Part 1

Historical Contexts

The American Scene, *c.*1900

When Henry James visited his home country in 1904 for the first time in 21 years, a visit partially recorded in his 1907 *The American Scene*, he was disappointed with the changes that he saw. He was disturbed by the evidence of massive immigration, and also by what he viewed as the country's rampant materialism. James's account is colored, of course, by his own career-long ambivalence toward the United States. His earliest novels, such as *The American* (1877) and *Daisy Miller* (1878), had portrayed their central American characters as naïve, as victims – each in their way wealthy without social sophistication, and each driven by a misguided self-reliance. Yet these characters are arguably morally superior to most of the Europeans with whom they interact. While James's later novels are considerably more complex, his overall view is little changed. In his early book-length study of Hawthorne (1879) James had regretted what he saw as the provincial limitations of the earlier writer, and his relatively late experience of European travel.

James was one of a number of prominent Americans, including painters James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Mary Cassatt, and novelist Edith Wharton, who chose to base themselves in Europe rather than staying in the United States. For some other writers disturbed by the vast changes in the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century the changes provided new material for their fiction – raising questions about the ideals of democracy, about the degree and even the possibility of freedom of will, and about the quality of life produced by the hazardous working conditions and overcrowded housing that governed the existence of so many in the rapidly growing cities. Mark Twain, the opposite of James in so many ways in his subject matter and concept of fictional form, provided a bleak view of human

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nature in his final, unfinished novel *The Mysterious Stranger*, published posthumously in 1916. Set in 1490, two years before Columbus's landing, the book makes clear through its antagonist's trips into the future that the discovery of America will bring no fundamental changes to the human condition or to its ultimate fate.

By the turn of the century the United States had shifted from the largely agrarian economy in place at the end of the Civil War in 1865 to an economy that was fast making the country one of the world's major industrial powers. The opening of the transcontinental railroad meant that after 1880 the United States could be one vast, interconnected manufacturing center, the railroads linking the centers of raw materials, manufacturing, and distribution. This growth and new power was highlighted in two major international events, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair celebrating the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase. The 1904 Fair also hosted the first Summer Olympic Games to be held in the United States.

Henry Adams, related to the second and sixth Presidents, his father a Congressman and US ambassador to Britain, and himself a Harvard graduate and eminent historian, used the Paris World's Fair of 1900 as the setting for his account of feeling confronted by a world of force for which his education and experience had little prepared him. "Historians undertake to arrange sequences ... assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect," but for Adams such sequences were broken by the scientific advances that he saw around him in the Great Exposition. He needed a scientist to guide him through the great hall of dynamos, but even so "found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new." Adams's recognition of the challenge posed to conventional arrangements of cause and effect anticipates the complexities of modernist form in a writer such as Faulkner, or in much modernist poetry, where continuities are dissolved and juxtaposition suggests the multiple possible relationships between events.

The new wealth and power of the United States was also projected abroad, and not just through the trips abroad that became a regular part of a wealthy family's experience. The Spanish American War of 1898 brought the United States – following Spain's defeat – Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam, making the United States for the first time one of the colonial powers. In the same year the United States annexed the island of Hawaii, which would eventually become the fiftieth state in 1959.

The total population of the United States in 1870 was 38.5 million. By 1890 the population had doubled and by 1920 the figure was 123 million.

The largest cities by 1920 were New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, which as well as being major industrial centers became central literary and publishing centers too, displacing the role formerly held by Boston. In these centers the influx of immigrants, mainly from Europe, together with a migration from small towns into the cities, made for a surplus of labor and kept wages low and living conditions poor. These poor living conditions were exacerbated by the boom-and-bust business cycles that came with the largely unregulated economic activity, a situation that also produced such immense fortunes as those of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and J. Pierpont Morgan. Businessmen became the central figures of such realist novels as William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and later the trilogy by Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947). Novels by Upton Sinclair and Frank Norris also took up the world of business, merchandising, and labor, most notably in Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and Norris's *The Octopus* (1901). The Jewish immigrant experience was captured by Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).

This largely unregulated capitalism – attempts by workers to unionize and strike were likely to be countered by violence – was seen by some novelists in terms of the theories of competition laid out in the works of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spenser. Initially these conditions produced a call for greater realism in fiction, including contemporary settings and dialogue that reflected the speech of the day. But when such realism produced mainly accounts of middle-class urban life, naturalists such as Norris, Dreiser, and Stephen Crane – influenced by the writings of Émile Zola in France – presented a picture of conditions in which human will could do little to influence the forces of nature that determined individual fates. The realism of Howells appeared sentimental alongside such novels.

Henry James noticed on his 1904 visit the new freedoms allowed to American women, but this freedom did not extend to voting rights, which were not granted to women until 1920. Nevertheless, a number of important colleges for women had been established in the second half of the century, including Vassar (1861), Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and Smith (all 1865), Barnard (1889), and Radcliffe (1894). The tensions between this move to greater independence and the moral and social expectations of female behavior remained very present. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) illustrates the problems that lack of financial independence, the need to appear morally pure, and lack of the power that is available to men could bring to a young woman whose social world could ostracize as easily as it could protect her. One of Wharton's last short stories, "Roman Fever" (1936), shows how far women still had to come for social freedom at the

turn of the century. As Grace Ansley and Alida Slade, in "ripe but well-cared for middle age," sit on a terrace in Rome while their daughters disappear for the day with two aviators, they reflect upon the generations of mothers who have sought to protect their young daughters on visits to the city: the dangers shifting from the "Roman Fever" that worried their grandmothers to "the spice of disobedience" that concerned their mothers, to the lack of concern felt by the two contemporary middle-aged ladies sitting on the terrace at their lunch table. James's unprotected Daisy Miller is a victim of "Roman Fever," while a generation later Kate Chopin's "disobedience" in publishing the story of Edna Pontellier's rebellion against a stifling marriage in *The Awakening* (1899) sharply curtailed Chopin's future writing career, and her heroine found no alternative to suicide. Little wonder that Dreiser had trouble publishing *Sister Carrie* (1900), where his Carrie Meeber goes largely unpunished for her ruthless independence – a novel which Sinclair Lewis, upon accepting the Nobel Prize (in 1930 the first American writer so honored), declared "came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind."

Frank Norris tried to help Dreiser get his novel published, and later Dreiser in turn helped Sherwood Anderson. Anderson rejected realism as merely the reporting of surface differences, and instead was interested in the inner, subconscious and often sexual, forces that drove his characters. His *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is set in the last years of the century. Its "backward view" illustrates the impact of the growth of cities upon small-town life, the struggles of women to find a voice and an independent role in a world still largely dominated by men and male assumptions, the warping of imagination that Anderson felt commercial standards in writing and publishing had brought to literature, and the over-investment in empty rhetoric and facile idealism that he thought had taken both literature and the country itself in the wrong direction at a moment when both might have finally begun to fulfill their potential. Anderson's resistance to the plot-shaped short story and his interest in the inner life of his characters were features explored further by Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, two writers who received help and advice from Anderson early in their careers.

Willa Cather, in a series of novels, also looked back at the end of the nineteenth century from the perspective of the 1920s. In *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor's House* (1925) both title characters live into a century at odds with the era that shaped their identities and values. Marion Forrester is a survivor, but finds only in the frontier culture of South America a place in which she can still – now wearing heavy makeup – feel at ease. Professor Godfrey St. Peter opts for isolation, as the goals of his family and the college administrators change around him. Cather eventually abandoned

the juxtaposition of historical periods that shape these and some of her other novels, and turned completely to the past. In Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), set in nineteenth-century New Mexico, the aged, now retired Bishop and his Navajo friend and former guide reflect upon the changes and innovations that have come to the Southwest in the decades since they first traveled together across the vast distances of the new diocese. "Men travel faster now," reflects the guide, "but I do not know if they go to better things."

For America's black population, in some ways there had been too little change. The Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution abolished slavery in 1865 following the end of the Civil War, and during the period known as Reconstruction the federal government attempted to rebuild the South and enforce a degree of equality. But after 1877, when federal intervention in the South ceased, the southern states began to enact restrictions upon black voting rights, and to enforce the segregation in public transport and public schools that would last into the middle of the next century. The *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 affirmed the legality of racial segregation, a decision not overturned until the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 with *Brown vs. Board of Education* that such inequality was unconstitutional. A difference arose between the two black leaders Booker T. Washington and W.E. B. Du Bois over the degree of compromise that should be made with white racism and the segregation laws. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" speech of 1895 and his autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) argued for a more incremental approach. Du Bois, co-founder of the influential National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, and author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), argued for a more radical challenge to racial inequality. Washington became the first head of the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) at the age of 25, and Du Bois was the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University. Despite their different approaches, the legacy of both leaders was important to the later civil rights campaigns of the mid-century. Washington's views were treated scathingly, however, by Ralph Ellison in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), where a thinly disguised version of Tuskegee is presented as making too much of a compromise with its white patrons.

The end of the Indian Wars came in 1890 with the Battle of Wounded Knee, which involved remnants of the Sioux Nation. The most famous Apache, Geronimo, had surrendered in 1886, and in 1905 rode in President Theodore Roosevelt's inaugural parade. The Native American population had been the victims of a federal policy of forced removal from their native lands – westward and into poverty-stricken reservations. Then the General Allotment Act of 1887 went against Indian cultural tradition by giving individual

plots to individual Indians, and dissolved collective tribal claims to the land. But the land was often of too poor a quality to farm successfully, and the Indians lacked the resources and skills for modern agricultural methods. Indian children attended schools away from the reservations where the education sought to remove them from attachment to their tribal heritage and customs as part of a plan to assimilate them into mainstream culture. A number of Native American writers sought to keep their cultural heritage alive in the early decades of the century, along with describing the dislocation that resulted from such government policies. Most notable among these writers was Zitkala-Sa, an important activist and reformer. The poverty, isolation, and alienation that characterized reservation life through to the end of the twentieth century, despite the Allotment Act being repealed in 1934, are recorded powerfully in the works of such later Native American writers as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sherman Alexie.