HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AMERICAN LITERATURE - 20th Century

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Part I : Early 20th Century

Introduction

Modernism in American literature took so many forms that it is hard to define. It was, at least initially, an attempt to break clear of what a new generation called Victorian sentimentality – especially the poetry that was didactic and aimed to be inspiring and heroic. In fiction it generally aimed at greater realism and economy, by being nearer to everyday speech and experience. In drama it sought the same, as opposed to the histrionics of Victorian melodrama and the stale humor of music halls. For all of these new values American writers had European models, such as Rambeau and Baudelaire in poetry; Flaubert, Proust, and Joyce in fiction; and Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg in drama.

As the anthology suggests, the poets were perhaps the first American modernists. They were less dependent on the marketplace – there being a very small market – and they had Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell as outspoken, flamboyant leaders and Harriet Monroe as a creative publisher. Pound in the early 1900's was also very eclectic in his tastes, with a genius for spotting many different talents and then promoting them. So universal was his influence and presence, in both Europe and America, that the critic, Richard Ellman, titled his great biography of him *The Pound Era.* Pound was also very eclectic in his reading and the choices of the poets and poetry he imitated and experimented with – from parodies of his English contemporaries to imitations of Latin, Greek, French, Japanese and Chinese. He even made his "Pact" with Walt Whitman and later, despite his infamous fascism and anti-Semitism, won homage from Allen Ginsburg. The title of his essays, *Make It New* (borrowed, paradoxically from Confucius), became like a slogan of the entire modernist movement.

And new came in many different styles, forms, and subjects

Amy Lowell's "Imagism" was one of the first new movements to become popular, though it was later treated as rather silly and passé.

Robert Frost took Edward Arlington Robinson's New England and gave it a wholly new harshness, severity, and universality, by using the understatement and indirection of rural speech, while employing traditional forms and meters.

Pound's closer friend and fellow ex-patriot, "Tom" Eliot, as Pound called him, was also both new and traditional, but in very different ways. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was the interior monologue (a "love song" never sung) not of a colorful Renaissance Italian like the speakers in Browning's dramatic monologues but of a meek and sensitive modern urbanite. It also shocked the reader with its opening lines comparing the evening to "a patient etherized upon a table." But it was "The Waste Land" for which Eliot suddenly became most famous – a poem whose title seemed to sum up the cultural condition of Europe and America after the Great War. Its implicit and explicit allusions to other poems invited the reader to compare the dry, infertile, and demeaning present with a more vibrant past. Such references also displayed its debt to English and classical traditions. As Eliot later wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he believed that a poet should write with all of his literary tradition at his finger tips.

A third friend of Pound's, though rival of Eliot's, was William Carlos Williams, who spent most of his life as a general practioneer in Paterson, New Jersey, while also staying very close to most of the avant garde movements of his time.

Other poets were modern in different ways. Edna St. Vincent Millay epitomized the rebelliousness of witty and outspoken modern women. Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" celebrated the raw energy and power of that "Freight Handler to the Nation" in lines that updated Walt Whitman. E.E. Cummings surprised with his unorthodox typography, pacifism, and resistance to cant. Wallace Stevens's verbal elegance celebrated the power of poetry itself to summon new worlds and orders. Claude McKay mixed the traditional language and form of the sonnet with tributes to Africa and protests against the treatment of Afro-Americans. Langston Hughes used jazz rhythms and vocabulary, in praise of black people and in bitter reflections on their mistreatment.

Modern American fiction represented less of a break with the past, at least initially. Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser were still writing after the Great War and were much admired by the new generation, she for *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and he for *An American Tragedy* (1925). The most radical new writer was Gertrude Stein, who attempted to break up sentences by repetition and contradiction as Picasso and the cubists had broken up pictorial painting. At the same time she imitated the patterns of common speech. This influenced Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, as readers can realize in turning from "Ada" to the stories from Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." What is further important in Anderson is his gentle sympathy for his small-town characters, his "grotesques." Unlike earlier naturalists, he does not treat them as victims, but finds their distortions "amusing, some almost beautiful." (p. 862)

The influence of Anderson can be felt in both Hemingway and Faulkner, though they accepted it differently and moved on independently. Hemingway used his short sentences and simple vocabulary in order to recover beauty and order and meaning in the post-war wasteland. His heroes also attempted to live by the basic masculine codes of good hunters and fishermen. Faulkner sometimes kept his sentences short and simple, as in "That Evening Sun," but introduced more dialogue. At other times, as in "Barn Burning" and his later novels, his sentences became as long and complex as uninterrupted, entangled thoughts and feelings.

For all of them, as for Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hurston, Richard Wright, Katherine Anne Porter and most of their contemporaries, the novel was the most important medium. But they also excelled in short stories. Mass circulation magazines paid extremely well, and little magazines and some monthlies like the *Atlantic* had prestige and encouraged experimentation. Porter's "Flowering Judas" and Wright's "Almos' a Man" are tense and intensely absorbing short stories. Fitzgerald's "The Ice Palace" is at once very readable popular fiction and a realistic study of character and manners. Eudora Welty and Zora Neale Hurston give us two very different studies of Southern rural character, the one of a determined, heroic elderly Negro lady and the other of affectionate, happy Negro lovers. Jean Toomer's *Cane* is, like Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a combination of novel and stories.

Serious modern American drama was dominated by Eugene O'Neill, whose work is too extensive and varied to be represented by just one play. He experimented with all the modern dramatic styles and also tried to adapt classic Greek drama. *The Emperor Jones* is generally described as one of his experiments with symbolic expressionism, in which dream and reality are combined. But it is also a study of ego-maniacal character and underlying fear and insecurity. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* is interesting to read with it. Although Glaspell and O'Neill worked together in the Provincetown Players, it is a very different play – realistic, more subtle in its action and clues, and distinctly feminist in its sympathies. From one point of view, it is just a short detective drama. But the irony is that the detectives – male – all strut around, patronize the women, miss the right clues, and end up wrong. It is the two women who slowly put the evidence together. But do they really get to the bottom of the case?

Reading

Poetry

Introduction and critical statements: pp. 538-40; Pound, 542-4; Lowell, 544-8; Eliot, 548-52; Johnson, 553-4; Hughes, 557-61; Frost, 564-6; Williams, 566-9 [26 pp]
Lowell, 575-80
Frost, 581-94
Sandburg, 598-604
Stevens, 605-18
Williams, 626-40
Pound, 641-50
Eliot, 669-97
McKay, 704-9
Millay, 710-6
Cummings, 716-26
Hughes, 752-65

Fiction

Introduction and critical statements: pp. 819-27; Anderson, 828-30; Stein, 830-3; Hurston, 839-41; Wright, 843-46 [21 pp]
Stein, "Ada," 847-51;
Anderson, "The Book of the Grotesque," "Hands," "Paper Pills," 857-68
Porter, "Flowering Judas," 869-80
Hurston, "The Gilded Six-Bits," 880-91
Toomer, "Portrait in Georgia," "Blood-Burning Moon," "Seventh Street," 905-15
Fitzgerald, "The Ice Palace," 915-36
Dos Passos, "Two Portraits," "Vag," 937-948
Faulkner, "That Evening Sun," "Barn Burning," 948-76
Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River," 976-92
Wright, "Almos' a Man," 1008-20
Welty, "A Worn Path," 1021-9

Drama

Introduction, pp. 773-9
Glaspell, "Trifles," 780-92
O'Neill, "Emperor Jones," 792-817

Questions

Compare and contrast the modernism of two white poets or short story writers with two black writers or poets. What is "modernism" for each and how concerned are they with it? Do they have other concerns like race, region, manners, and study of character that mean more?

Compare and contrast the modernism of two male writers and two female writers, looking at their choices of subject, their styles, and their sympathies.

The early Twentieth Century brought a Southern literary renaissance. Porter, Hurston, Toomer, Faulkner, Wright, and Welty were all southerners, and their subject matter was mainly the South. Write a portrait of the South and Southern characters and concerns as they collectively describe them.

Part II : Late 20th Century

Defining post-modernism is even more difficult than defining modernism. The number and variety of authors, movements and styles are greater, and many authors and their works break down the previous barriers between the experimental and new (the "elite") and the popular. Many authors also wrote in two or more genres. Sylvia Plath, for instance, wrote both poetry and autobiographical fiction, both of which later sold widely, although after her death. Norman Mailer, one of the most prominent and controversial authors of the whole period, wrote both best-selling fiction, like *The Naked and the Dead*, his first novel, about World War II, and best-selling non-fiction, like *The Armies of the Night*, his account of the huge October, 1967, peace march on Washington. James Baldwin wrote in three genres – fiction, essays, and drama. All three of these authors, like many others, also are identified with one or more of the social and cultural movements of their time – feminism and the women's movement, the anti-war movement, civil rights, and gay liberation. As the anthology's very useful Introductions explain, the paperback revolution that started in the 1940s cut the cost of books and made them more widely available, with the result that literature could become a part of popular culture, although the latter was increasingly dominated by sports, television, films, and the music industry. Any kind of "serious literature," as it was sometimes called, was likely to be a literature that was culturally critical or that asserted the values of previously unrepresented groups.

Reflective of all this, the final section of *The Bedford Anthology* is not divided by either periods or genres. Instead, it gives us selections from a total of 40 authors in the order of their years of birth, followed by 6 more in a section subtitled "The Contemporary Memoir," although it is also difficult to define modern memoirs. They could have been included with the others. Thus, we shall study them in roughly the same order, although to make some connections and comparisons, we must also skip around.

One early movement in the poetry of the first post-war decades was called "the new formalism," in recognition of the fact that poets like Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell turned away from the so-called "free verse" of their predecessors and wrote in rhyme, with more attention to conventional meters and greater use of traditional forms like the sonnet, sestina, and villanelle. But their subjects were not so traditional. Roethke wrote the delightful "My Papa's Waltz" and many more poems about his father and his father's greenhouse business. Bishop evoked "Brazil, January 1, 1502," praised "The Armadillo," and recalled pictures she saw in a *National Geographic* in a dentist's waiting room, in 1918. Berryman's *Dream Songs* were, he said, about the musings and reverses of an unheroic "white American in early middle age." (p. 1129) Robert Lowell, although associated with the new formalists, also became much more autobiographical and political in the 1960s, beginning with *Life Studies*, which contained a prose autobiographical piece, "91 Revere Street."

Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" is not an example of "new formalism." Nor is it autobiographical. Rather, it illustrates the tendency of black poets and novelists and other minority authors to search their people's history for better understanding of their suffering, their heroism, and thus the present. It is also interesting that thirty-five years after Hayden's poem, the story of the revolt on the *Amistad* was made into a movie.

An equal or greater contrast with formalism is Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*, which seemed in 1955 to be so different that some people began to speak of it as poetry "raw" rather than "cooked." Ginsburg seemed as revolutionary as Whitman once had. He was also a mystic, like his friend Gary Snyder. But there is order to *Howl* – in its long repetitions of the opening words of lines and in the ways in which lines correspond to the rhythms of speech. It is a poem to be read aloud and as a kind of chant and incantation.

The 1950s are often regarded as a time of complacency, contentment, and conformity. College students of the time were said to belong to "the silent generation." But a surprising amount of the literature of the late 1940s and '50s is, like *Howl*, full of anger and protest. Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" (1956) is an interior monologue of a woman oppressed by poverty, domesticity, children, and the frustrations trying to find time to write. Ralph Ellison's story, "The Invisible Man" (1947), an early chapter from his great novel of the same title, tells of the cruel humiliations of young black men at a white men's smoker. Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) has become a classic tale of the delusions of the middle class businessman. Bernard Malamud's "The First Seven Years" (1950) is the sad story of an immigrant Jewish shoemaker who wants his daughter to marry "Max the college boy." James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), about his father and his relations with him, ends with his resolution to hold

in his mind two conflicting ideas. He must accept the fact that life is unjust, but he must fight injustices "with all one's strength." Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953) is a frightening vision of a world in which an ordinary family's vacation trip ends in an overturned car and senseless murders.

The 1950s were followed by the peace movements and civil rights movements of the 1960s, which produced an outpouring of powerful literature of all kinds. In 1964 Amiri Baraka (then called LeRoi Jones) published his angry play, *The Dutchman*, about a fatal encounter between a young black man and a white woman on a New York subway. Its producer was Edward Albee, author of the absurdist play, *The Sandbox*, and it was staged with a play by Samuel Beckett, one of Albee's models, but its racial rage was radically different from the theater of the absurd. Two years later Alex Haley published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1966), the electrifying story of how Malcolm Little, a small-time Boston hustler, converted to the Black Muslims while in prison, and became the most prominent of its ministers. It and Baraka's plays, poems, and essays, along with Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the works of James Baldwin soon became part of many college literature courses. White students and their professors sought to understand black experience. Colleges were admitting more black students, and they wished to read more works by black authors.

The example of the black civil rights movement inspired white and black women to probe their experience more deeply, to write about it, and to identify with other women writers, old and new. One of the "new" was Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide in London in February, 1963. Her first book had been published in 1960, but the poems posthumously published in *Ariel*, like "Daddy," comparing her father to Nazis and herself to "a Jew," seemed to express many women's previously suppressed feelings of rejection and rage.

The poems of Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audrey Lorde are not difficult to read and understand. They are not "obscure," to use the word often applied to earlier twentieth-century poetry. But they do often introduce and develop violent metaphors and associations. Rich's "Trying to Talk with a Man" is set on an atomic testing site in the desert. In "Diving into the Wreck" the poet is a scuba-diver exploring the "wreckage" of old history and mythology.

> The words are purposes.
> The words are maps.
> I came to see the damage that was done
> And the treasures that prevail.

In "Coal" Lorde compares herself to "the total black / being spoken / from the earth's inside." In "Stations" she writes "Some women wait for the right / train in the wrong station" and ends

> Some women wait for something
> to change and nothing
> does change
> so they change
> themselves.

Feminist and minority literature was often criticized as inferior to the classics of the older canon. It was being read and taught, traditionalists said, just to be "politically correct." But literary canons change over time, as anyone can see by looking at anthologies of fifty or one hundred years ago. They change with changes in audience, because all people need to read literature by writers like themselves as well as different from themselves. They change as new writers write from new experiences, needs, and desires. And they change with changes in social, economic, and cultural history. John Updike's "A & P" catches the language and values of a super-market checkout boy. David Mamet's short memoir, "The Rake: A Few Scenes from My Childhood," is a scene from late twentieth-century suburbia, not a pretty one, but certainly a believable one. Annie Dillard's childhood was obviously more pleasant, but it is also important to know that her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, was a celebration of the common but little seen natural world in Virginia's Roanoke Valley, where she went to college. It was a new kind of nature book. Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" is about soldiers in the Vietnam War. Raymond Carver's short

story “Are These the Actual Miles?” is about a couple selling their car, a common enough experience. But Carver’s very spare “minimalist” treatment mixes suspicion with loss, making both harder to bear.

But it is perhaps from the later feminist and minority writers that we get the widest views of late twentieth-century America. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” is not racial protest but racial celebration, like some of the poems of earlier black poets. Leslie Silko, Joy Harjo, and Scott Momaday provide us with more insight into contemporary American Indian life. After recounting miraculous survivals of all kinds, from glaciers and earthquakes to recent shootings, Harjo concisely sums up one of the ironies of Indian life and history in the last stanza of “Anchorage,”

> Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
> but also the truth. Because who would believe
> the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival!
> Those who were never meant
> to survive?

Maxine Hong Kingston beguilingly fuses her own experience with traditional Chinese stories. Gary Soto, as a third-generation Mexican-American, describes his courtship of his future wife, a second-generation Mexican-American.

Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” is on the one hand a “post-racial” story because, as the anthology says, “it is never revealed which of the two main characters is black and which is white.” On the other hand, because Morrison is black and some of the subject matter is racial, we want to know, and the energy we expend trying to tell may be a sign of how obsessed by race we still are.

Readings

Introduction, pp. 1067-78
Roethke, 1079-87
Bishop, 1088-98
Hayden, 1111-18
Tillie Olsen, 1119-26
Berryman, 1127-33
Ellison, 1134-46
Malamud, 1147-56
Miller, 1174-1252
Lowell, 1250-65
Brooks, 1266-73
Baldwin, 1284-1301
O’Connor, 1301-15
Ginsburg, 1315-27
Ashbery, 1327-32
Albee, 1332-42
Rich, 1342-49
Le Guin, 1349-53
Snyder, 1353-60
Morrison, 1364-80
Plath, 1380-90
Updike, 1390-97
Baraka, 1397-1414
Lorde, 1415-20
DeLillo, 1421-26
Harper, 1427-33
Carver, 1433-41
Anzaldua, 1441-48
Walker, 1448-57
O’Brien, 1457-71
Silko, 1472-81

Harjo, 1481-87
Dove, 1487-92
Cisneros, 1492-96
Momaday, 1521-28
Kingston, 1528-33
Dillard, 1534-39
Mamet, 1539-43

Questions

As the producer of Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, Edward Albee must have thought highly of it. How different and how similar is it to Albee's surreal or absurdist play *The Sandbox*? Which is closer in style to Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*?

Discuss the similarities and differences among three of the writers read in this unit –one American Indian, one Afro-American, and one Mexican-American. What are their attitudes towards race and racial prejudice? What use do they make of their race's history.

Autobiography and protest are prominent in a lot of the poetry in this unit – in the poems of Roethke, Bishop, Lowell, Ginsberg, Rich, Plath, and Harjo, to name seven. Choose four of these poets and try to rank them according to how much you identify with the experiences they describe and how powerful or effective you think their protests are.