of his most famous poems, "The Idea of Order at Key West." The allegorized singer of the poem is an initiator, a creator, whose "maker's rage to order words of the sea" creates human possibilities for self-recognition. So the poet's urge to create is also a "blessed rage of order." The poet necessarily becomes an egocentric creator who must create with the authorization of outside frameworks such as religion, myth, historical certainty. The poet creates order, not by defining reality, but by creating various versions of the world he sees around him.

Stevens is often considered a sophisticated and difficult poet whose poems are often about poetry itself. Although that assessment is partially justified, it is wrong to assume that Stevens is only concerned about abstract definitions of poetry. With very few certainties left to man, Stevens seems determined to clarify the relationship between poetry and reality, between poets and other men. He writes about the creative process in order to humanize it, to show the necessity for human beings to recognize the glorious power of imagination.

The poet who was perhaps most influenced by the Imagism of Pound did not exile himself from America. William Carlos Williams (1893-1963) first met Pound when Williams studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania; he did go abroad for four years after his medical studies, but returned to Rutherford, New Jersey, to practice medicine until he died in 1963. Unlike his friend Pound, Williams immersed himself in the American experience and perhaps came to understand that experience as Pound never could. However well he understood life in America, though, Williams was no less critical – and like most American poets saw himself in opposition to the values which he felt his culture substitutes for true moral and aesthetic values. One of his strongest concerns is the degeneration of and inadequacy of language, and with it the breakdown of interpersonal communication. Williams is appalled by the materialistic life in the industrial age.

It is in Williams' brilliant creation of the hard, clear image that we see how profoundly Pound's Imagism affected his poetry. He eschewed ideas in poetry; "No ideas but in things" he wrote, for he believed that poetry must deal with the direct scrutiny of the senses. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is often quoted, and it remains a clear example of this important facet of Williams' poetry: he creates an image rather than telling the reader how to feel, or how to remember.

Williams spent the later part of his poetic career writing *Paterson*, a long poem consisting of five books (at the time of his death he was working on a sixth book). Williams himself described *Paterson* as an attempt to use the city of Paterson, New Jersey as an all-encompassing American location. Paterson, New Jersey is a heavily industrial, ugly modern city on the banks of the polluted Passaic River, not far from New York City; it is situated on a level plain

flanked by hills. *Paterson* attempts to describe as specifically as possible the geographical, social, and psychological realities of the city and the people who live there.

Williams wanted a great deal from poetry: it was almost as if he thought the poet must be a diagnostician and healer for our cultural ills. He wrote in 1951 that he believed the old values “hold today as always... But the TERMS in which we must parallel the past are entirely new and peculiar to ourselves.” Unlike the early Pound and Eliot, he set himself to write poetry which would have its basis in the language actually spoken in everyday American life. Williams felt that poets like Eliot had “put poetry back in the classroom.” Williams believed that poetry should not become so allusive and referential that it fails to echo direct, sensory, close-at-hand experience.

The great financial crash of 1929 and the Depression of the 1930s brought an abrupt end to the spirit of exuberant experimentation. To many writers political and social issues seemed more urgent than questions of craft. American poets, however, did not shift as much from their formal concerns as did English and European poets or novelists in general. By the time World War II restored prosperity in the U.S., a basically Eliotic poetic doctrine had become academic orthodoxy, assisted by Eliot’s own growing conservatism.

Eliot’s contemporary John Crowe Ransom, joined with several slightly younger friends – Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson – to form the “Fugitives” group. Also known as Southern Agrarians, they advocated aristocratic social values, orthodox or even fundamentalist Christianity, and traditional poetic forms. They were all university teachers and men of great personal charm and persuasiveness, and their influence was enormous. Their ideas, in combination with those of such other academic poet-critics as R.P. Blackmur, and teacher-critics such as Cleanth Brooks, Austin Warren, and René Wellek, become known as The New Criticism. It was the dominant aesthetic – and teaching – method in the U.S. for at least twenty years. This was by no means a unified body of thought, but generally it argued for the autonomy of the poem, its independence from the life of the author and from the prejudices of the reader, and – so it seemed – from the social and historical forces surrounding them. Highly educated men, the New Critics valued intellectual complexity and allusiveness, and such qualities as irony, tension, and paradox. A poem was not to preach or argue, but to be an art object like a piece of sculpture or a vase. In the words concluding “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish, “A poem should not mean but be.”

The New Critics were the chief mentors and models for the “Middle Generation” (between the great modernists and today’s contemporary poets) – Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop. Nearly all these poets later developed sharply away from their academic and formalist beginnings, but that mode was dominant enough in the mid-fifties to cause a rebellion.

The node was not totally dominant, of course: modernist experimentalism was continued by George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky with their Objectivist movement in the 1930s, Kenneth Rexroth in the 1940s, and Charles Olson and his Projectivism in the 1950s. But none of these had a very large public impact. It took the flamboyant Allen Ginsberg to crystallise a counter-poetic.

The Beat Generation

In the early fifties a group of young writers who met one another while studying at Columbia University proclaimed themselves “the Beat Generation.” They included Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso. Eventually in the manner of the pioneers (and these writers saw themselves as pioneers), they moved westward, where Ginsberg met Lawrence Ferlinghetti and founded the City Light Press in San Francisco, named after Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookstore. The Beat Generation, wrote the *New York Times* in the review of Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, “was born disillusioned. It takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society. It does not know what refuge it is seeking, but it is seeking.” The Beat poets took Kerouac’s novel as their testament in the same way the “lost generation” had taken *The Waste Land* as a manifesto.

Allen Ginsberg (b. 1926) is an eclectic, occasionally brilliant poet who saw himself as the prophet and spokesman of the Beat Generation. Born in Newark, New Jersey, of middle class Jewish parents, Ginsberg was strongly influenced by his mother’s active membership in the Communist Party and by her terrible bouts with mental illness. He also claims to have been strongly influenced by William Blake – he has often cited a moment in 1948 when he was overcome by a personal vision, a hallucinatory experience involving the voice of Blake coming to him, reciting some of Blake’s poetry. Ginsberg claims that moments of intense revelatory experience of this sort are the key to writing poetry. Like other poets of his generation (and like Blake and Coleridge), he experimented with various drugs in order to facilitate such hallucinatory experiences. In 1956, in a now famous and then controversial performance, Ginsberg and five other poets gave a group reading in San Francisco. It was on this occasion that Ginsberg recited his long poem *Howl*.

It is Ginsberg’s most famous poem – one loud anguished cry at the destructiveness of American materialistic society:

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

Howl is a violent attack on the modern America he saw around him. The poem depends to a large extent on rhetorical shock. Some of the obscenities Ginsberg used there, while more common in print today after almost thirty years, are still not acceptable in polite circles. The poem's technique seems to owe a great deal to Whitman in its use of repetition, apostrophe, and colloquial diction. Ginsberg uses the language of the drug subculture, which often uses words and slang phrases from Black music and the jazz milieu, and mixes these with references to mystical religion (St. John of the Cross, the Kaballah). The poem is dedicated – to Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met in 1949 when he himself was committed to a psychiatric hospital in New York. Ginsberg used Solomon, who had quite a brilliant mind but was nonetheless mentally ill, as a representative of the entire generation. Ginsberg continues to write and to travel widely giving readings and acting as a sort of guru, or spiritual advisor. His later poetry, particularly the poem *Kaddish* (1959), which he wrote in memory of his mother after she had committed suicide, is a highly anguished autobiographical verse which records the growth of Ginsberg's consciousness. He has described himself as a Buddhist Jew with attachments to "Krishna, Siva, Allah, Coyote, and the Sacred Heart." He travelled in the Far East in the early sixties. Given his strong interest in Eastern mysticism and counter-cultural manifestations, it is not surprising that the hippie generation of the sixties rediscovered him and hailed him as their prophet and teacher. He and his lifelong companion Peter Orlovsky have travelled all around the country, reading poetry and giving advice to aspiring young poets who make up a new "Beat Generation."

Ginsberg's friend and fellow Beat, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919) established the first all-paperback bookstore in the country, City Lights, and began publishing a series of small books called "Pocket Poets." The series revolutionized poetry publishing, for it meant that cheaper paper editions were more accessible to a wide readership and that young, unknown poets might have a chance to publish their work. Older Beat poets, such as Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth, encouraged younger poets to read their poetry aloud in readings organized by the bookstore, and gave editorial advice and publishing help to young poets. Ferlinghetti thus had a wide influence on the growth of poetry in the past thirty years.

His poetry is the most self-consciously absurdist of all the Beat poets. Rather than assail and confront the reader/listener with howls and angry accusations like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti writes poetry which is based on opposing the establishment and its values through a variety of counter-cultural experiences: drugs, free love and sexuality, Eastern religion. He wrote poems that show his mischievous, absurdist views applied to American politics, and the circus imagery in *A Coney Island of the Mind* is certainly connected to his antic attitude toward life (Coney Island, just outside New York City, houses one of the country's oldest large amusement parks). Like the other Beat poets, Ferlinghetti idealizes the nomadic life "on the road" in which one exists in a sort of "walking anarchy" detached and disengaged from established political and social values. Although Kerouac is given credit for inventing the term Beat Generation to describe his friends and peers, Ferlinghetti took the term and used it as part of his own literary activity. The City Lights Bookstore published a newsletter "Beatitude," thus referring to the beatific or mystical side of the Beats (this was how Kerouac said he meant it), but the term Beat can also mean in American slang "done in" or "had it" in the sense of being exhausted – or it can refer to a musical beat as in jazz.

There is no doubt that Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, the best and most imaginative of the Beat poets, had a major influence on American poetry: they helped break down conventional taboos concerning such topics as personal instability and homosexuality. Equally important, they revolutionized poetry publishing in the United States. While, however, they are critical of American society, they have failed to offer any solid moral or aesthetic values to substitute for the tired American values they criticize.

The 1960s and Since: The Confessions and Other "Schools"

Critics throughout the sixties exaggerated the contrast between Beat and academic poets. In fact the contemporary poetry scene was and is much more complex and diverse than such an opposition suggests. But the number of fine poets who have begun writing since 1945 is so great that it is necessary to talk about them in groups.

Any list of academic poets of distinction would have to include Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, William Meredith, and Stanley Kunitz, though these are highly individual writers, especially Kunitz. Louise Bogan, equally accomplished, has suffered from being too original to be linked with any group.

The so-called Confessional Poets, outspoken and personal, sometimes shockingly intimate, are often seen as most clearly representing the reaction against modernism. Yet all of them began as well-trained formalists before breaking loose into personal styles.

Poets like Robert Lowell (1917-77), Sylvia Plath (1932-63), John Berryman (1914-72), Theodore Roethke (1908-63), and Anne Sexton (1928-74) use their private lives, replete with nervous breakdowns, abortions, love-hate relationships with parents, and suicidal fears, to dramatize the increasing disorientation of human life. In Lowell's long work *Life Studies* (1959) Lowell and his family are the central figures. The failure of communication within the family seems to be parallel to such communication breakdowns in public and social life. World War II horrifies Lowell, and his status of conscientious objector (C.O.) becomes part of the theme of the poems in *Life Studies*:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,

and made my manic statement...
 Given a year
 I walked on the roof of the West Side Jail...

In “Colloquy in Black Bock” (written after Lowell was released from jail where he served a sentence for his conscientious objection to the war), Lowell continues this theme that language and interpersonal relations have so deteriorated that they cause negative effects at all levels, private and public:

Here the jack-hammer jabs into the ocean;
 My heart, you race and stagger and demand
 More blood-gangs for your nigger brass percussions,
 Till I, the stunned machine of your devotion,
 Clanging upon this cymbal of a hand,
 Am rattled screw and footloose. All discussions
 End in the mud-flat detritus of death.

In his monumental book of poems *For the Union Dead* (1964), which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Lowell bitterly attacks the glory paid to soldiers after their death. Later in the poem, Lowell brings the past to the present by noting that “There are no statues for the last war here;” he means the Second World War, but he could as easily mean the Korean War or the war in Vietnam. War, in fact, seems to be a continual and repeated image for many poets writing in the twenty years after World War II – and this is not surprising for war dominates the American consciousness of the mid-twentieth century. Lowell’s pacifism was not confined to World War II. In June 1965 he refused an invitation to President Johnson’s White House and used the occasion to articulate and emphasize his opposition to the Vietnam War. Throughout his life, war and the human damage done by war was a repeated theme in his poetry.

Lowell is also concerned with human conflict on a private level. Despite the fact – or perhaps because of it – that he was born into a prominent New England family that had produced famous educators, statesmen, and poets (both James Russell and Amy), Lowell presents himself and his family not as patricians but as unhappy, sometimes psychotic, failed people. *Life Studies* is an autobiography that is part prose, part poetry. The poem “Commander Lowell” presents a cold, relentless portrait of the Naval officer who was his father. The piece “91 Revere Street” (the family’s address in Boston) portrays the hurt anger and failed communication which haunted his parents and seen to have profoundly affected their child. *Life Studies* is an attempt by the poet to exorcise the grief and anger he has stored against his family. Even in poetry that is not openly confessional or descriptive of his family, Lowell often takes his theme from the failed communications between human beings. In “To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage,” Lowell presents us with a female speaker whose husband is an alcoholic; the wife moans “Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust,” and the horrifying image of the husband swaying over the supine wife “like an elephant” reduces this marriage to a terrible prostitution.

Lowell continues the confessional poetry he began with *Life Studies* in *Notebook, 1967-8* in which he parallels his private, tortured mental history with the political turmoil of the 1960s. The book is a sonnet-sequence of irregular, unrhymed sonnets which seem to imply the connection between formal, public life and informal, private life. Lowell was perhaps the most successful poet to write in the confessional mode, though he was not without his flaws. However personal he becomes, he does seem to realize that it is the poet’s obligation to universalize a situation so that his poetry speaks to more than one person. He seems to touch nerves with his poetry, to somehow bring the reader into his own life so that the reader recognizes his own imperfect human life.

Sylvia Plath honed and polished her confessional poetry until, as one writer puts it, “the result is a holy scream, a splendid agony – beyond sex, beyond delicacy, beyond all but art.” Like Lowell, Plath uses her family and family background as the grounding for poems which examine closely the poet’s obsession with death (she eventually committed suicide), the poet’s relationship to her father and other members of her family; but she also expands these obsessions to make them reflect upon world events impinging on her consciousness. In Plath, as indeed in the poetry of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, there is a heightened sensitivity to the human predicament. History becomes both an impersonal and a personal nightmare. In Plath’s autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) she chronicles the seemingly ordinary events leading up to a young woman’s mental breakdown. On the outer edge of her consciousness is the horror of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, a left-wing Jewish couple who were sentenced to death for passing atomic secrets to the Russians in the early 1950s. The execution seems to amplify her own fears and obsession with death. A similar expansion of image occurs in a bitter poem Plath wrote about her father, Otto Plath:

I thought every German was you.
 And the language obscene
 An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
(„Daddy”)

She again compares herself to victims of terror in “Lady Lazarus” which details several suicide attempts from which she has arisen like Lazarus:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –
A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
My paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

There is certainly a danger in this approach to oneself as the major subject of poetry. Plath has been accused of sometimes falling into a whining, self-pitying tone, which she does occasionally, but there is real strength in her willingness to confront the nature of victimization, the nature of victim to conqueror and the relationship of a suicide to life. At her best, Plath is able to convey the sheer terror and fear with which she, and many other human beings, face a daily life filled with news of death, and with failed communications between people.

Anne Sexton studied with Robert Lowell at Boston University, but she probably would have developed into a confessional poet even if she had not been influenced by him. Sexton’s poetry records “the awful rowing towards God,” which is also the title of one of her books. She once said that she preferred to think of herself as an imagist “who deals with reality and its hard faces,” and her poetry supports this claim. She writes hard, clear images which vividly remain in the mind of the reader. In “Music Swims Back to Me” a voice which seems almost disembodied from her physical self hears music waft through the window of her mental hospital room. In “Lullaby” she gives us an ironic image of a before-bed ritual:

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
it floats me out of myself,
my stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.

Her poetry is deliberately framed in her life – sexual encounters, marriage, motherhood, living, and death – for she finds life difficult and feels that the poetry which expresses it “should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt.”

Sexton’s poetry takes snapshots with the camera of her imagination – focusing on a moment or moments that allude to an entire memory or event. She clearly exemplifies a poetry of experience, a poetry which subjectively portrays her life as an allegory for modern existence in a bruised state. Like Plath, Sexton used her poetry to work out the conflicting loves and fears of her life, and she also eventually chose suicide.

The “Confessionals” – the name was rejected by every member of the group – have been called solipsistic. But they were all redefining the self in the process of reasserting their individuality against the impersonality of modernism and the anonymity of the modern world. Even with the enormous variety of poetry written in the last twenty years, the best poems tend to share this new understanding. The poems reveal personal perceptions and emotions; the self is not concealed behind masks or personae; but this exposed self is understood to be the completely implicated in the history and social conditions of its time. The old oppositions between private and public no longer seem to make sense. “The personal is political,” as the women’s movement put it.

Other oppositions traditional to Western thought are also being questioned or simply ignored in much of the best contemporary poetry. The self is no more opposed to the physical world than it is to the social world which shapes it; we are physical beings as fully as mental ones. So the old splits between man and nature, between mind and body, are transcended or, again, simply discarded. Much of this had already been said by Walt Whitman, especially in *Song of Myself*. Whitman was never forgotten, of course, but beginning in the late 1950s he underwent a tremendous rediscovery which has affected most poets writing today.

Charles Olson (1910-70) found the grand synthesizing impulse in the work of Ezra Pound, and, beginning as almost a disciple, wrote a poem even more monumental than *The Cantos*. His *Maximus Poems*, published in parts over several decades, appeared in a single collected edition only in 1984. They have been influential, especially on other poets, but not popular, for they are very difficult. Like *The Cantos* they are a collage including distant times and cultures – in Olson’s case the Sumerians and Mayans. Like *Paterson*, they are based on a native locality – Olson’s

Gloucester, Massachusetts, a fishing village – and incorporate its history. The hero Maximus is both Olson himself (who was physically enormous) and much more: a representative man encompassing his time and country, like Blake's Albion.

Also like both Pound and Williams, Olson proposes a new poetic. He called it Projectivism, and spoke of "proprioception" (the title of a pamphlet he wrote). Both words point to the way in which the self projects itself into reality in the process of perceiving it. The ego, however, does not impose itself on the world, but rather opens to it. Indeed we must "Wash the ego out," Olson said, and this is the job of the poem. The length of the poetic line should be determined by the poet's breath, the most personal measure, and at the same time the least personal, because breath is common not only to all people, but also to the animal world.

For eight years Olson was teacher and the rector at tiny Black Mountain College, where a remarkable group of artists and thinkers gathered. The poets associated with him there, Robert Creeley (b. 1926), Robert Duncan (b. 1919), and Denise Levertov (b. 1923), as well as friends with no formal link to the school – Ed Dorn (b. 1929) and Paul Blackburn (1926-1971) – became known as the Black Mountain Poets. Loosely connected to the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance, these poets are all so different that it is almost impossible to generalize about them, except to say that they are committed to both freedom and personal craftsmanship. They all accept Olson's dictum that "Form is never more than an extension of content."

Another group perceived as a "school" opposed to the academic "establishment" was the New York poets. Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) with his "Personism" and his funny, casual poems like journal jottings, Kenneth Koch (b. 1925), James Schuyler (b. 1923), and John Ashbery (b. 1927), were friends with a group of artists such as Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning, who deeply affected their work. O'Hara died in 1966, but his poems, collected only in 1971, continue to have an impact. Ashbery emerged as one of the foremost American poets of the 1980s. His work is very difficult, using radically inconsistent diction (sepulchre and drugstore in the same line) and often obscure references. Like Eliot, he is erudite, but creates poems without identifiable events or characters. Yet his language can be beautiful – the musical element of his poetry is most important to him – and his imagery taps the archetypal world of dream to produce a strange power.

The other best poets writing today are equally inclusive, but mostly more accessible. Foremost among these poets is Gary Snyder (b. 1930). Snyder encountered the Beat movement in 1952 when he went to the University of California at Berkeley to study oriental languages. He had earlier received a B.A. degree and had shipped out of New York as an ordinary seaman during the summers. "Going to sea," he says, "was part of a long growth and extension of my sympathies... to many classes and kinds of people and many parts of the world so that now I feel at home anywhere." His background in anthropology has led him to explore the archetypal recesses of the human past and the ways men define their lives by ritual and sign. His philosophy is a mixture of American frontier anarchism with Buddhism plus commitment to naturalness and a communion with nature.

In "Hunting" he combines the natural world of the hunt with the centuries-old spirit of American Indians, who hunted in the same forests. Snyder advocates pluralistic values drawn from a variety of sources and a heavy reliance on nature as the values which will rescue us from materialism and industrial destruction:

The only thing that can be relied on
is the snow on Kurakake Mountain.
fields and woods
thawing, freezing, and thawing
totally untrustworthy...
the only faint source of hope
is the snow on Kurakake mountain.
(“The Snow on Saddle Mountain”)

Snyder's poetry is a highly personal blend (as in "Meeting the Mountains," in which he describes his young son Kai's joy at discovering nature around him) of the philosophical and spiritual fragments he shores up against the modern world.

A.R. Ammons is clear but never simple in his long philosophical nature poems, more casual than Emerson, more relaxed than Frost, funnier than Stevens. Adrienne Rich (b. 1929), beginning as a formalist, has gradually broken free in her life and her technique to become an eloquent voice of woman's experience. But her struggle for communication (one book is called *The Dream of a Common Language*) are not limited to one gender: "I choose to love this time for once/ with all my intelligence."

Another woman who is personal without being confessional is Maxine Kumin (b. 1925), who has been writing seriously for almost thirty years. She won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1973 for a volume entitled *Up Country*, and in 1982 was named Poet of the Library of Congress, the closest honor the United States has to the title of Poet Laureate. Kumin has strong Imagist tendencies which are tempered by a solid sense of the realistic scene around her. Like the confessional poets, she works out many of the conflicts she has had with her family and her background in her poetry (and in such novels as *Through Dooms of Love* and *The Designated Heir*), but Kumin does not see herself as victim as

much as actor and player. There is great deal of natural imagery in her poetry, taken from the woods and fields surrounding her New Hampshire farm.

If Kumin seeks incorruptibility in the rural experience, Philip Levine (b. 1928) seeks a similar quality in the urban experience. But he travels extensively, particularly in Spain, a place he has come to regard with symbolic reverence. He has been strongly influenced by the Spanish surrealist poets, particularly Garcia Lorca, and one of his volumes of poetry focused on the legacy of such poets and of the Spaniards who died in the Spanish Civil War. Despite his rural residence and his strong interest in Spain, Levine's best poems are imagistic recreations of moments in the lives of city dwellers. "Belle Isle, 1949" is a memory poem which contrasts the romantic image of two teenagers swimming in the moonlit Detroit River with the polluted debris and overflow of the industrial city. Yet somehow the poignancy of the encounter outweighs the industrial waste around them. Levine attempts, with some success, to define the experience of the mobile, mid-twentieth century American, who despite the depersonalization around him wants to reach out to those he wants to love.

Poetry in the United States in the 1980s is taking many directions: the confessional mode continues with modifications and strengths. Younger poets are certainly writing a verse based on colloquial language, as Williams would have it, language as it is actually spoken, and like Williams they are writing a poetry which eschews editorializing and commenting – the words of the observation and description can supply the emotion but not an editorial "message." In a sense, through the continued influence of William Carlos Williams, these poets are writing in an imagistic mode – they have fulfilled Pound's dicta more faithfully than Pound himself – using the clear, hard image to treat directly the thing himself. And like Pound, and most other American poets, these poets stand a little apart from the values of their contemporary world. They retreat inward – some to madness, others to communion with nature, or into history – to oppose and somehow ameliorate the social and political standards around them.

(Agata Preis-Smith has contributed the discussion of T.S. Eliot's poetry.)

Timothy Wiles

Chapter 14: Modern American Drama

Eugene O'Neill and the Beginnings of American Artistic Drama

Although theatrical entertainments existed in America since colonial times, the history of American drama begins with Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) in the 1920s, if we speak of plays which continue to be performed on American and world stages. Why did the drama take so long to establish itself as an artistic form in America? First, we must note that the drama, unlike lyric poetry or even the novel, cannot be produced in isolation, and wait unprinted or forgotten for many years, as happened with Dickinson's verse and Melville's novels. Drama needs to be produced at the time it is written, if the author is to learn from direct stage experience, as after all Shakespeare and Moliere did. And for that to happen, the author has to convince many parties that his creations are both artistically worthy and financially profitable – he must convince players, producers, critics, and audience. In America's case, the late development of cities and of sophisticated urban bourgeoisie accounted for drama's late development. The country also emerged from cultural Puritanism even later than it escaped the religious kind, and church censorship, later replaced by Victorian moralism, stifled honest expression of complex emotions on the stage even after these had found their way into fiction. On this subject, it should come as no surprise that the birth of drama in America coincided with the first publication of the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud.

As for foreign influences, one could argue that the American drama came about mainly due to immigration. Certainly the country's cultural make-up changed very quickly after the Civil War with waves of European immigrants as well as imported ideas entering from outside the Anglo-American mainstream. Most of the immigrants were poor and uneducated, but many came from cities which had supported subsidized art theaters. Meanwhile, the American upper classes were travelling to Europe in droves, mainly to learn new manners and to buy antiques, but inevitably the more progressive ones picked up new ideas as well. The immigrants brought "city culture" as well as urbane cultural criticism to America, including more tolerance for serious theater, and they helped create the cities as economic entities which could support both a popular stage, and eventually, a critical alternative to it. The new theater came to America during the decade of World War I, a time when the country was forced to look toward Europe. It grew up first in New York City's artistic colony, Greenwich Village, and its chief beneficiary was Eugene O'Neill, who was only one of a number of bohemian artists and revolutionaries who came of age then. For example, Emma Goldman, an anarchist and feminist, lectured widely on free love, the destruction of the state, and Ibsenian playwrighting; she was an early mentor of O'Neill's. Other bohemians were also attracted to the doctrine of released repressions which they felt their particular cultural heritage needed. One such couple, John Reed and Louise Bryant, befriended O'Neill before he became famous as a playwright and they later travelled along with Goldman to write political reportage from the Russian Revolution. This group provided the artists and the audience with the first substantial alternative theater in America, named the Provincetown Playhouse. Fed by the prosperity and the social risk-taking of the 1920s (a decade sometimes called the Roaring Twenties, when everyone broke at least one law – that against alcohol consumption), this group quickly produced several serious playwrights, and one gifted dramatic artist in O'Neill, whose plays soon were in demand on the more established commercial stages of Broadway (as the New York theater district is called).

But this is only one version of the origins of serious American drama, the one which emphasizes the formative influences coming from artistic capitals located elsewhere. It is also possible to claim important native influences on the drama. A colorful theatrical tradition had already been thriving on American stages for more than a century, and although it did not create great dramatic literature, it too influenced the forms and outlooks which American playwrights adopted for their serious writing after World War I. For O'Neill and his company did not simply copy European forms, they adapted them to popular forms found in their own culture. For example, O'Neill's father had been a star of both the melodrama stage and in Shakespeare revivals, the two most popular forms of written drama on 19th-century American stages. There were also forms of theatrical spectacle which did not depend much on written texts at all. Musical reviews, vaudeville (variety shows), and burlesque shows provided song, comedy, circus stunts, and sex appeal (including striptease and bawdy jokes) to mass audiences. Minstrel shows developed to portray racial themes. (These were a form of review which included a white master of ceremonies and black singer-clowns who stood up and performed skits about black life and sang Negro songs directly to the audience. At first, the end men were played by White actors in black makeup called "blackface"; later, Black actors were allowed to play these parts. Although the minstrel shows would be called racist today, they provided the first means by which Black themes and, later, Black actors could enter the White mainstream stage.) The wild west shows were another form of bi-racial entertainment, involving cowboy performers and real Indians in rodeo acts and dramatizations of the western conquest, again from a racist perspective.

Returning to O'Neill we could list a number of conditions governing his emergence as America's first great playwright under two categories: personal heritage and cultural heritage. The first group defines him as an individual and explains specific qualities of his writing. Here we could include his good fortune to be born the son of a successful actor who considered the theater an artistic calling, at a time when many Victorian Americans considered it a road to

sin, and furthermore, a father who supported him financially for years. O'Neill also spent a troubled youth trying to "find himself," that is, going through periods of drunkenness, work as a common laborer and seaman, and travel amongst the ranks of the lowest classes in several countries, all experiences which he later drew upon for his stories and characters. His own family conflicts were just as colorful, and they provide a hidden key to many of the character conflicts even in his non-autobiographical dramas.

Turning away from individual factors, we find several formative circumstances available for the first time in his early years, such as the emergence of Little Theaters, the European influences, and the hunger for a newly-powerful (even *nouveau-riche*) nation to possess a world-class art (including a drama) of its own. Perhaps the least-recognized element but one of the most essential was the theatrical tradition which O'Neill inherited; observers neglect it because O'Neill and his contemporaries claimed to be rebelling against it totally. This is the heritage of popular spectacular entertainment, melodrama, and even Shakespeare productions on 19th-century American stages.

It would take an entire chapter to catalogue O'Neill's plays adequately, show the variety of themes which deal alternatively with his own life, American history and culture, philosophical issues, or world history. For lack of space, we will make only a general survey of the major groups within his work. His plays fall into three periods. His earliest plays stayed close to experiences drawn from his own early life. He wrote short, naturalistic plays of the sea, creating a group of down-and-out, wanderer heroes who embodied proletarian reality and spoke accurate, non-rhetorical vernacular language, but still expressed a yearning and an awareness of higher cultural crisis that indicates that an artist, not a sociologist, created them. He also depicted his tuberculosis in several plays, most notably in his first full-length success, *Beyond the Horizon*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1920. But he uses his hero's terminal illness there to depict conflicts between the landsman and the sea wanderer, the practical business- and family-man and the overreaching artist.

In the 1920s, O'Neill wrote a dozen bold plays which overreached his own artistic capacity but still introduced many of the scenic and poetic effects which he absorbed from European experiments. He also expanded his repertoire of themes, depicting Black characters sympathetically for the first time on the American stage (and also capturing their dialect); illustrating conflicts between American country and city, as well as between the businessman mentality (or "Babbitry," after Sinclair Lewis' novel) and the artistic personality; portraying the newly emancipated women (who in America received the vote in 1920 and some sexual and professional liberation during the Roaring Twenties); excoriating the machine age; and above all, psychoanalyzing the universal and the American mentality in several plays. These plays also mark his innovations of masks, puppets, spoken interior monologues, and poetic devices.

In the latter 1930s and early 1940s, in self-imposed seclusion, O'Neill returned to his family biography to write his best dramatic literature. He also returned to a more strictly realistic form, but in language laden with subtle imagery, to create his most accurate depiction of everyday life under stress, immigrant and establishment cultures in unconscious conflict, and the language of real-life talk heightened by the artist's insight. O'Neill never stopped striving to write "the great American drama," even when he had already accomplished this in his last autobiographical plays. In fact, at the same time as their composition, he was attempting to write a multi-play cycle about the development of American spirit and material success. He planned to include nine or eleven plays in the cycle, and drafted scenarios for many of them, but when he could no longer write due to Parkinson's disease he destroyed the manuscripts of almost all of them, burning thousands of pages. O'Neill finished one play from this cycle to his satisfaction, *A Touch of the Poet*, and spared it from the fire. In fact, he did create his longed-for socio-cultural panorama in his autobiographical plays. When we read beyond strictly personal themes in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, we can see the realist's mastery of a whole social environment in O'Neill's own time, as informed by the influence of past history, but embodied in dramatic dialogue rather than narrated, and free of cant and costume trappings. Still, his impulse to write the final cycle reveals O'Neill as a heroic though over-reaching American artist on the order of Melville or Whitman, wanting to know and sing all aspects of his national experience.

Brief chronology and overview of O'Neill's major plays

Here the dates indicate first publication, which except for the third group, coincides roughly with first performance.

1. Early naturalistic plays with autobiographical reference to O'Neill's sea-faring and tuberculosis crisis
 - S.S. Glencairn* cycle of one-act plays, published in 1919: sea plays marked by poetic naturalism, the first successes of the Provincetown Playhouse
 - Beyond the Horizon*, 1920
2. Experimental plays employing formal innovations, from O'Neill's middle career
 - The Emperor Jones*, 1921
 - O'Neill's first major Black characterization; extensive use of expressionistic structure, staged dreams, psychological monologues, and African drumming as a symbolic element.
 - The Hairy Ape*, 1922

- conflict between natural, animalistic man (a proletarian stoker emblematically named Yank) and decadent, industrialized society; expressionistic choral and telegraphic verbal styles, as well as influence via subjective lighting, life-sized puppets, and allegory of man-in-a-cage mechanistic choreography.

***All God's Chillun Got Wings*, 1924**

- extensive depiction of the Black community via an inter-racial marriage.

***Desire under the Elms*, 1924**

- naturalistic drama of generational conflicts in a stifling farm environment, but also O'Neill's first recourse to Greek tragedy to illustrate eternal patterns, especially the Oedipal conflict.

***Strange Interlude*, 1928**

- very long chronicle of the emancipated 1920s woman, also viewed symbolically as an earth mother; noted for sexual and linguistic frankness and psychological accuracy, much of which is revealed to the audience in the form of spoken interior monologues.

***Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1931**

- three-play cycle, originally performed on three evenings, recasting the *Oresteia* as a post-Civil War New England family drama; includes imitations of Greek chorus, soliloquy and mythology, but re-cast in American terms; his Nobel Prize winning work.

3. Final realistic plays written in seclusion, on autobiographical themes

***The Iceman Cometh*, 1946 (written 1939)**

***Long Day's Journey Into Night*, 1955 (written 1940)**

- a classically Aristotelian play (one set, one date, one continuous and tragic action of downfall and redemptive insight) which appears to be both archetypically American and the best example of naturalism becoming realism; note O'Neill's artistic credo voiced in Edmund's speeches about insights gained at sea.

***A Moon for the Misbegotten*, 1952 (written 1941)**

Social Drama of the 1930s

Historians date the end of the Roaring Twenties from the stock market crash of October 1929. It is safe to say that even in 1980 the Depression is the most formative social influence in the lives or memories of parents' stories of American living today. Before the Depression, America had always seemed a country of unbounded opportunity, a benign provider, and a center of democratic political moderation which was simply too wealthy and flexible in terms of social mobility to seriously concern itself with theories of class struggle – or the actual practice. But with one-sixth of the population unemployed, banks failing, the middle-class houses prey to mortgage foreclosure, breadlines, and stockbroker's suicides, coupled with a disastrous Western crop failure which sent whole families drifting as in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, it seemed to many Americans as if the whole social fabric was unravelling. Such a crisis called for radical solutions, many argued, and they proposed various Socialist and Communist restructurings of society in tracts, political campaigns, and also in literature.

A whole group of playwrights and producing ensembles responded to the social crisis. If in the 1920s theater had been dominated by the solitary genius of O'Neill, the mood of 1930s art was toward collectivism. Artists were encouraged to portray the struggle of the average man, or even the masses. Authors often employed collective heroes such as a group of social types drawn from several classes and occupations. Acting ensembles also played an important part in the nurturing of playwrights. These ranged from the communist New Theater League to the government-founded Federal Theater Project, the first federal subsidy of artists in America, which produced hundreds of plays nationwide and stimulated theatrical innovation with its documentary dramas about public issues, a kind of staged newsreel called the Living Newspaper. A group of young directors and actors of moderate socialist leaning founded the most productive company of this decade, the Group Theater (1931-41).

Their theater produced one noted dramatist, Clifford Odets (1906-63), but many playwrights successful in later generation did apprentice work with the Group, including William Saroyan, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Odets' plays initiated contemporary poetic naturalism on the American stage. His middle-class families greatly resemble Chekhov's milieu, except that now the impending social catastrophe has arrived, and the language is more pungent and idiomatic due to the non-aristocratic characters whom Odets depicts. But beyond his rich urban slang, the language resembles Chekhov's dialogue of lacunae and missed connections, with characters lost in their subjective worlds and often floundering in apathy which has a concrete social causation. This describes the environment of Odets' two best long plays, *Awake and Sing!* (1936) and *Paradise Lost* (1936). However, by the end of most of his plays, a key character breaks out of his despair and makes a social affirmation, usually vague in politics but rich in imagery.

Odets could write a more politicized play with panache, as witness his agitprop (from "agitation and propaganda") union piece *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), which ends with the audience joining the actors in a call for "Strike!" But his major talent lay in social portraiture of the average family under economic stress, and when the Depression began to ebb (and Odets left the Group Theater to write for Hollywood), his talent dried up as well. Odets

produced his best work young, drawing out of personal memories the indirectly autobiographical reveries which proved to be his main contribution to dramatic art.

Thornton Wilder (1897-1976), contributed perhaps the most in terms of theatrical experimentation and poetic quality of writing. At first glance, his philosophical fantasies *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) bear little resemblance to the social realism of contemporaneous playwrights. But his focus on the collective life of mankind as a race shows his interest in social entities as the fit subject of drama, an emphasis he shared with other 1930s playwrights. His structural analysis of a small town's quotidian and mental life, although set in 1906, offered an image in 1938 of the domestic and communal bonds which economic crisis was straining. And his panoramic history of mankind always just surviving catastrophe "by the skin of our teeth" referred both to the Depression (the "ice age" of Act I) and the still-ongoing war as depicted in Act III. The play concludes with Wilder's ironic optimism, having depicted mankind in constant progress but also in constant cyclic repetition of its mistakes.

Although Wilder's comic optimism sometimes seems untempered by the darker experiences of life, his dramaturgical innovations rank him with the profoundest thinkers of theater theory in this century. He introduced scenery-less stages, omniscient narrators, choral depiction of inner thoughts, and self-conscious theatricality to the American stage. This last technique is his most important. Sabina of *The Skin of Our Teeth* addresses the audience directly. Occasionally she also speaks to the audience in the character of fictional actress, Miss Somerset, supposed to be playing her part – and Hiss Somerset usually interrupts Sabina to protest against this play's immorality. In a scene in which the archetypal father and son must fight; she interrupts to protest that when these two actors played that scene the previous night, they drew real blood due to each of their private familial complexes. In fact, the whole imagined performance of the play is constantly being interrupted by mishaps. The scenery totters; actors get sick and have to be replaced by the Black ushers as stand-ins; and Hiss Somerset is constantly challenging the stage manager's authority. We get through the imagined performance of the play just by the skin of our teeth, as much as through its dramatized catastrophes, and largely thanks to the audience's solicited tolerance and even physical involvement. At the gimmick level, the audience is asked to pass up its seats onto the stage for firewood during the ice-age crisis, etc., but at a deeper level of audience participation and cooperative creation of the performance, we are asked to imagine omitted scenes, appealed to as over-hearers of impromptu rehearsals, and pleaded to for tolerance while the theater company copes with Playhouse disasters. These positions harmonize with the philosophical speculations Wilder's spokesmen ponder, resulting in both a great unity of performance-and-story, and an activated, participatory audience, suitable for the drama of a socially conscious age which wished to stir its public to real action. Particularly for this final effect, we can view Wilder's plays as fit members of the social and activist cannon of 1930s drama.

Several minor writers of the 1930s dramatized other aspects of the crisis. Robert Sherwood (1896-1955) depicted the European drift toward war as a violent absurdity in his *Idiot's Delight* (1936), whereas Lillian Hellman (1905-1983), writing from the vantage-point of 1941, could lay the blame more squarely on fascism in *Watch on the Rhine*. The 1930s treatment of world wars past and yet to come is connected with the Marxist social analysis. Leftist dramatists generally interpreted World War I strictly as an economic rivalry among capitalism, as did Irvin Shaw (1913-1984) in his expressionist pacifist play *Bury the Dead* (1936), and popular opinion moulded by Depression experience accepted this interpretation as an explanation of the coming war as well. Ironically for the cause of pacifism, this left the United States unprepared in terms of public opinion for quick entry into World War II.

As a social activist, Lillian Hellman embraced many contemporary causes in the 1930s, but her best drama of the decade, *The Little Foxes* (1939), attacked industrial greed and economic exploitation. In a lighter vein, William Saroyan (1908-1981) turned to the barroom setting to anatomize American social types in *The Time of Your Life* (1939), portraying the nation as drunken dreamers who can only cope due to the absurd largesse of a crippled philanthropist.

The serious musical originated in the 1930s on American stages, and proved to be the most artistic embodiment of the agitprop didactic drama form. Most prominently, Marc Blitzstein (b. 1905) adapted Bertold Brecht's epic theater and defamiliarizing techniques to a musical about the labor union in *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936), and an actual labor union, of female garment workers, staged an amateur review called *Pins and Needles* (1936) which presented tuneful vignettes from working people's everyday lives, and ran for four years on Broadway and was even played at the White House. These works laid the ground for Roger's and Hammerstein's liberal and humanitarian musicals of the 1940s and 1950s which usually depicted the resolution of inter-racial or inter-cultural conflict (*Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*), and Leonard Bernstein's musical on a similar theme, *West Side Story*. Besides their progressive social outlook, these works possess a unity between song and text and a lyrical embodiment of realistic speech, particularly in the songs, which elevates them above the average commercial entertainment: they are plays of sentiment, but not sentimentality.

Critical Dramatists in an Age of Prosperity

The Jewish-American son of a wealthy merchant who lost his fortune during the Depression, Arthur Miller (b. 1915), worked in factories to support his university education, and wrote apprentice work on the fringes of the socialist theaters of the 1930s. Of his generation, Arthur Miller offers the most direct vision of after-effects of this social crisis of the 1930s in his works. For example, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) had his best business year in

1928; although Miller never mentions the Depression here, he depicts a used-up commercial traveller who is sixty in 1949, who still longs for fleeting success and popularity, and who cannot understand what is blighting his professional and domestic life. This play raises larger issues of success-worship, self-delusion and the over-valuation of popularity and appearances rather than achievement which are still problems in American social life, but its specific reality depicts a depression survivor who in fact cannot survive the psychic trauma.

Miller's next important play, *The Crucible* (1953), uses the witchcraft hysteria and trials of Salem, Massachusetts, of the 1690s, as an allegory for anti-communist hysteria in the American 1950s. Its hero, John Proctor, hangs for refusing to compromise himself or denounce his friends. Miller returned to both these topics in his autobiographical play *After the Fall* (1964), an expressionistic and cinematic dream play which appears to stage the associative memory process of psychoanalysis. Quentin, survivor of two marriages and about to enter a third, addresses an invisible "Listener" located in the audience to relate his formative experiences and try to decide whether he dares commit himself again to another person in marriage. These experiences include parents who blamed and hated each other for financial mishaps during the Depression; youthful involvement with socialist intellectuals which was sorely tested under McCarthyism when Quentin and his friend are asked to testify against a mentor, and constant recollection of concentration camp slaughters, although not from direct experience. The play breaks new ground as a socially conscious dramatized interior monologue. Having voiced his autobiography, however, Miller seems able only to repeat his themes in plays of diminishing impact. His central value as a playwright, besides the honest chronicling of a complex political era, is his depiction of the average man in his public role, the banal temptations and delusions he is prey to, and yet the greatness of aspiration and striving for insight that make his downfall tragic. The same is not true of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), who at first glance resembles O'Neill more than his contemporaries, with his Southern rather than mainstream outlook and setting; his interest in the personal realm and psychological themes; and his concern with aberrant, neurotic personalities, who can trace their disturbance to a sexual origin. He also wrote his life down in an early play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), and then became repetitious in his final years. But his most striking characters and best-constructed dramatic situations have a mythic stature that places them among the obsessive life-affirmers and tragic questers of classic American literature, and they speak their passions in lyrical prose that seems at once accurate to region and psychology, and richly poetic; he builds on the long periodic sentences and the rhetorical hyperbole of a once-aristocratic people of the South.

Social concerns are woven into the texture of his best plays, and support the foreground sexual conflicts; his weaker plays transpire in placeless allegorical locales (*Camino Real*, 1951), or florid exotic climes which just provide lush imagery (*Night of the Iguana*, 1961), so that the conflict of lovers' wills seems to exist as a timeless entity outside of culture. Since in this sociological age we tend to believe that even our sex lives are culturally conditioned, and since Williams has demonstrated this so convincingly in his best plays, these weaker plays take on the aspect of fantasy – partly of the philosophical variety, partly of the erotic.

For the integration of social and sexual conflict, Williams' two best plays are *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. (The earlier *Glass Menagerie* also has this quality, and rings true about Williams' own Depression-era poverty, stifling family, and sexual inhibitions, but it exists mainly to explain an autobiographical issue – his sister's mental breakdown.) In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams portrays the larger-than-life collision between two elemental forces embodied in aristocratic but neurotic Blanche Dubois and her honestly-appetitive but cruel and narrow-minded brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. They seem like opposite types, but as they battle they show unconscious attraction for each other. One needs to study the play at length to identify all the connotations of their struggle. Blanche embodies a poetic sensuality but has an obsessive attitude toward sex; she stands for the arts and civilizing forces, but also falls for trashy sentimental decorations and taunts Stanley for his stupidity. Stanley is the elemental sexual being but also a possessive tyrant; he is child-like in his sentiments and needs, but when he turns to humiliate Blanche, he falls back on adult hypocrisies. Eventually he rapes her, and her only refuge is into insanity, but the tragic collision seems inevitable and appropriate for the two of them; as he says, "we've had this date from the beginning."

Williams overcame his pessimism about the saving power of sexual union in his marriage comedy *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The play's general themes of impotence yielding to fertility and accepting one's own identity (even as a deviant or dying man) are embodied in a concrete and significant setting. Big Daddy's plantation and mansion, to gain which Maggie must make his son father her child, is not just the mythological "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest bottom land this side of the valley Nile" that he calls it. Having been born a white trash tenant farmer, having been a hobo during the Depression, but rising to prosperity due to ruthless ambition during the war, Big Daddy is the 1950s is the archetypal patriarch who gained a prosperity he is not sure he deserves; his ennuiridden, alcoholic and miseducated son is the typical offspring of that rootless rise to fortune. They are American cultural types of this era, as well as vivid individuals inhabiting a particular region; even their two diseases, cancer and impotence, indict the culture. But Maggie's sexual frankness, disdain for hypocrisy, and enlightened self-interest which expands to show concern for both men are equally American traits, and in Williams' most positive play they may succeed to revitalize the culture.

Williams and Miller had contributed their most lasting plays by the beginning of the 1960s, and with them, theatrical realism, even of a heightened or poetic kind, seemed to have exhausted its resources. It had already been

largely rejected on European stages, where a new style, called by the critic Martin Esslin “the theater of the absurd,” emerged after the Second World War. This style resembled the dream play and surrealism in part, the more political side of expressionist drama in another part. Esslin found a common element in the writer’s acceptance of existentialism, a world view which sees life as absurd, that is, according to Albert Camus, without absolute authorities, so that man either flounders in a meaningless wasteland, or creates values provisionally, and out of an act of will. Esslin identified Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter as the main writers of this trend. The main theatrical excitement in New York theaters during the early 1960s was the introduction of these European dramatists.

Both this philosophy and the specific formal innovations appealed to American writers in the 1960s, when they came to question their country’s patriotic and moral self-righteousness more and more, but could find no convincing alternative ideology or religion. Quite quickly, American playwrights adapted at least the superficial techniques of absurdist drama to their own works. Because they felt a more immediate social stress than did West Europeans in the 1960s, and because they had a longer tradition of stage and literary realism behind them, they also revived techniques from the socially-conscious 1930s theater, particularly agitprop form and the collectivist aesthetic. We will see this particularly in the performance ensembles (discussed in the next section) which were trying to create an image of a new kind of community, and embody it in their own communal theater groups.

Edward Albee (b. 1927) began his career writing in this vein, and found his first success in the Off Broadway theater (an alternative theater movement for challenging playwrights who could not hope for an expensive Broadway production), which also accommodated writers like Arthur Kopit and John Guare, first identified as absurdist. Albee’s work has proved to be the most substantial and consistent in terms of thematic concerns. He also achieved the greatest fame, perhaps to his disadvantage. After the early success of *The Zoo Story* (1960) and *The American Dream* (1961) Off Broadway, he took Broadway by storm with his first full-length play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and his later plays have all been produced there, but seldom with unanimous critical acclaim or even financial profit.

Albee’s early short plays set the two modes in which he continues to develop his skills as a dramatist. Realistic and violent, *The Zoo Story* tells of an encounter between a bland, middle-aged executive, Peter, and a disturbed urban drifter, Jerry. Jerry accosts Peter at the older man’s favorite haunt, a Central Park bench, and teases and taunts him into a conversation. Gradually we learn that Jerry has intended to pick out any average citizen at large, particularly of the “uninvolved” type, and involve him in the staging of Jerry’s own suicide. He does this after a faked fight for an absurd symbol of territorial possession, Peter’s park bench. But in the process, he has reached over his own void and authentically contacted another person, whom he has also shaken out of an unexamined spiritual lethargy: as he tells his horrified “murderer” while dying, “It’s all right, Peter, you’re not a vegetable, you’re an animal.” In his dialogues, Albee has mastered aggressive contemporary city talk with its bitter wit and poetry of insults, to show the loneliness lying beneath it.

In *The American Dream*, Albee uses absurdist theatrical techniques, particularly the Ionesco brand of satire, against domestic complacency. A parody family with names like Mommy and Daddy, plus an adoptive son known only as the American Dream, bicker and settle their scores after a lifetime of parental frustration. Due to Albee’s skillful writing, which mixes witty parody and emotional concern for these symbolic puppets, his satire still shocks and moves even after one gets the point of his simple allegory. This play sets up the terms for Albee’s later and more complex indictments of the American family, and it illustrates a characteristic absurdist technique of treating clichés literally, giving them dramatic life by taking their banal terms at straight semantic value and actualizing their scary implications.

In his longer plays, Albee presents his own, specific type of poetry of cruel aggressive wit. He wrote the best example of this kind of contemporary talk in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play involves a middle-aged couple, George and Martha, apparently childless, who have insulted each other for mutual inadequacies all during their marriage, but have come to depend on their clever put-downs for intellectual stimulation and emotional communication. The action unfolds over one drunken evening at an all-night party. George and Martha gradually draw a young visiting couple, Nick and Honey, into their game-playing, eliciting shameful secrets from each of them which they eventually turn against the youngsters in games they call “Get the Guests” and “Humiliate the Host.” The night-long orgy ends in shambles, with George and Martha wondering whether, stripped of debilitating illusions, they can salvage a life together alone: “Just . . . us?”

He can see many of Albee’s themes in this play: failed communication, illusion-ridden existence, marriage tensions, verbal cruelty stepping in to provide temporary stimulation and interchange where emotional kindness has proved too weak to sustain disturbed psyches. In George’s eventual exorcism of their marriage-sustaining illusions, and in Martha’s appetitive drives against his ineffectuality and desire to maintain that she is at least “an animal, not a vegetable,” we see strong personalities at work even amidst the psychological derangement. A similar progressive impulse runs beneath most of Albee’s plays, a drive toward an understanding or a breakthrough, even when no solutions are offered.

In recent plays, Albee has turned to older characters, and given convincing psychological portraits of people on the edge of their decline. But the plays have taken on a remoteness as they moved up into the higher class strata and into advanced years; the characters sometimes indulge in oblique, learned syntax, which does not evoke the vitality of Albee’s earlier tough talk. Still, plenty of passion animates these plays, and Albee has become a major voice in

American theater in terms of still commanding contemporary interest – and providing formal innovations which still influence others.

Two other writers gained some acclaim in this era for their Americanizations of absurdist techniques. Arthur Kopit (b. 1937) contributed a wild farce about predatory mothers which included man-eating venus fly trap plants on stage and a dead husband stuffed and trussed up off stage, titled simply *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' go Sad* (1960). Kopit produced two later plays on dissimilar themes but with striking effects, though it remains to be seen whether there is a central unity to his drama. In *Indians* (1968), written during the Vietnam War, he contrasts cowboy and contemporary slaughters, using the format of the old Wild-West show, but viewed as a haunted circus in which Indian victims pursue Wild Bill as he rides his cardboard horse. In a touching play called *Wings* (1978), Kopit creates a stuttering monologue for a speech-deprived stroke victim who has to re-learn her body's and voice's uses in therapy, only to achieve a transcendent death. Another writer of bitter comedies, John Guare (b. 1938), compiles wilder situations based on more mundane realities. In *The House of Blue Leaves* (1970), he depicts a frustrated family of would-be songwriter father (actually a zoo keeper), insane mother, over-eating mistress, and anarchist son, who wants to assassinate the Pope. In a better play, *Bosoms and Neglect* (1979), Guare depicts the improbable love affair between a young couple whose common bond is the fact that they share the same psychiatrist. The play is marked by savage wit against psychological self-indulgence. But though these writers use fables and cruel wit in the manner of Albee, their characterizations are not large and moving enough to make their people memorable.

Recent Playwrights

From among the generation of playwrights to emerge since Albee met his early and greatest success with *Virginia Woolf?*, no single writer has achieved the same mastery of craft, profundity of insight, or uniform critical acclaim as he. But several writers stand out whose early works show promise of future development. These newest playwrights have explored new formal techniques, dialogue patterns, and most noticeably, they have created new speech styles and authorial voices which reflect the current American vernacular, often drawing on the slang of young trend-setters, ethnic minorities, and sub-cultures. Their plays often first appeared on alternative stages which developed outside the commercial Broadway economy, and some of them spent apprentice years collaborating with the experimental theater companies prominent at the end of the 1960s such as the Open Theater and the Performance Group, which took active political stands against racism and the Vietnam War.

Among these younger playwrights, Lanford Wilson (b.1937) writes his dramas in the most traditional style, not abandoning a straight-forward story with a logical outcome and psychologically realistic characters whose pungent, idiomatic speech borders on lyricism. Although Wilson has experimented with plays built out of non-dialogic catch phrases, characters addressing the audience directly, and the cinematic alternation of many short scenes, his most successful plays take place in a single location in which the action unfolds continuously. His main innovation lies in the characters' speech styles, which are contemporary and ironic, full of wisecracks and also sometimes marked by the incoherencies of real-life talk where even the inarticulateness is telling. All this clever talking comes from average middle class Americans, and is linked to the major themes and metaphors of his plays.

Wilson depicts educated contemporary citizens, usually focusing on a group of young people whom fate has relocated in an unpromising environment far from their favorite university refuges and cities, sometimes back in their rather sterile home towns in the provinces. In spite of his characters' self-awareness and general freedom from neurosis, something is awry in each of their situations. Often a threat of change or even physical demolition hangs over them: Wilson is aware of the constant uprooting of the past in transcendent America, where according to the popular song, "they razed Paradise and put up a parking lot." He chooses locales rich with American mythology for his actions: a once-grand hotel now under the wrecking ball (*The Hot I Baltimore*,¹ 1973); an Indian mound excavation about to be flooded by an artificial lake (*The Mound Builders*, 1975); and, in *5th of July* (1978), the old family home which the hero contemplates selling as a recording studio. Wilson laments the passing of treasures from the country's past, but he does not dwell in the past. In his characters' nostalgia for fading institutions we find a whole catalogue of cultural symbols put under stress in contemporary America. But his most conscious characters observe that the past glories stood for dynamic progress and did not represent comfortable stability to their original creators.

Wilson captures this contemporary mood of cultural tiredness and a need for reassessment vividly in his plays. He sometimes indulges in sentimentality, creating characters who are not aware of the hazards or conflicts inherent in their attitudes of romantic enthusiasm. This mars his early success *The Hot I Baltimore*, which contains not one but three prostitutes, each with a heart of gold, whose efforts to start a movement to save their condemned residential hotel do not seem convincing. But in more recent plays, he has demonstrated a fuller range of tragic conflicts, either between individuals none of whom is exclusively good or evil, or within individuals themselves. Wilson may be telling us something about the simple actions which punctuate our lives more often than do shattering calamities, lives which we fill mostly with self-revealing (and in Wilson's case, poetic) talk.

A much more experimental dramatist, Sam Shepard (b. 1940) takes talk to an extreme, and often builds whole plays out of volcanic eruptions of verbal brilliance. He is the poet of hip talk today, and he sometimes builds entire dramatic actions around stylized verbal duels or oracular monologues. He turns to contemporary "pop" culture for the

¹ The "e" in its neon sign burned out and was never replaced. Note also the demystifying meaning of *5th of July*'s title.

sources of his idioms, freely mixing western colloquialisms (as filtered through cowboy movies and country-and-western songs), rock music slang, and the argots of sports, crime, drug-taking, science fiction, and the mass media. For example, in *The Tooth of Crime* (1974), set in America which has been divided into feudal fiefdoms each ruled by a mobster who is also a rock star, he mixes the slangs of rock, crime, and big business, so that “to have a hit” or “to make killing” refers simultaneously to a wide-selling song, a business success, and a murder. At its climax, two rival rock stars battle by exchanging musicalized monologues which parody the history of black music, Presley and Jagger songs, in what one calls “a style match”: the challenge is to “choose an argot ... Singles or LPs. 45, 78, 33 1/3.” In several plays Shepard also introduced rock songs, for which he composes the music.

Shepard creates fantastic and mythic characters to match these idioms. His plots include a journey undertaken by a pop star and a drug addict to a desert island where they meet Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Captain Kidd, and Paul Bunyan (*Mad Dog Blues*, 1971); a clairvoyant kidnapped by mobsters and forced to “dream” for them the winners of horse and dog races (*Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, 1974); and a hippie guerilla band which steals from the army a computerized weapons system (itself disguised as a robot rattlesnake) and teams up with American Indians to oppose the “establishment” (*Operation Sidewinder*, 1970). But his counter-cultural rebels do not usually succeed in their quests and rebellions; the few that do triumph over adversaries only through heroic monologues, which seem to blast down the moral if not physical force through their virtuosity and their vision of an alternate culture.

Shepard’s themes resemble Wilson’s and other writers’ of his generation: the commercialization of America; the dreams inherent in popular culture, particularly the richness of rock and movie imagery, but also their limitations; the breakdown of family ties and the need to renew these, often in alternative communities; and the crisis of the American artist, especially when he becomes a popular idol. He depicts young people, usually hip rebels, who confront uncaring elders and intractable establishment forces, but who do not come out of the battle unscathed or even go to defeat in unambiguous tragic glory. They often come to realize their own involvement in the dominant culture and its middle class commercial values. The arbitrary happy endings of some of his earlier plays are unsatisfying, but in some recent tragedies he depicts complex and contradictory collisions of values to renew a traditional theme of drama, the simultaneous acceptance and transcendence of one’s cultural heritage.

Shepard has also turned to more realistic play forms to illustrate the theme of inheritance. His trilogy of “heartland” plays set in rural family dwellings does not much resemble traditional plays on the subject, however. The characters are especially free from traditional individualized psychology and do not have some personal Freudian secret in their pasts from which they expiate themselves by way of a psychoanalytic confession. Even the incest plot behind *Buried Child* (1979) exists more in the realm of allegories about infertile, death-embracing old kings ruling a wasteland until young blood regenerates the life force, than on the level of a case history of family neurosis. This group of plays, which are linked by themes but do not constitute an interdependent trilogy, includes a second fine work, about spiritual starvation amongst middle class family members, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), and a lesser play about two battling brothers who swap identities in the course of co-authoring a movie western, *True West* (1980). These plays demonstrate that Shepard, although still undisciplined, can go beyond “hippie themes” limited to one generation’s interest and experience, to write major plays with developed conclusions about the American experience.

If we could say that Wilson conveys hip slang faithfully, and that Shepard elevates it to a poetic realm above realism, then David Mamet (b. 1947) burrows below realism in the murky depths of gut and gutter talk. But he does not just write with a tape recorder’s accuracy. He re-works dirty words and coarse expressions into an ambiguous poetry of the contradictions, accidental revelations, and unexpected insights people make through their use of ordinary language. Although some of his typical scenes resemble those of acknowledged naturalists like Gorki or Strindberg, he is a “hyper-naturalist” in his construction of speeches: no real life slang users would use so many and so artfully constructed idioms. Mamet ponders the existential incomprehensibility of other people to the subjective self, though he never says it in such pompous language, rather showing it through hundreds of gemlike speech acts. He does share the naturalist’s world view in his belief that people are governed and conditioned by their environments. He rarely writes tragedies, for his characters rarely articulate insights about themselves or overcome the tyranny of the words that govern them.

Among recent playwrights, Mamet alone turns to characters and situations outside the experience of hip young people, so he may eventually offer a broader cross section of types and concerns than do most of his peers. He has explored the world of old pensioners in *Duck Variations* (1972), dating bar denizens in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), children and divorced parents in *Reunion* (1976), actors in *A Life in the Theater* (1977), and lovers in *The Woods* (1977). But many of these plays are slight and episodic. His best play to date, *American Buffalo* (1975), contains a completed action and eventual insight made by characters who speak the most inarticulate of languages. Three petty criminals plot a burglary of a rare 5-cent coin with a buffalo head on it, mutually betray one another while preparing for the hoist, fail to complete the crime, but understand what they have done to one another at a conclusion marked by bloody reconciliation. Mamet does not romanticize his crooks, but he does make their language of bravado and betrayal telling, and the play contains some subtle criticism of the business and competition ethic which justifies the suggestion made in his title that the play has wider national implications.

Mamet’s plays concern basic American problems. The contemporary value crisis has its historical roots, but it was made much more pronounced by the Vietnam War, and by the racial conflict. The former has not been dealt with

successfully (despite repeated efforts of David Rabe, b. 1940), but the latter has found artistic depiction in the drama. A whole school of Black playwrights has emerged to depict the varieties of minority experience within the racial community and implications for both races when they collide. These writers owe some debt to earlier playwrights, especially the poet Langston Hughes, who contributed some social comedies and lyrical plays during the Harlem Renaissance, and Lorraine Hansberry (1930-65), the first Black author of a widely-acclaimed play about the black family, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Here she used honest realism to depict a supportive but stifling Black matriarchy which nurtures but also confines the unemployed though ambitious male “head of family” as he dreams big dreams of opening a liquor store. Lorraine Hansberry had a humane vision and a tolerance for racial co-existence which elevated her plays’ humble situations, and her early death by cancer cut short a career which might have tempered the visions of other Black writers, the angrier and more separatist playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s. Chief among these in terms of notoriety is LeRoi Jones, who changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka in his Muslim separatist phase. His best play is probably *Dutchman* (1964), about a mythic clash between a White temptress and a Black middle class aspirant.

Ed Bullins (b. 1935) offers a more consistent talent and more variety of viewpoints. He has written over twenty plays which faithfully record the Black experience, its family support systems, economic struggles, susceptibility to narcotics and crime, and personal heroism, with struggling characters often seeking a small victory out of a depressed environmental situation. Major plays in this cycle include *In New England Winter* (1967), *Goin’ a Buffalo* (1968), and *In the Wine Time* (1968). More recently, in *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1975), Bullins has depicted more affluent younger Blacks who have achieved some economic power and social status during the 1960s movements of anti-segregation. Miss Janie includes both Black and White characters, dramatizes bi-racial love affairs, and satirizes the egoistic fantasies of typical members from both races. Bullins also innovates formally here, using flashback techniques and narrative directed frontally to the audience. With this play he may be entering the mainstream of the experimental theater of recent decades, both formally and thematically. But in the main, Black playwrights have not ventured far from the conventional naturalistic form of social drama, perhaps because they have such a pressing social story to tell, and also because their ethnic communities have not been educated in the avant-garde tradition of modern arts. These playwrights write for their own people first of all, but the best of them reach wider audiences. Other noted plays of this school include Ossie Davis’ (b. 1917) *Purlie Victorious* (1961), Lonne Elder’s (b. 1931) *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969), Charles Gordone’s (b. 1925) *No Place to Be Somebody* (1969), and the “choreopoem” which the poetess Ntozake Shange compiled out of her verse, titled *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976).

* * *

What conclusions can be drawn about modern American drama? The survey of recent works and movements implies that it is alive and well, but also that it does not flourish at the same height of quality in every generation. It has remained a social drama, being responsive to wide audiences and current subjects, rather than addressing an educated or monied elite and harkening back to classical or traditional subjects. A popular theater runs the risk of pandering to public opinion or reflecting the values only of the middle class majority. But American drama remained popular while continuing to challenge dominant assumptions, particularly about sexual mores and conventional meanings of “success” in social life. At each juncture of the stage’s history, it created an alternative theater to foster challenging playwrights, notably the experimental artists’ theaters of the 1920s which nurtured O’Neill, the socialist theaters of the 1930s which staged Odets, the Off Broadway movement of the 1950s where Albee (and the European absurdists) first appeared, and the Off-Off-Broadway and regional theaters which are developing new playwrights today. It should not surprise us that the last generation’s experimental dramatist should become the next generation’s conventional wise man, to be revered or rebelled against. American theater has failed to create a significant and mature political drama on the order of Shaw’s or Brecht’s plays, or even the lesser order of Weiss and Mrozek, perhaps because the culture does not foster political thought or rebellion. But its social drama has opened up many rich views of sub-cultural particularities, and the greatest heroes of these plays – O’Neill’s James Tyrone, Miller’s Willy Loman, Williams’ Blanche, Albee’s Martha – transcend mere sociological accuracy to achieve a stature as almost mythic heroes. Without a tradition of or aptitude for poetic drama or political theater, American dramatists have tried to introduce some of these forms’ qualities into realistic social plays about everyday Americans, often achieving a successful union of all the forms. The drama will probably continue to be one of America’s lesser arts in terms of critical acclaim, and one of her more exportable cultural products in terms of wider popularity.

Appendix

Reading list

The reading list for the students of the English Department in Warsaw changes from year to year, though about two-thirds of it remains constant. American literature is taught at present over a three-semester course of classes which meet once a week for two hours; this is accompanied by a two-semester course of one-hour lectures. In theory, students should thus have 45 discussion meetings; in practice there are at most 40 of them, what with various holidays and other “special occasions.” Each year we choose about 30 authors, whose books are discussed in classes and on whom students are examined at the end of the course. This leaves individual instructors the choice of discussing at least some writers during more than one class and/or supplementing the basic reading list with other writers who, however, are not included in the final examination. Following is the complete list of the authors who have appeared on our reading lists between 1982/83 and 1985/86; writers or specific works that have been on every one of these lists are marked (C).

Jonathan Edwards	<i>Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God</i> (C) <i>Personal Narrative</i> (C)
James Fenimore Cooper	<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> <i>The Pioneers</i> <i>The Prairie</i>
Benjamin Franklin	<i>Autobiography (I and II)</i>
Jean de Crevecoeur	<i>Letter From an American Farmer (III)</i>
Edgar Allan Poe	“The Fall of the House of Usher” (C) “The Raven” (C) “The Philosophy of Composition” (C) “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”
Nathaniel Hawthorne	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (C)
Herman Melville	<i>Moby Dick</i> (C)
Ralph Waldo Emerson	“Self-Reliance” (C) <i>Nature (I-IV)</i> <i>The American Scholar</i>
Henry David Thoreau	<i>Civil Disobedience</i> <i>Walden</i> (fragments)
Walt Whitman	“Songs of Myself (fragments) (C) “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (C) Preface to <i>Leaves of Grass</i> (1855)
Emily Dickinson	Poems: 67, 214 (C), 249 (C), 258 (C), 303, 435, 449, 465, 585 (C), 712 (C), 986 (C), 1593, 1642, 1732
Mark Twain	<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (C)
Henry James	<i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> (C)
Stephen Crane (C)	<i>The Red Badge of Courage</i> , or “The Open Boat” and “The Blue Hotel”
Kate Chopin	<i>The Awakening</i>
Willa Cather	<i>My Antonia</i>
Theodore Dreiser	<i>Sister Carrie</i> (C)
Sinclair Lewis	<i>Babbitt</i>
Edwin Arlington Robinson	“Luke Havergal”; “Richard Cory”; “Miniver Cheevy”; “For a Dead Lady”; “Eros Turannos”; “Mr. Flood’s Party”
Robert Frost	“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (C); “Moving”; “Fire and Ice”; “After Apple-Picking” (C); “Birches”; “Desert Places” (C); “Design”; “Nothing Gold Can Stay”; “Provide, Provide”
Eugene O’Neill (C)	<i>Long Day’s Journey Into Night</i> <i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i> <i>The Hairy Ape</i>
Ernest Hemingway	<i>The Sun Also Rises</i> (C) Selected stories
F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (C)
John Dos Passos (C)	<i>The 42nd Parallel</i> <i>Manhattan Transfer</i>
William Faulkner	“The Bear” (C) and: <i>Light in August</i> , or <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>

Appendix

T.S. Eliot	<i>The Waste Land</i> “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” “Tradition and the Individual Talent”
William Carlos Williams	The Catholic Bells; “The Yachts”; “This is Just to Say”; “Dance Russe”; “The Red Wheelbarrow” (C); “The Dance” (C); “Spring and All”; “To Elsie”; “Queen-Ann's Lace”
Wallace Stevens	“Sunday Morning” (C); “Peter Quince at the Clavier”; “Anecdote of the Jar”
Ezra Pound	Canto LXXXI; “In a Station of the Metro”; “The River-Merchant's Wife”; “A Pact”
John Steinbeck	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
Arthur Miller	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>
Tennessee Williams	<i>The Glass Menagerie</i> <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>
Ralph Ellison	<i>Invisible Man (C)</i>
Allen Ginsberg	<i>Howl</i>
Flannery O'Connor	“Good Country People”
Carson McCullers	“The Ballad of the Sad Café”
Saul Bellow	<i>Herzog (C)</i>
John Updike	<i>Rabbit, Run</i>
John Barth	<i>Lost in the Funhouse</i>
Vladimir Nabokov	<i>Pale Fire</i>
Sam Shepard	<i>Curse of the Starving Class</i>

- The End -