

20th century american literature us

20th century american literature us represents a vibrant and transformative period, capturing the nation's evolving identity, its triumphs, and its deep-seated anxieties. From the ashes of industrialization and the echoes of World War I to the seismic shifts of the Civil Rights Movement and the dawn of the digital age, American writers grappled with profound social, political, and cultural changes. This era witnessed the rise of iconic literary movements, the birth of new narrative techniques, and the exploration of diverse voices and experiences, all contributing to a rich and multifaceted literary landscape. Understanding this period is crucial for appreciating the enduring legacy of American storytelling and its impact on global literature. This article will delve into the key movements, influential authors, and significant themes that defined 20th-century American literary output.

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The Age of Modernism: Breaking with Tradition

The early decades of the 20th century in American literature were marked by the revolutionary spirit of Modernism. This literary movement, deeply influenced by global currents of thought and artistic experimentation, sought to break away from Victorian sensibilities and traditional narrative structures. Modernist writers challenged conventional notions of realism, embracing fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and subjective experience to capture the complexities of modern life. They explored the alienation and disillusionment felt in the wake of industrialization, urbanization, and

the horrors of World War I. The psychological depths of characters became a primary focus, as writers delved into the inner lives of individuals navigating a rapidly changing world. This period saw American literature gain international acclaim for its innovation and intellectual rigor.

Key Characteristics of American Modernism

American Modernism is characterized by several key literary techniques and thematic concerns. These include:

- Experimentation with form and structure, moving away from linear narratives.
- Emphasis on individual consciousness and subjective perception.
- Exploration of psychological themes, alienation, and existential angst.
- Use of symbolism, allusions, and fragmented imagery.
- A critique of traditional values and societal norms.

Influential Modernist Authors

Several authors stand at the forefront of American Modernism, their works shaping the literary trajectory of the century. Their contributions laid the groundwork for subsequent literary innovations and continue to resonate with readers today. These figures include:

- **William Faulkner:** Known for his complex narratives, often set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, exploring themes of Southern history, decay, and identity. His novels like "The Sound and the Fury" and "As I Lay Dying" are seminal works of Modernist fiction.
- **Ernest Hemingway:** Celebrated for his spare, journalistic prose style, Hemingway's works often focus on themes of war, loss, masculinity, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world. "The Sun Also Rises" and "A Farewell to Arms" exemplify his distinctive voice.
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald:** Capturing the glamour and disillusionment of the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald's novels, particularly "The Great Gatsby," explore the corrupting influence of wealth, the American Dream, and social stratification.
- **T.S. Eliot:** Though often associated with British Modernism, Eliot's American roots and his seminal poem "The Waste Land" profoundly influenced American poetry with its fragmented structure and allusions to myth and history.

The Lost Generation and the Roaring Twenties

The era following World War I, often termed the "Roaring Twenties," was a period of unprecedented social and economic change in the United States. This period also gave rise to what Gertrude Stein famously called the "Lost Generation"—writers who, disillusioned by the war's futility and the perceived hypocrisy of established society, sought new forms of artistic expression. The Jazz Age was characterized by a spirit of rebellion, newfound freedoms, and a vibrant cultural scene. American literature from this period reflects this dynamic, often critiquing traditional morality while celebrating the hedonism and experimentation of the era. The disillusionment carried over from the war mingled with the excesses of prosperity, creating a fertile ground for literary exploration.

Themes of Disillusionment and Hedonism

Literature from the Roaring Twenties frequently grappled with the profound sense of disillusionment experienced by a generation that had witnessed the brutality of war. Alongside this, there was a palpable embrace of hedonism and a rejection of pre-war moral codes. Writers explored the search for meaning in a world that seemed to have lost its compass, often through characters who indulged in pleasure and escapism. The tension between aspiration and reality, the promise of the American Dream versus its often-unfulfilled potential, was a recurring theme.

Literary Responses to the Jazz Age

The literary landscape of the Jazz Age was marked by a vibrant energy and a willingness to challenge societal conventions. Authors captured the spirit of the times through a variety of lenses, from the glamorous but ultimately tragic world of the wealthy to the gritty realities of urban life. The emergence of jazz music itself influenced the rhythm and improvisational spirit found in some literary works. This period solidified America's place on the global literary stage, with authors like Hemingway and Fitzgerald defining the voice of a generation.

The Harlem Renaissance: A Flourishing of Black Artistic Expression

The Harlem Renaissance, flourishing in the 1920s and 1930s, stands as a pivotal moment in 20th-century American literature, representing a remarkable outpouring of Black artistic creativity and intellectual thought. Centered in Harlem, New York City, this movement brought together poets, novelists, playwrights, musicians, and visual artists who sought to define and celebrate Black identity and culture in the face of systemic racism and discrimination. It was a period of profound self-discovery and empowerment, where writers used their art to challenge stereotypes, assert dignity, and explore the complexities of the African American experience. The Renaissance was instrumental in shaping a distinctly Black literary tradition within the broader American literary canon.

Key Figures and Their Contributions

The Harlem Renaissance was propelled by a constellation of brilliant minds whose work continues to inspire and influence. Their diverse voices and perspectives enriched the literary landscape immeasurably. Among the most significant contributors were:

- **Langston Hughes:** Often considered the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes's work celebrated Black life, music, and culture, often in accessible, vernacular language. Poems like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Harlem (Dream Deferred)" are iconic.
- **Zora Neale Hurston:** A novelist, anthropologist, and filmmaker, Hurston's focus on the richness of Black folklore and dialect, as seen in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," offered a counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes.
- **Claude McKay:** A Jamaican-American writer, McKay's powerful sonnets, such as "If We Must Die," articulated defiance and resistance against oppression.
- **Countee Cullen:** Known for his classical style and exploration of racial identity, Cullen's poetry bridged traditional forms with contemporary themes.

Themes and Impact of the Renaissance

The literature of the Harlem Renaissance explored a wide array of themes crucial to the Black experience in America. These included the complexities of racial identity, the struggle against prejudice and segregation, the beauty and resilience of Black culture, and the aspirations for equality and self-determination. The movement had a profound impact, not only by elevating Black voices within American literature but also by fostering a sense of pride and community among African Americans. It demonstrated the power of art as a tool for social change and cultural affirmation.

The Great Depression and Social Realism

The economic devastation of the Great Depression in the 1930s cast a long shadow over American life and, consequently, its literature. Writers of this era turned their attention to the plight of ordinary Americans, documenting the hardships, social injustices, and the search for hope amidst widespread poverty and unemployment. This period saw the rise of Social Realism, a literary movement that sought to depict the realities of working-class and marginalized communities with unflinching honesty. The narratives often focused on themes of class struggle, economic inequality, and the human capacity for resilience. The literature of this decade served as both a reflection and a critique of American society.

Depicting the Plight of the Common Person

Authors during the Great Depression made it their mission to portray the struggles of those most

affected by the economic collapse. Their works provided vivid accounts of life in migrant camps, breadlines, and Dust Bowl communities. They humanized the statistics of unemployment and poverty, bringing the human cost of the crisis to the forefront. This focus on the common person was a significant departure from some earlier literary traditions, emphasizing empathy and a shared sense of national experience.

Key Authors and Works of Social Realism

Several writers emerged as prominent voices of Social Realism, their literary contributions becoming enduring records of the era. Their works continue to be studied for their powerful depictions of American life during a time of crisis:

- **John Steinbeck:** His novel "The Grapes of Wrath" is perhaps the quintessential work of this period, chronicling the journey of the Joad family from the Dust Bowl to California, highlighting their resilience and the exploitation they faced. Other works like "Of Mice and Men" also explored themes of labor and companionship.
- **Richard Wright:** In novels like "Native Son," Wright exposed the brutal realities of racial prejudice and its devastating impact on Black men in urban America, offering a stark portrayal of social injustice.
- **James M. Cain:** While often categorized as hard-boiled fiction, Cain's novels like "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity" captured the desperation and moral ambiguity of individuals driven by economic hardship and desire.

Post-War Literature: Existentialism and the American Dream

The period following World War II brought about new anxieties and a re-examination of core American values. As the nation emerged as a global superpower and entered the Cold War, American literature grappled with themes of conformity, alienation, and the shifting meaning of the American Dream. Influenced by European existentialist thought, many writers explored the individual's search for meaning in a seemingly absurd universe, often within the context of a prosperous but spiritually hollow suburban landscape. The optimism of the post-war boom was tempered by a growing sense of unease and a questioning of societal norms.

Re-evaluating the American Dream

The post-war era saw a significant re-evaluation of the American Dream. While economic prosperity was widespread, many writers questioned whether this prosperity translated to genuine happiness or fulfillment. The emphasis on material success, suburban conformity, and the perceived homogenizing forces of American culture led to critiques of a dream that seemed to have lost its soul. Authors explored the psychological toll of this pursuit and the alienation experienced by

individuals who felt trapped by societal expectations.

Existentialism and its American Manifestations

The philosophical currents of existentialism, which emphasize individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a meaningless world, found fertile ground in post-war American literature. Writers explored characters facing existential crises, grappling with choices, and confronting the absurdity of existence. This philosophical lens provided a framework for understanding the anxieties of a nation that had experienced both unprecedented global power and the lingering trauma of war and the burgeoning threat of nuclear annihilation.

The Beat Generation: Rebellion and Counterculture

Emerging in the 1950s, the Beat Generation represented a significant countercultural movement that challenged the prevailing social norms and literary conventions of post-war America. Writers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs rejected materialism, conformity, and traditional societal structures in favor of spiritual exploration, sexual liberation, and unconventional lifestyles. Their writing style was often spontaneous, improvisational, and deeply personal, reflecting a desire for authentic experience and a critique of what they saw as the sterile, conformist culture of the era. The Beats laid the groundwork for later countercultural movements.

Challenging Conformity and Materialism

The core of the Beat ethos was a profound rejection of the mainstream American emphasis on consumerism, suburban living, and the conservative social values that characterized the 1950s. They sought alternative paths to enlightenment and experience, often through travel, poetry readings, jazz music, and spiritual practices. Their literary output served as a direct indictment of a society perceived as spiritually bankrupt and overly concerned with material possessions, advocating for a more authentic and engaged way of living.

Key Beat Authors and Iconic Works

The Beat Generation produced a body of work that was as provocative as it was influential, forever altering the landscape of American literature and cultural discourse:

- **Jack Kerouac:** His semi-autobiographical novel "On the Road" became an anthem for a generation, capturing the spirit of freedom, adventure, and the search for meaning through spontaneous road trips across America.
- **Allen Ginsberg:** His epic poem "Howl" is a powerful and controversial denunciation of American capitalism and conformity, celebrated for its raw energy and prophetic voice.
- **William S. Burroughs:** Known for his experimental techniques and controversial subject matter, Burroughs's "Naked Lunch" explored themes of addiction, societal control, and surreal

landscapes.

The Civil Rights Movement and Literature of Protest

The mid-20th century in America was indelibly marked by the Civil Rights Movement, a struggle for racial equality that profoundly impacted its literature. Writers of this era used their craft to bear witness to the injustices of segregation, racial discrimination, and the systemic oppression faced by African Americans. Literature became a powerful tool for protest, education, and galvanizing public opinion. The narratives often explored themes of resilience, the fight for dignity, the complexities of racial identity, and the urgent call for social justice. This period saw Black writers, in particular, gain significant prominence, sharing their experiences and demanding change.

Voices of Resistance and Advocacy

The literature produced during the Civil Rights Movement provided a crucial platform for voices that had long been marginalized. Authors articulated the pain of discrimination, the courage of activists, and the vision for a more equitable future. These works often served as both personal testimonies and calls to action, urging readers to confront uncomfortable truths and to participate in the struggle for liberation. The power of narrative was harnessed to humanize the movement and to expose the moral bankruptcy of segregation.

Landmark Works in Protest Literature

Several literary works from this period stand as powerful testaments to the struggles and triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, shaping national consciousness and inspiring generations:

- **James Baldwin:** His essays and novels, such as "Notes of a Native Son" and "Go Tell It on the Mountain," offered profound explorations of race, identity, and American society, dissecting the psychological and social impact of racism with sharp insight.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** While primarily known for his activism and oratory, King's written works, including "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "Why We Can't Wait," are significant literary documents that articulate the philosophy of nonviolent resistance and the moral imperative of the movement.
- **Maya Angelou:** Her acclaimed autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" vividly recounts her childhood experiences of racial prejudice and her journey toward self-acceptance and empowerment.
- **Ralph Ellison:** His novel "Invisible Man" explored the existential plight of an African American man navigating a society that rendered him unseen and unheard, a powerful metaphor for the Black experience in America.

The Rise of Diverse Voices: Women, Minorities, and Beyond

As the 20th century progressed, American literature increasingly embraced a broader spectrum of voices, reflecting the nation's growing diversity and the ongoing movements for social change. Beyond the established literary traditions, women writers, ethnic minorities, and authors from various LGBTQ+ communities began to gain significant recognition, challenging dominant narratives and introducing fresh perspectives. This expansion of the literary landscape brought new themes, experiences, and stylistic innovations, enriching the understanding of what it means to be American. The focus shifted to explore previously underrepresented aspects of the American experience.

Expanding the Literary Canon

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a conscious effort to expand the traditional literary canon to include works by authors whose voices had been historically excluded or marginalized. This expansion was driven by feminist literary criticism, the rise of ethnic studies, and increased visibility for LGBTQ+ writers. These authors brought unique insights into issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and cultural identity, offering critical re-examinations of American history and society from varied vantage points.

Notable Authors and Their Contributions

The influx of diverse voices contributed immensely to the richness and complexity of 20th-century American literature:

- **Toni Morrison:** The first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, Morrison's novels, such as "Beloved" and "Song of Solomon," powerfully explore the legacy of slavery, Black womanhood, and American history with lyrical prose and deep psychological insight.
- **Sandra Cisneros:** Her novel "The House on Mango Street" offers a poignant coming-of-age story told from the perspective of a young Latina girl in Chicago, capturing the nuances of cultural identity and the search for belonging.
- **Alice Walker:** Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Color Purple" addresses themes of racial and gender oppression, resilience, and the power of female solidarity in the American South.
- **Kurt Vonnegut:** While often associated with postmodernism, Vonnegut's distinctive voice and satirical approach to war, technology, and human nature in works like "Slaughterhouse-Five" resonated with a wide audience, questioning societal structures.

Late 20th Century Trends: Postmodernism and Beyond

The final decades of the 20th century saw the emergence and widespread influence of Postmodernism in American literature. This movement, often characterized by skepticism towards grand narratives, a playful engagement with language, and a blurring of the lines between high and low culture, reflected a world grappling with globalization, technological advancement, and a questioning of objective truth. Postmodernist writers experimented with narrative structure, self-reflexivity, and irony, challenging traditional notions of authorship and originality. This era marked a period of intense questioning and redefinition of literary purpose.

Characteristics of Postmodern American Literature

Postmodern literature in the US is marked by a distinct set of characteristics that distinguish it from earlier movements. These include:

- **Pastiche and Parody:** The imitation and playful subversion of existing genres and styles.
- **Intertextuality:** The referencing and reworking of previous texts.
- **Metafiction:** Narratives that are self-aware of their status as fiction.
- **Irony and Skepticism:** A questioning of established truths and authority.
- **Fragmentation:** Non-linear narratives and a departure from conventional plot structures.

Key Postmodern Authors and Their Impact

Several authors defined the Postmodern landscape, their innovative approaches leaving a lasting mark on contemporary literature:

- **Thomas Pynchon:** Known for his complex, labyrinthine novels like "Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon explores themes of paranoia, conspiracy, and the impact of technology on society with intricate plotting and encyclopedic knowledge.
- **Don DeLillo:** His works, such as "White Noise," delve into themes of consumerism, media saturation, and the anxieties of modern American life, often with a sharp, intellectual wit.
- **Joan Didion:** Didion's essays and novels, including "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and "Play It as It Lays," offer incisive and often disillusioned observations on American culture, politics, and the elusive nature of truth.

Enduring Legacies of 20th Century American Literature

The literary output of the 20th century continues to shape contemporary American culture and its global perception. The movements, themes, and innovations established during this period remain vital, influencing new generations of writers and thinkers. From the psychological depth of Modernism to the social critiques of the Civil Rights era and the experimental playfulness of Postmodernism, 20th-century American literature provides an enduring lens through which to understand the nation's evolving identity, its persistent struggles, and its profound capacity for change. The exploration of the American experience, in all its complexity and contradiction, has left an indelible mark on the world of letters.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the most significant literary movements that defined 20th-century American literature?

Key movements include Modernism (exploring alienation, fragmentation, and subjective experience through authors like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Eliot), the Harlem Renaissance (celebrating Black culture and identity with writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay), and Postmodernism (questioning grand narratives, embracing irony, and exploring intertextuality with figures like Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Morrison).

How did World War I and World War II influence American writers and their works?

The wars profoundly impacted writers, leading to themes of disillusionment, trauma, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world. The 'Lost Generation' writers, in particular, grappled with the aftermath of WWI, while WWII fostered a sense of collective anxiety and introspection, reflected in works exploring the human cost of conflict and the rise of the atomic age.

What role did race and ethnicity play in shaping 20th-century American literary narratives?

Race and ethnicity were central to many 20th-century American literary narratives. The Harlem Renaissance highlighted Black experiences, while later movements addressed the struggles and triumphs of other ethnic groups, including Latino, Asian American, and Native American writers, often challenging dominant cultural narratives and exploring issues of identity, discrimination, and cultural heritage.

How did the changing social and political landscape of the US, such as the Civil Rights Movement and feminism, manifest in literature?

The Civil Rights Movement inspired powerful works that exposed racial injustice and advocated for

equality, with writers like James Baldwin and Maya Angelou being prominent voices. The rise of feminism in the mid-century led to a surge in literature that examined gender roles, female experiences, and patriarchal structures, featuring authors like Betty Friedan and Sylvia Plath.

What were some major stylistic innovations introduced by 20th-century American authors?

Innovations included stream of consciousness (Joyce, Faulkner), fragmented narratives and non-linear timelines (Eliot, Faulkner), experimentation with language and form (Pound, Cummings), the use of unreliable narrators (Nabokov), and the development of magical realism in later works (Morrison). These techniques aimed to capture the complexities of modern consciousness and experience.

How did American literature reflect or critique the concept of the 'American Dream' throughout the 20th century?

The American Dream was both celebrated and critically examined. Early in the century, it was often depicted as achievable through hard work. However, as the century progressed, writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*) and Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman*) exposed its darker side, revealing disillusionment, corruption, and the unattainability of the dream for many.

Who are considered the most influential American novelists of the 20th century and why?

Beyond those already mentioned, influential novelists include William Faulkner (complex narrative structures, Southern Gothic themes), Ernest Hemingway (sparse prose, existentialism), John Steinbeck (social realism, the Great Depression), Tennessee Williams (dramatic works exploring psychological depth and Southern decay), and Toni Morrison (masterful prose, exploring Black history and identity). Their influence stems from their innovation, thematic depth, and lasting cultural impact.

What impact did the rise of mass media and popular culture have on 20th-century American literature?

The proliferation of film, radio, and television influenced literary styles, sometimes leading to more cinematic prose or narrative structures. Conversely, literature often served as a critical lens on mass media and popular culture, examining its effects on society, identity, and the perception of reality, as seen in works by authors like Don DeLillo.

How did the exploration of individual psychology and internal monologue evolve in 20th-century American literature?

The century saw a deep dive into the human psyche, moving away from purely external plot-driven narratives. Techniques like stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and unreliable narration allowed writers to delve into the subjective experiences, anxieties, and subconscious of their characters, reflecting a growing interest in psychoanalysis and existential thought.

What are some key themes that recur throughout 20th-century American literature?

Recurring themes include alienation and isolation, the search for identity, the disillusionment with societal norms and institutions, the impact of technology and modernity, the complexities of human relationships, the critique of consumerism, the legacy of history (especially regarding race and conflict), and the enduring, often complicated, pursuit of the American Dream.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to 20th-century American literature, with short descriptions:

1. The Great Gatsby

This iconic novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald explores themes of wealth, class, love, and the elusive American Dream in the Roaring Twenties. Through the eyes of narrator Nick Carraway, readers are drawn into the opulent world of the mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his obsessive pursuit of the unattainable Daisy Buchanan. The book's vivid imagery and poignant commentary on societal disillusionment continue to resonate deeply.

2. To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression and tackles issues of racial injustice and moral growth. The story is told from the perspective of young Scout Finch, who witnesses her lawyer father, Atticus, defend a black man falsely accused of rape. It's a powerful exploration of prejudice, courage, and the loss of innocence.

3. The Catcher in the Rye

J.D. Salinger's classic coming-of-age story follows Holden Caulfield, a disillusioned and rebellious teenager, as he navigates New York City after being expelled from his prep school. Holden's cynical narration and his search for authenticity in a world he deems "phony" have made him an enduring voice for adolescent angst. The novel delves into themes of alienation, identity, and the fear of growing up.

4. Beloved

Toni Morrison's masterpiece is a haunting exploration of the legacy of slavery and its devastating psychological impact on individuals and communities. Set after the Civil War, the novel centers on Sethe, a former slave haunted by the ghost of her infant daughter. Through powerful prose and magical realism, Morrison confronts the brutal realities of the past and the enduring strength of love and memory.

5. Of Mice and Men

John Steinbeck's poignant novella tells the story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two migrant ranch workers during the Great Depression who dream of owning their own land. Their close friendship is tested by Lennie's immense physical strength and his inability to control himself. The book is a stark portrayal of loneliness, companionship, and the fragility of dreams in a harsh world.

6. The Grapes of Wrath

Another seminal work by John Steinbeck, this novel chronicles the arduous journey of the Joad family, tenant farmers driven from their Oklahoma farm during the Dust Bowl. They head west to California in search of work and a better life, only to encounter further hardship and exploitation.

The book is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a critique of social injustice.

7. Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison's groundbreaking novel explores the experiences of an unnamed African American protagonist navigating racism and identity in mid-20th century America. Moving from the segregated South to the bustling streets of New York City, the narrator grapples with invisibility and the struggle to define himself in a society that refuses to see him. It's a profound examination of race, culture, and the search for self.

8. A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams's celebrated play, often studied as a literary work, dramatically portrays the clash between Blanche DuBois, a fading Southern belle, and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. Set in the steamy French Quarter of New Orleans, the play delves into themes of illusion versus reality, desire, and the disintegration of the Old South. The raw emotion and complex characters make it a compelling study of human vulnerability.

9. The Sound and the Fury

William Faulkner's experimental novel offers a fragmented and deeply psychological portrait of the Compson family in the fictional Southern town of Jefferson, Mississippi. Told through the alternating perspectives of four different characters, including the intellectually disabled Benjy and the rebellious Quentin, the book explores themes of decay, the passage of time, and the burden of the past. Its innovative narrative structure challenged conventional storytelling.

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