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## Locating Contemporary Literature

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Literature in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States bears only a faint resemblance to the writing accomplished between 1900 and 1950. Early in the century, arguments as to what distinguished American literature from British led to the emphasis on plain character and plain language that marked the writing done in both realism and naturalism. Then, with the modernist sweep to overthrow most existing literary traditions (always using Ezra Pound's rationale that *making it new* was to be primary), the innovation that made American poetry, fiction, and drama of keen interest to the world settled in.

By 1950, however, traditional aesthetic innovation was wearing thin. The United States had endured the Great Depression, a long decade of hardship that not only dampened the promise of the American dream but changed literary methods to a surprising extent. The amalgam of cryptic modernist innovation and almost sentimental proselytizing that characterized the collective, proletarian novel and the speech-lined poems of the Depression gave rise to incredible variety: despite the paper shortages of World War II, published writing in the United States continued to be influential. It is in the aftermath of the war, once people had righted their perceptions about causation and blame, and had admitted again the atrocity of war itself (as well as of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb), that literature – whether called *contemporary* or *postmodern* – began to change.

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Modernism's heavy seriousness gave way at times to a strangely comic irony. The power of United States bombs to destroy cities and families instantly had taught readers the risks of too placid a belief system: even without the Second World War, the Cold War remained. European existentialism crept into works by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, J. D. Salinger, John Barth, Thomas Berger, and later Donald Barthelme, Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, and others. Even as writers as distinguished as Flannery O'Connor, Nathanael West, and Vladimir Nabokov had separately approached those tones, the congruence of a number of writers – working in both serious fiction and the more experimental genre of science fiction – made the advent of the ironic and the irreligious a dominant strain. With this attitudinal turn, established canons of texts faltered. On college campuses, courses in science fiction, as well as mystery and detective novels, made their appearance: what was to be known as *genre* writing usurped the popularity of courses that included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner.

The marketing of books also played a role in what happened to writing at mid-century. Categories that would have seemed contrived during the 1920s, and certainly during the 1930s, came into existence: black literature, Jewish literature, women's writing, and – with James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* – the literature of sexual difference. Descriptive markers created new kinds of demands in that publishers couldn't feature just one novel by an African American writer; instead, they opted for several on that part of their list. Currents began almost by accident. The comedy inherent in Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, for instance, linked this first novel by an African American with the mid-century production of white male writers (indeed, the advertising for *Invisible Man* did not mention Ellison's race). Once the category of black writing – or, in that period, “Negro” writing – was introduced, work by Margaret Walker, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Paule Marshall, and others found publication.

It is, of course, a commonplace that United States literature changed dramatically during the 1960s. No one would deny that the revolutionary spirit of that decade modified the practice of writing, and it can easily be said that with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr, an abstract concept of political and personal loss becomes figured in literary loss. (The same kind of dynamic in the relationship between a set of horrifying events in culture and writing occurs after 9-11-2001.) But what becomes

clearer now in retrospect is that many of the styles and themes that writers used during and after the 1960s were already incipient during the 1950s.

United States literature has always been somewhat critical of its home culture. The questioning critical responses to the United States in this period of study are best illustrated in the poetry, fiction, and prose poem production of the writers that came to be known as the Beats. Grouped around Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights publishing and book store in San Francisco, a myriad of such writers as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Diane de Prima, Anne Waldman, Richard Brautigan, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Paul Blackburn, and others signaled the legitimacy of turning away from the dominance of Western civilization. In their search for other ways of living, for new kinds of sexual and physical experiences, these writers' beatific power impressed readers with a willingness to change. To write impressionistically, as Kerouac did in his novel *On the Road*, to include the autobiographical as a legitimate part of "art," to expose all kinds of personal motivation – these qualities were, at first, rejected. Later, recognition of what Kerouac and Ginsberg were achieving changed the nature of United States aesthetic principles. The outgrowth of mid-century poetry – Robert Lowell's mid-career change, for example – followed. The so-called Confessional poets took courage from the often ridiculed Beats.

As publishers acknowledged this change and therefore searched for interesting representatives of the Other, writers who were culturally or philosophically different from the mainstream (though still white, still heterosexual, and still male), the established writers from earlier in the twentieth century died away. Beginning in the early 1960s, the world lost Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright, Dashiell Hammett, William Faulkner, e.e. cummings, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, William Carlos Williams, Clifford Odets, T. S. Eliot, Randall Jarrell, Flannery O'Connor, Carl Sandburg, and Langston Hughes, among others. It was a clearing out of possible production that made readers nostalgic for the great accomplishments of modernism – but also ready to accept new kinds of writing. These losses, coupled with the searing political changes of the 1960s, opened publishers' doors to writers who might well have been rejected a decade earlier. Joan Didion's *Run River*, along with her *Play It as It Lays*, represented the new interest in women's lives, no matter how disturbing; just as Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, brought a kind of comedy to that subject. The plethora of 1960s and 1970s novels by

women, most of them still in print today, included Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, Joyce Carol Oates' *With Shuddering Fall*, Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, Marge Piercy's *Small Changes*, Lois Gould's *Such Good Friends*, Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows*, Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an ex-Prom Queen*, and others. In 1970 Toni Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*; in 1982 Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (and the film made from it) polarized the literary world in terms of not only race and gender, but also sexual preference and class.

The vitality of American letters between 1950 and the mid- to late 1960s argued against one current of critical opinion, that literature at the midpoint of the twentieth century was staid. What was staid then was the *academic* response to the writing being done. According to the heavy critical studies appearing, a monolithic development of "pre-war" writing and "post-war" might have existed for a time: it was difficult not to take seriously Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) as well as, earlier, F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) and his studies of Henry James, and a bit later, R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955). Always retrospective, these acclaimed books about United States literature were bent, implicitly, on proving the difference (and the superiority, or at least the equality) of American writing. The specter of the 400 years of British texts, and that more formal British language, still haunted American letters.

Despite the emergence of that new field of academic study – called "American Studies" so as to present the worlds of United States art and music in the company of its literature – few English department courses in United States writing even existed. When students wanted to study "twentieth century" literature, they read works written by the British and the Irish rather than by United States writers. (Looming large over the canon were T. S. Eliot and Henry James, both of whom had become British citizens and were soon placed on reading lists as British writers.)

So long as scholars who were at all interested in American texts were boxed into that pervasive argument – that there was such an entity as American literature, something separate from the English and focused on defining itself differently – few observers had the time or energy to learn the *varieties* of the new existing in American art, writing included.

As early as 1960, Leslie Fiedler had assessed the problem: that codified critical views had created the straight jacket students found themselves enduring. In his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, a survey that was considered outrageous, as well as unduly subjective, he insisted:

Though it is necessary, in understanding the fate of the American novel, to understand what European prototypes were available when American literature began, . . . it is even more important to understand the meaning of that moment in the mid-eighteenth century which gave birth to Jeffersonian democracy and Richardsonian sentimentality alike: to the myth of revolution and the myth of seduction. (Fiedler 12)

For all the interest in United States individualism, no other critic is on record in 1960 for mentioning seduction, and very few negotiated with the concept of revolution. Fiedler's book provoked readers, and it provoked them healthily. It showed them that the literary world was not completely humorless, and it called directly for readers to mount arguments and counter-arguments. For perhaps the first time, a critic was taunting his readers, and he seemed poised to accept responses that challenged his own.

The world according to Fiedler here was a precarious one. Boundaries were not circumspect (in some cases, they were not even drawn), and acknowledging the influence of British letters on American did not mean that Fiedler deified Anglo traditions. *Love and Death in the American Novel* also solidified a movement that had been previously unacknowledged – that United States *fiction* was becoming the dominant genre, at the expense of poetry, drama, and non-fiction. All eyes – internationally as well as nationally – followed American fiction. Perhaps a reflection of the dominance of the novel form during modernism, this emphasis seemed to crystallize when William Faulkner won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. Unlike Hemingway, who was to win that accolade in 1954, Faulkner was not famous for either his stories or his plays. The apex of modernist writing may have occurred with James Joyce's *Ulysses* but other outstanding modernist novels were American – John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and his *USA Trilogy* (1938); Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1931), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and others; Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925); F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934); Hemingway's

*The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1939), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952); Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929); Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936); John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925); Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920); Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), and countless novels by Sinclair Lewis, beginning with *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (1920 and 1922). Lewis won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1931. The American novel had become synonymous with a window into the land of financial – and artistic – supremacy, and its world readership benefited from an interest that was as much cultural as aesthetic.

For a time, United States drama ran a close second to this pervasive interest in the novel, but by World War II (following as it did on the heels of the depressed 1930s), the economies of scarcity (outright depression, poverty coupled with the myriad wartime shortages) curbed the production of theatrical art. Even if plays were staged in New York or Cincinnati or Baltimore or San Diego, patrons could not afford to spend their limited gas ration – or the tread on their tires – to attend.

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#### A MID-CENTURY SAMPLER: *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* AND *INVISIBLE MAN*

To scrutinize the years at the middle of the twentieth century is to unearth a clearly dominant focus on the novel. Even though readers found Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) disappointing, its action tamed for the most part to slow scenes of dialogue, they still bought the book. What they bought more copies of, however, were Ray Bradbury's provocative *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), one of the first acceptable science fiction novels (interlinked stories) and (though less academically noticed) Mickey Spillane's *My Gun Is Quick* (1950). Mass marketing of the highly readable crime novel, replete with blondes who were not always victims, and the availability of these genre novels in paper covers (and therefore cheap) made their purchases acceptable. Along with the supermarkets' romance novel sections, crime and science fiction tested the boundaries for educational acceptability. Reading was becoming a way of escaping the stresses of the highly competitive existence that postwar culture spawned.

What was happening literarily in 1950 was less a reflection of the tensions of the Korean War or, in the States, of the McCarthy investigation into possible ties with either the American Communist Party or the international Communist Party. Readers were experiencing an appreciation for a materialism not rooted in a belief in capitalism but more of a denial of both these situations – the war and the influence of communism. Yet, in an unexpected move even for the highly educated literary community, *Annie Allen* (1949), Gwendolyn Brooks's second poem collection, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. (It would be decades before another African American writer would receive that honor.) And on Broadway, audiences managed to get in to see William Inge's first play, the all too poignant heterosexual drama, *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950). Inge, a white playwright from Kansas, avoided the existentialist influence from France (this was also the year of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*) and instead reified much of the sexualized theater which audiences had come to expect in the work of Tennessee Williams. With that Southern playwright, however, East Coast audiences could pretend a distance from the behavior of Williams's Southern characters – a distance that, in reality perhaps, did not exist.

The years 1950 and 1951 created a moment of calm in the literary landscape. Readers expected writers to be fascinated with the politics of both war and political beliefs: immersed in the tensions of the Cold War, pointed toward achieving excellence in science and technology, the United States culture barely noticed when William Faulkner received the Nobel Prize for Literature, or when Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (1951) helped to create public awareness for the spoilage on-going in the natural world: few readers knew what the word *ecology* even meant. The kind of disdain most readers felt for Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* or even for Albert Camus' *The Rebel* extended in the United States to Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1952). Like Faulkner's often difficult fiction, these writings plainly privileged the need for readers to interpret language. For the United States book-lover who had never gone to college – and until World War II brought GI benefits to thousands of veterans, that included many of America's readers – asking so much effort was unreasonable, and as could have been predicted, the year's big novels became James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951), a book that reprised Norman Mailer's 1948 *The Naked and the Dead*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a first novel by the largely unknown J. D. Salinger (whose short stories had appeared in *The New Yorker* and had created a following for him there).



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*THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

In the midst of the Korean War, Jones's novel was legitimate heavy reading. An informed United States population worried about the Atomic Energy Commission's announcement about the hydrogen bomb (which had been tested first in October, 1951), and the McCarran-Walters Act which tried to improve the policies governing immigration. Conditions were exacerbated by steadily rising unemployment, especially when one of the visible credos for returning servicemen and women had been the promise that the United States would reward them for their sacrifices. The postwar milieu, despite visible suburban prosperity, was increasingly tinged with irony. That irony became the narrative voice of Salinger's Holden Caulfield, a maturing adolescent benefiting from economic stability and a good private school education, yet floundering in contemporary society. Wry, even comic, Caulfield's voice hooked readers who were themselves tired of the erudite high literature that posed abstractedly the large moral questions of the twentieth century (and especially postwar questions). In a protagonist who wanted only comfort – talking to a therapist, spending time with his younger sister, escaping the sexual advances of a teacher he had admired – Salinger found the expression of a *zeitgeist* that thousands of United States readers recognized. Strangely incompatible with what seemed to be general prosperity, a dissatisfied mentality was searching for ways to tell a different story, a story that fed on not only discontent with the status quo but also on a clear-eyed vision that had begun to see past wartime and postwar propaganda.

One legacy of the fear of wartime catastrophe – here imaged in the destruction possible from “the bomb,” both atomic and hydrogen – was the tendency to scrutinize what “American” meant. Throughout the twentieth century there had existed a kind of “pride of place” in the United States. Once the international conflict of World War II had left America and Americans much better off than the other Allies, especially the country's chief cultural competitors – France and Britain – then the slow deterioration of that pride began. Hostile countries such as Russia and other Cold War constituents were eager to criticize. But some of the angry critique came from within, with the visible dissension of conservatism versus the radical. The McCarthy investigations were the apparent mark of questioning what *everyone* was said to believe. Dissenters were jailed and removed from influential roles: the imprisonment of Alger Hiss for his supposed complicity





Figure 1 Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States (1953–1961). Used by permission of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Texas

with Russia, and the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for being spies, leaving their two young children orphaned, indelibly marked the United States conscience. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), like William Carlos Williams's play *Tituba's Children*, were literary responses to the country's in-house terror.

In the milieu of "war," governed by social opinion about what was or was not patriotic (or treasonous), all actions and comments took on weight. Even as American aesthetics during the first half of the twentieth century had privileged innovation, the postwar decade of the 1950s was intent on erasing marks of newness and invention. A community ethos of stabilizing sameness became the norm. Women were excited to become wives and, later, mothers; the men returning from war were the breadwinners. Marriage was pleasantly monogamous ("no-fault divorce" was at least 20 years away). The threat of being accused of un-American behavior kept any questioning largely private. But the questioning remained, and it was to that vague discomfort that Salinger's character Holden Caulfield spoke repeatedly.

Another change that stemmed in part from the 1930s depression was the complication of the famed – and often readily accepted – American dream. To work hard had been one of the United States' governing moral principles: once "work" had become scarce, however, and finding work in a culture where recorded unemployment stood at 25 percent almost impossible, as it was during the Depression, the principles of the dream had to change. To work meant gaining economic self-sufficiency, and in those terms the American dream bought homes and land, clothing and cars, education and stability. Work, however, was the lynchpin.

The American dream had been the dominant theme of such modernist novels as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, many segments of John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, and Anzia Yeziarska's wistful immigrant stories. During the prosperous 1920s, the American dream was as real as Wall Street and Harlem, probably more real than William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow, an image that by 1950 was itself already nostalgic.

By 1950, too, the location of the American dream was changing; it was no longer to be found exclusively on Main Street or at the 42nd Parallel. Populations had been forced to move because of the shortage of work and, for writers, the previously established appeal of working hard for a character such as Jay Gatsby would be repeatedly questioned. The Great Depression had left more writers than Fitzgerald stunned, disbelieving, and ready to accept some lesser version of earlier definitions of both "economic success" and "dream." Diminished as it was amid the rubble of recession, the American dream did maintain a component of what a person could possess, a dream to which Philip Weinstein refers when he describes the "collapse of the American dream of identity-as-property in a Lockean sense" (Weinstein 276).

### ***INVISIBLE MAN***

When Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, it codified the unease of Salinger's novel within the more appropriate seriousness of the literal war novels, both Jones's book and Mailer's. Difficult, heavy, even stern in its use of language, *Invisible Man* became a vehicle for discussing the malaise of the discouraged postwar reader, regardless of that reader's skin color. The humor that existed in particularly the later sections of the

book was carefully disguised; the solidly African American setting provided readers with a necessary personal disclaimer, especially for the brutal Battle Royale and other early scenes. These were not the experiences of the white middle class; readers could categorize the book as one filled with exotic happenings.

One of the characteristics that made *Invisible Man* relatively approachable, however, was his life as a college student. Unlike Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* more than a decade earlier – defeated from childhood by his and his family's relentless poverty – Invisible Man had the ambition, and the intellect, to head for university: the grim Battle Royale scene itself was based around his receiving a college scholarship. The story of racialized poverty in even that bloody battle scene was comparatively ameliorated. But although privileged by attending college, Invisible Man was betrayed when the institution's president wrote him damning letters instead of recommendations. The character of Invisible Man was not only asked to leave college before completing his education but he was then also saddled with hostile letters that would effectively forestall any promising future. What captured the reader's sympathy was imagining the character's fall. The protagonist had succeeded in going to university, in rising above classmates and neighbors in having such ambitions, and in becoming a leader during his years at university (his serving as guide for the member of the Board of Trustees illustrated the high regard in which he was held). President Bledsoe's dismissal robbed him, in effect, of a lifetime of success. Many readers had experienced betrayal of a similar nature – power was not limited by race in the hierarchy of positions. When Ellison used Bledsoe's chicanery as a primary narrative mover, he undercut the emphasis on race that many reviewers expected. The novel won the National Book Award, coming as it did several years after Nelson Algren's *The Man With the Golden Arm* – and the film with Frank Sinatra in the junkie role – had been the first recipient of that newly created prize.

It could well be that Ellison's choice of almost encyclopedic political frames in *Invisible Man* was purposefully fragmented. As he moved his obviously disenfranchised and intentionally anonymous protagonist into the urban cacophony that would defeat him, he ceased writing a race novel. While the Negro belief at that time in the Back to Africa movement, in Communism, in the resistance to assimilation, in isolationism, and in the other philosophies Invisible Man adopted were useful for Ellison to describe, they were less familiar to mainstream book buyers than they were



Figure 2 Sylvia Plath, c. 1953, with friend

to an educated black intelligentsia. By the novel's conclusion, the story of *Invisible Man* became an Everyman's saga: to identify with the bewilderment of the character was to be, more broadly defined, a twentieth-century victim. Race seemed to have become a less crucial issue.

Like Holden Caulfield, however, the protagonist of Ellison's novel was a man. Few readers would have expected any serious novel to have a woman character as protagonist. The canon of any literary study during the 1950s was developed around the male character's ability to persist toward his goal, no matter what adversity he faced: such a pattern worked for Hamlet, for David Copperfield, in limited ways for Ahab, and in still more limited – and comic – ways for Huckleberry Finn. The world of serious literature pivoted on the belief that adventures worthy of epic standing, like the quest novel or the bildungsroman, could be



undertaken only by male figures. The few women characters in *Invisible Man* – the maternal Mary, the several sex partners – helped to show the novel’s alignment with these long-standing literary tropes. (It would be more than another decade before Esther Greenwood, the depressive college-age woman in Sylvia Plath’s posthumously published *The Bell Jar*, began to claim a protagonist’s role in United States fiction. Like the women characters in Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room*, Esther seemed as much victim as hero. Similarly, when Gwendolyn Brooks published her brief novel, *Maud Martha* (1953), readers again saw *victim* – this time, black woman victim – and made no claim for the character’s heroism. In contrast, the fiction of the 1930s had created a number of strong women, but Depression-era writing was being willfully ignored because of the fears spun out of the McCarthy hearings – and the taint of a belief in Communism that remained attached to much proletarian fiction.)

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## American Poetry During the 1950s

### A. *Poems of the Mind and the Body*

Even as the paper shortages that stifled voices during World War II disappeared, readers in the 1950s were still keenly aware that the writers of the earlier half of the century continued to dominate United States literature. Much of the decade of the 1950s was given over to younger writers waging war against the received opinions of Robert Penn Warren, for example, or W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, e.e. cummings, or William Faulkner.

For students at United States universities, the key modern writers were alive and publishing – perhaps in the long-revered mode of T. S. Eliot, who had left behind writing the influential essay (as in his 1933 Harvard lectures, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*) in order to create verse dramas for the English-speaking world. His erudite poems of the 1920s, for example, *The Waste Land* (1922) and such shorter works as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” were joined at the close of World War II by his *Four Quartets*, meditative verses resonant with experiences in London during the German bombings. If Wallace Stevens’s ornately orchestrated works of evocative language

were gaining prominence among critics, Stevens sometimes was seen as a poet of the second rank, especially after 1948 when Eliot had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Similarly, when Carl Sandburg's *Complete Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1951, his prominence was already fading. To write about the United States in either classically pared down images, or to borrow Walt Whitman's wider breath line was to seem reductive, even imitative. Because of William Carlos Williams's more open rhythms, his work had found readers, especially with his multivolume poem *Paterson* (published in five separate books during the 1940s and the 1950s). With the 1950s, Williams had turned to a three-step line, as if to mimic speech patterns, emphasizing strategic pauses: younger readers saw his prosody as natural,

When I speak  
of flowers  
it is to recall  
that at one time  
we were young . . .

(*Pictures from Breughel*, 159)

Although few readers cared in the 1950s that Williams's choice of a middle name (*Carlos*) signaled his Cuban mother's descent, Williams's insistence on the appropriateness of what he called "the American idiom" as a literary language separated him dramatically from the formalist "New Criticism" of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who preferred that poets would return to the techniques of the British Romantic poets, and a more visibly formal prosody. What Eliot, Stevens, Marianne Moore, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, W. H. Auden, and many of the next generation of poets – Randall Jarrell, Richard Eberhart, Richard Wilbur, Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Howard Nemerov, Karl Shapiro, Anthony Hecht, and the early Robert Lowell – shared was their belief in the well-made aesthetic object. Poetry had retained its supremacy on the literary scale of value, but only a certain kind of poetry was readily accepted.

Seemingly undifferentiated from British modern poetry, that written in the United States was both formally expert and filled with the abstractions readers wanted to find and remember. The mnemonic qualities of verse had kept readers in touch with such lines as Richard Wilbur's "Outside the open window/The morning is all awash with

angels” (“Love Calls Us to the Things of This World”) and Randall Jarrell’s blunt evocation of war in his poem “Losses”: “It was not dying: everybody died.” Luke Myers’s caustic tone in his *Sewanee Review* essay, looking back on the poetry of the 1950s, helps to divide those readers satisfied with the status quo, and the impatient – and generally younger – readers.

The poets who first appeared during the fifties have some distinction:

the best of them write with technical skill, intelligence, and resourcefulness. Yet a stack of their books, read through, leaves a sense of dissatisfaction . . . . The young poets, in fact, share a conceptual framework handed down almost unmodified from the twenties and thirties, which can not serve them as well as it served their predecessors; beyond that, no important relations can be established among the worlds they evoke. (Myers 42)

Those young poets were well aware that a different kind of line had begun with Ezra Pound’s pronouncements, although in this postwar period – with Pound imprisoned at St Elizabeth’s hospital for the criminally insane in Washington, DC – few people were reading his *Cantos*. What Williams had shaped into the three-step triadic line, the younger poets of both the Black Mountain and the New York schools were calling, borrowing from Charles Olson’s key essay, “projective verse.” For Pound, following breath rhythms had been the most radical of his principles: the poems he admired were first grouped into a category called *Imagism*, using H.D.’s lines as illustration, and then termed *Vorticism*, using the work of Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff. All of his *ABCs of Reading* tenets appeared in his various *Cantos* but by the 1960s Pound, along with Hart Crane, e.e. cummings, Robinson Jeffers, and poets who had already been influential in the 1950s – one thinks of the childlike lyrical lines of Theodore Roethke as well as the caustic humor of John Berryman, whose *Dream Songs* later became offensive to readers newly conscious of racial differences – was less often read.

Within the hierarchies of literary genres, perhaps it is not surprising that what seemed to be the simplest, neatest, most rule-bound, and most traditional genre – that of poetry – was, in fact, erupting into currents that were at best unpredictable and at worst boring.

Led in literary prolegomena by its rector Charles Olson, North Carolina’s Black Mountain College at the edge of Asheville became an aesthetic force for change. Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller,



M. C. Richards, Josef Albers, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Robert Tudor, and, in literature, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, proved that the innovative, based on personal experimentation, attracted good students. *The Black Mountain Review* broadcast more immediate versions of early Pound, and smaller groups of poets – Cid Corman’s *Origin*, Jonathan Williams, and in the Midwest David Ray in Kansas and Frederic Eckman and his *Golden Goose* magazine and press at Ohio State University in Columbus – echoed these pronouncements. It was Eckman’s journal that published William Carlos Williams’s “The Pink Church” – the poem that columnist Westbrook Pegler misread as a paean to Russia, instead of praise for the human body: Pegler’s campaign against Williams in the early 1950s led to his losing his position as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, an honor he had long coveted. Eckman, a poet whose work paralleled not only the poems of Williams but also those of Creeley, Denise Levertov, and David Ignatow, was a successful academic poet as well as co-founder of several MFA programs.

Drawing excitement from the visible successes of British poet Dylan Thomas’s public readings throughout the United States, the American response to its own writers also became more public: universities and coffee houses began sponsoring readings by practicing poets and a few fiction writers. This visibility was encouraged by the publication of journals such as *The Paris Review*, a glossy international journal founded by George Plimpton, Donald Hall, Max Steele, and other Harvard graduates. These new style journals featured another way of focusing on the writer and his art, the interview. Asked questions by a person knowledgeable about the writer’s work and its practice, the interview – such as *The Paris Review*’s early interrogations of both Forster and Hemingway – supported an increasingly widespread interest in how writing was done (the creation of “creative writing” programs and fine arts degrees followed quickly). Separate from the writer’s biography, and healthily distant from the pronouncements of academics, the interview worked in tandem with taped readings (i.e., the public performances of poetry and fiction) to provide readers and listeners a useful context. Appreciation for contemporary letters increased noticeably.

The New York School of poetry – dominated by Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Ron Padgett, David Shapiro, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, Edward Field, James Schuyler, Ted Berrigan, and others – separated



Figure 3 Ernest Hemingway with Mary, c. 1961. Photograph by John Bryson

itself from the Black Mountain ethos through its connections with painting, sculpture, print making and urban existence. (“Their affinities are with the European avant-garde, going back to Mallarme and Corbiere, Jarry and Apollinaire, Mayakovsky, Tzara, and Breton. They are also close to the various circles of Action Painting, the Museum of Modern Art, *Art News*, the Living Theatre, and the Artists’ Theatre,” Hassan 122). In form, the New York School was also unpredictably fluid. Like the Black Mountain poets, these writers also valued the centrality of silence, of the gap on the page and in the reader’s eye and mind. New York poets were also graphically specific as O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” or “Second Avenue,” replete with its memorable Camera Stores, suggested.

Sometimes titled “Personism,” this literal name-dropping was later to find its parallel in the “shopping mall” fiction of Jill McCorkle, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lee Smith, and others. In any poetic scheme, however, the fact that O’Hara wanted to rewrite the literary world to his own terms shows a kind of conservatism rather than an emphasis on radical innovation (Izenberg 128).

Another very early starting point for American poetry in the 1950s was the mixed form *mélange* of Gertrude Stein, whose magnificently unwieldy “Patriarchal Poetry” fed into the work of hundreds of younger writers. The poem’s pages of gendered wisdom, set in an



anarchy of line lengths (“Their origin and their history patriarchal poetry . . .”) provided a truly contemporary reading of the exclusionary qualities of both political and linguistic power:

What is the difference between two spoonfuls and three. None. Patriarchal Poetry as signed. Patriarchal Poetry might which it is very well very well leave it to me very well patriarchal poetry leave it to me leave it to me leave it to leave it to me naturally to see the second and third first naturally first naturally to see naturally to first see the second and third first to see to see the second and third . . . (Nelson, *Anthology* 77)

As poets influenced by the Pound and Williams nexus took over much of United States poetry, leaving the quickly quaint formalists behind, still less visible groups of poets intent on using generally radical language worked – separately or together – and usually on their own terms. Later in the twentieth century, Charles Bernstein labeled such poets as Ron Silliman, Ron Sukenik, Lyn Hejinian, Michael Davidson, Bob Perelman, Diane Wakoski, Clark Coolidge, Barrett Watten, Michael Palmer, Susan Howe, and others LANGUAGE poets. Said to be identified not by forms but by its own culture, the LANGUAGE poets at work today believe they do more cultural work than aesthetic (Izenberg 144). The poem “Leningrad,” for example, is a collaborative work of community, written by some of these United States poets but also by Russian contributors. Like the layers of change throughout Lyn Hejinian’s works, this poem too has no permanent text.

Michael Palmer’s interest in lyrical and fragmented narrativity is illustrated when he opens his short poem “All Those Words” with this two-sentence segment:

All those words we once used for things but have now discarded in order to come to know things. There in the mountains I discovered the last tree or the letter A. What it said to me was brief . . .

Reminiscent of Stein’s apparent sentencing, Susan Howe also uses language for even greater special effects. In her work with the recreation of documents and stories from American history, she has written a long poem, “Articulations of Sound Forms in Time.” Mixing contemporary prose within a seventeenth-century recreation of language in her quasi captivity narrative, Howe succeeds in creating viable meaning from her scattered poem sections: “Otherworld light into fable/Best plays are secret plays” (Nelson, *Anthology* 1040).



Stunned as the reader often is when Gertrude Stein breaks into unexpected clarity, Susan Howe's power to reach a reader is also unexpected.

### ***B. The Farthest Edge: The Beats and the Confessional School***

Some literary tendencies do not need to be painstakingly described. Rather, the congruence of different writers moving in similar directions nearly overwhelms the observer. So it was in 1956 when poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti brought out Allen Ginsberg's long poem "Howl" at his San Francisco-based City Lights Bookstore and press. *Howl and Other Poems* appeared in the glossy, highly visible black and white pocketbook format, the style that was used to publish the writing of Gregory Corso, Ed Dorn, Jack Kerouac, Robin Blazer, Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Ferlinghetti himself, and others. Anti-establishment poetic culture had found its voice.

The concept of the group identity of the Beats (*beatific*, holy, borrowed from several Eastern world beliefs) may have been born at a 1955 poetry reading at San Francisco's Six Gallery. With Kenneth Rexroth as master of ceremonies, the poets who read were Gary Snyder, Lew Welsh, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, and Ginsberg. Other poets who came to be named a part of this group included Neal Cassady, William Everson, William Burroughs, Carol Berge, Richard Brautigan, Ed Sanders, Gael Turnbull, and – from the emergent African American group – LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Bob Kaufman.

At Robert Creeley and critic Warren Tallman's three-week poetry conference at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 1963, this early grouping was supplemented and reinforced: primary speakers for the conference included Charles Olson, Canadian poet Margaret Avison, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Creeley, Ginsberg, and others. By then Peter Orlovsky, Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, Clark Coolidge, Fred Waugh, and William Hawkins and other Canadian poets had become a part of the group; and when the conference moved to the Berkeley campus in 1965, the movement expanded further.

The poems associated with Beat philosophy were not all imitations of Ginsberg's long-lined chant: in fact, most were not. Having

read Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1957), Ginsberg brought physiological, mystical, and political commentary into his art. As James Breslin noted, "Drugs, madness, extreme experiences of all kinds were sought to dislocate ordinary into visionary consciousness. Jazz was invoked as a model for poetic improvisation" (Breslin 1085). The Beat culture was intent on being a welcoming one, and their 1960s conferences (to which no fees were charged) represented that approach to creating community. Writers were incredibly diverse. Ginsberg's almost Hasidic sounding poems ("Howl" as well as "Kaddish") were true laments for not only people lost to him but also for the promise of his East Coast culture. Gary Snyder's shorter lined praises of the natural world, particularly the Pacific Northwest, resonated with a kind of Buddhist sonority. Levertov, like Duncan, wanted to encompass as much of the spiritual world as language could: a reader of Martin Buber, she brought the worlds of Russian, Welsh, and Hasidic cultures into her careful lines. Robert Duncan was similarly inclusive in his search for a way to fuse the mystical and the homosexual with the spiritual. The Creeleys – both Robert and Bobbie – created minimalist imagery in the shortest possible stanzas. Ferlinghetti became known for his almost impulsively accented speech/song forms. Diane di Prima fused her calligraphy and painting with language, creating a body of collage notebooks that have yet to be fully studied. What these writers shared, despite what seemed to be their strident formal differences, was the impulse to the comic. An antidote to the miasma of life as a serious enterprise – one that forced the human mind to both accept the horrors of the bomb, the Holocaust, the thousands of war dead, and then to move past that recognition – the Beat writers leavened their acknowledgment of these horrors with their wry art. When Ginsberg speaks to Walt Whitman in a California supermarket, when Corso meditates on the state of heterosexual marriage, when Kerouac mimics jazz rhythms in his "Mexico City Blues," they force the reader to respond with a mixture of humor and the sanguine.

The Beat movement also allowed its members to escape the restrictions of established culture. Both Ginsberg and Kerouac were students at Columbia University; some of the other Beats were from Harvard; Ferlinghetti had graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (under his Anglicized surname of Ferling); others had attended universities in the California system. In the rubric of the nineteenth century, "Going West" or, phrased differently, trying out the frontier, allowed the writer to create a set of unique morals, a

lifestyle that was expansive rather than restrictive. For the same reason, most of the Beats had traveled abroad: to India, to China and Japan and other Pacific Rim locations, to Africa (England, Italy, and France were no longer the chosen destinations; people could read about these locations in great amounts of United States literature). What the newly conscious mind sought was new ways of becoming truly, deeply conscious.

It was not accidental that several of Jack Kerouac's early novels dealt with the characters' experiences of travel. His most famous book, *On the Road*, published commercially in 1957, painted the quest for an élan of movement in indelible, almost rhapsodic, colors: the characters in his roman à clef – Neal Cassady, Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Kerouac himself, others – lived to move across the United States, traveling in non air-conditioned comfort back and forth on Route 66, one of the few east–west highways that linked California with the East Coast. To travel so frequently, and so uncomfortably, by aging auto became an iconic image for the life of exploration: today's "road trips" stemmed from Kerouac's recitation of these months in transit. *On the Road* gave readers the joys of male friendship, both heterosexual and homosexual; the excitement of young minds in unchecked conversation (a true communion that ran uninterrupted for pages – days becoming nights, lit by only a few weak glimmers from the dashboard of the car in which they rode); the energy of the search for different kinds of knowledge, much of it unacceptable to the parents and teachers who had raised them to make such searches; the belief in a classless society that allowed the characters to make unconventional friendships. The book was intended to shock, especially in Kerouac's scenes of drug use, multiple sex partners, the figures' use of crude and offensive language, and the endless dialogue that questioned established life goals. *On the Road* posited that experience was the way a searcher learned, even if poverty, ill health, or imprisonment resulted.

One of the tangible results of the Beat belief that freeing the unconscious or the so-called subconscious was desirable played out in Kerouac's method of writing this novel. In *On the Road* he used his belief in "spontaneous prose" to generate a run-on effect. Is the sense of real movement caught in the plotline of actual movement, or in the rushed language among the characters, or in the partial and undeveloped scenes (as in the Mexican segments)? Is the speed of this whole enterprise captured in Kerouac's writing the novel at his typewriter, on a long sheet of taped-together paper so that the

book became a scroll of language, selling at auction in the twenty-first century for several million dollars? Parts of the scroll were available to be shown throughout the United States in guarded exhibits. It is as if the artifact of the *On the Road* manuscript was testimony to its author's aesthetic commitment.

Because Robert Creeley also wrote short fiction and a novel (*The Island*) somewhat later, his comparison between writing long stretches of prose and writing the poem is relevant here: "... prose seems to offer more variety in ways of approaching experience. It's more leisurely. One can experiment while en route, so to speak. But still, for me, poetry gives a more immediate, a more concentrated articulation – a finer way of speaking" (Creeley 181, 183). Finally, for Creeley, all writing is linked: "Writing is my primary way of finding what I was feeling about, what so engaged me as subject, and particularly to find the articulation of emotions in the actual writing."

Many of the Beat writers also found new points of origin as well in what they read. Despite Pound's warning younger writers away from Whitman, the Beats devoured him. They found Hart Crane, D. H. Lawrence, and William Carlos Williams. (Williams's doorstep at 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford, New Jersey, where he both lived with his family and had his medical offices was a popular target for not only Ginsberg – who grew up nearby in Paterson – and Robert Creeley, but also for Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, James Laughlin, Robert Coles, and many other young writers connected with both Harvard and the New York universities.) They also read Rimbaud, Antonin Artaud, and a number of the surrealists, avidly looking for ways to free what they saw as their locked-in consciousnesses.

So long as the Beat movement maintained a kind of geographical identity, it was caught in the same kind of confusion that "Black Mountain" (and to a lesser extent, the New York school) had triggered. By 1960, when Anne Sexton's first poem collection (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*) appeared, her work clearly showed the achievement of various "new" currents in poetry. Still formal in structure, Sexton's poems were dominated by the sound – and appearance – of a character's voice. Sexton's poems reminded her readers that she wrote like O'Hara, or like Creeley, or like Ginsberg. Her characters sounded like the voice of Frank O'Hara in its particular focus on an apparently living person or a concrete object and, similarly, like the voices of Creeley or Olson in cryptic and usually intimate conversation, and like the Ginsberg apostrophe to Whitman. Bewilderment at Sexton's



achievement was only an intermediate stage. This woman poet from some Boston suburb could not be one of the New York poets (like O'Hara), and she had never been to either western North Carolina or San Francisco: she was therefore not a Black Mountain poet or a Beat. She was not one of the Harvard writers, but she was acquainted with poets John Holmes and Robert Lowell. As in every attempt to create categories within literary periods, here the eager groupings that had been called up to describe United States poetry during the 1950s had already begun to fail; the Black Mountain writers now merged with Beats; the New York writers had begun drifting westward to coalesce with the deep image writers, James Wright in Ohio, and Robert Bly in Minnesota where he published, first, issues of his journal *The Fifties* and then, later, *The Sixties*.

What gave critics a direction into Anne Sexton's poems was the fact that – like the writers linked to these other groups – the believable personal voice dominated the work. Just as autobiographical elements had been visible in nearly all the Beat writing, here too readers identified the voice of the poet-persona, whether or not it represented the voice of the actual poet. The story the poem told might be unpleasant or objectionable, but its authenticity to lived experience was the trait readers relished.

In 1959, W. D. Snodgrass had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his first collection, *Heart's Needle*. Filled with references to his apparently painful divorce and capturing the reader with his memories of his young daughter, Snodgrass's book was often reviewed in tandem with Robert Lowell's 1960 collection, *Life Studies*. Within a few months of each other, books by Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and George Starbuck had formed a recognizable group: by the time of Anne Sexton's second collection, *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962, readers were hungry for her revelatory work. By 1966, when her third collection appeared as *Live or Die*, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Clearly, critical practice demanded that these poets be given a point of linkage: M. L. Rosenthal, who often reviewed for both *The Nation* and *The New York Times Book Review* coined the term "confessional poetry." He first applied it to Lowell's collection; by 1967 he was using it as a descriptive term in his book *The New Poets of England and America*. What Rosenthal emphasized was that these poems turned inward in a personally revealing way. The critic saw that these poets used the "I" persona to designate the literal poet, not as a mask for the poet figure. And he paired Plath with Lowell because he found

the psychological vulnerability of her poet persona similar to many of Lowell's.

To create critical designations does not always mean steady success in reference: instead of the term *confessional* becoming positive, as Rosenthal had intended, it was frequently used to undermine poetic achievement. Some critics echoed his term as a way to dismiss these poems, and throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, essays and reviews appeared about the "dangers" of the confessional mode (Sylvia Plath had killed herself in 1963; Sexton was to follow, also a suicide, in 1975). Not until Plath's husband and literary executor Ted Hughes published *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* in 1980 did the sheer excellence of her great oeuvre silence those who used what had become the predictably negative term, *confessional*.

It sometimes seemed that readers reacted negatively to the term *confessional* because the subject matter of these poems seemed offensive to readers. Anne Sexton's "The Abortion," "Ringling the Bells," "The Moss of His Skin" and others asked readers to both understand unfamiliar experiences and to approve the poem's linguistic recreation of them. In "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," Sexton as poet speaks directly of her explorations in the poem: "in the end, there was/a certain sense of order there;/something worth learning/in that narrow diary of my mind" (Sexton 34). Poem as explanation joins the confessional writer with many other poets.

That Sexton and Plath were both women writers may have intensified readers' reactions to the issue of suitability: Plath's wishing "Daddy" dead, or mischievously using nursery rhyme rhythms for highly serious themes (as in "Lady Lazarus," her account of several suicide attempts). Gender roles suffused the reading of poems in the 1960s, particularly since there were accomplished women poets who did not offend their readers. Among these were Sexton's best friend, Maxine Kumin, Carolyn Kizer, Margaret Walker, Marge Piercy, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Diane Wakoski, Denise Levertov, and others. One of the most prominent of the Plath-Sexton generation remains Adrienne Rich, who won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1951 for *A Change of World* and the National Book Award in 1974 for *Diving into the Wreck*, 1973. For Rich, whose poetry underwent much change beginning with "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law," her essays too influenced the feminist movement. In contrast to the early deaths of both Plath and Sexton, Rich lived until 2012, an active participant in the twenty-first-century struggle with lesbian, gay, Jewish, and disability issues.

A smaller group of writers combined friendship with characteristic poems to form the “deep image” school. James Wright, William Stafford, Alan Dugan, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Robert Bly, Louis Simpson, and others crafted apparently straightforward lyrics, most of which pulled metaphors tight to create a more-than-expected impact. Wright’s “Lying in a Hammock,” for example, moves through nature imagery, leading to the five-word last line: “I have wasted my life.” More often, poets who explore the deep image do not turn inward but rather outward – they are inherently more political than many poets in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was no accident that within this group, most of the important work connected with protests against the Vietnam War was written.

### American Theater During the 1950s

When drama critic Ruby Cohn assesses this decade in the development of United States drama, she points out that even though there were more and more plays produced on Broadway (and off Broadway), and despite the fact that the war had occasioned the age of the musical as escape, the serious audience for theater became “less and less responsive to serious performance” (Cohn 1101). But still, Eugene O’Neill continued to write, and his work was augmented by not only that of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams but also – beginning early in the 1950s – that of William Inge.

In fact, theater in the 1950s may be seen as the unifying place for discussions of American literature. Making money as never before, this age of the musical, complete with superior scores and opulent costumes, was fueled in part by the ease with which musicals often became movies, sometimes with the same stars as had played the Broadway roles. So long as the Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway performances were profitable, the United States theater was open to all kinds of experimentation. While critics lamented what they saw as the paucity of that experimentation, some unusual productions did exist. The range of serious theater was impressive. T. S. Eliot, like established playwright Lillian Hellman, had several New York successes (*The Cocktail Party*, 1950; *The Confidential Clerk*, 1953; *The Elder Statesman*, 1958). The last plays of both Robert Anderson (*Tea and Sympathy*, 1953) and Clifford Odets (*The Country Girl*, 1950) were well received. Eugene O’Neill, who had earlier won four Pulitzer

Prizes, was represented by his long-awaited *Long Day's Journey into Night* (written in 1940 but not produced until 1956) and both *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1957) and *A Touch of the Poet* (1958). After Arthur Miller's important productions in the 1940s (*All My Sons* and *The Death of a Salesman*) in 1953 he brought out *The Crucible*, his ironic rewriting of the McCarthy trials as the Salem Witch hunts, a play that would be produced internationally more often than any other of his works, although it was less popular on Broadway.

The 1950s in drama, in fact, belonged to the comparatively unknown William Inge, who saw four of his best plays produced on Broadway in only seven years (and also made into films) and to Tennessee Williams, whose reputation had accelerated in 1944 with *The Glass Menagerie* and then in 1947 when *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Elia Kazan, had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Set against the somber realism of Arthur Miller's family dramas (or, more accurately, his plays about fathers and sons), Williams's work offered a pyrotechnic display of color and lights, as well as a wide emotional range. During the 1950s, Williams saw produced *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) which won him his second Pulitzer and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), with its effrontery of violence against homosexuality and even cannibalism, and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). The psychological richness of Williams's characters established new parameters for actors, and some of the best British and United States professionals competed to appear in his work. Parallel with this rage for Tennessee Williams's theatrical art were the four dramas William Inge wrote for Broadway in this decade. Inge featured the seemingly modest characters of American life whose moments of truth allowed an unexpectedly deep probing of motive. His *Picnic* (1953) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and his *Bus Stop* two years later provided a number of acting opportunities for young talents.

In 1957 Inge's *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* provided another explanation of the often-ignored class issues in America. The characterization of women and adolescents in Inge's work, drawn much less flamboyantly than in the plays of Tennessee Williams, was to shape the work of a number of 1960s playwrights, whose emphasis fell on the common character as protagonist (as in Jack Gelber's play *The Connection*, 1959, with its focus on heroin abusers).

The surprising news in 1959 – after nearly a century of drama written about Caucasian characters, written by Caucasian playwrights – was the awarding of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award to African

American playwright Lorraine Hansberry for her long-running family play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her title taken from Langston Hughes's poem, the play echoed the United States family drama and, like that work, was interesting for the interactions among family members. That the Youngers are black did not lessen the effectiveness of the plotline. (Hansberry was the first African American and the first woman playwright to win this prize; at 30, she was also the youngest writer to be so lauded. Her way had been paved to some extent by Alice Childress, whose productions in both 1952 (*Gold Through the Trees*) and 1955 (*Trouble in Mind*) had themselves been well received; the latter had won an Obie.)

Musical productions during the 1950s showed the current spirit of innovation as well. The decade began with acclaim for a thoroughly American musical, *Guys and Dolls*, by Abe Burrows and Frank Loesser. Here the lives of showgirls and gangsters, as created by Damon Runyon in his stories, brought street idioms and burlesque music to the stage. Burrows followed this success with *Can-Can* (1953), *Silk Stockings* (1955), and *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961). In 1951 Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II wrote the book for *The King and I*, based on Margaret Landon's *Anna and the King of Siam*, one of the most frequently produced musicals of the century. Gertrude Lawrence was the Welsh schoolteacher and Yul Brynner starred; Jerome Robbins choreographed the Siamese ballet version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Nineteen-fifty-three's *Wonderful Town* – Leonard Bernstein (music) and Betty Comden and Adolph Green (lyrics), by Jerome Chodoron and Joseph Fields – is adapted from Ruth McKimney's novel *My Sister Eileen*. A handful of musicals dominates 1954. The *Rainmaker*, a comedy by N. Richard Nash leads to a musical adaptation, *110 in the Shade*. Truman Capote's *House of Flowers* has music by Harold Arlen. George Abbott's *Pajama Game* features choreography by Bob Fosse, famous here for "Steam Heat," and music by Jerry Ross and Richard Adler. It won the year's Tony Award and was made into a film in 1957. Thornton Wilder's comedy *The Matchmaker*, a revision of his 1938 *The Merchant of Yonkers*, later became the basis for the 1962 blockbuster musical *Hello, Dolly!*

The range of United States musical productions widened as Cole Porter's *Silk Stockings* treated Cold War tensions. S. N. Behrman and Joshua Logan's *Fanny* was a long-running hit, as was George Abbott's *Damn Yankees*, with songs by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross. The diversity continued into 1956. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's

*Auntie Mame* became a film in 1958, also starring Rosalind Russell, and then metamorphosed into the 1966 *Mame*. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe built *My Fair Lady* from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and created perhaps the greatest of American musicals. It ran for a record 2717 performances. Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella* (adapted from Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*) is near-opera: most of it is sung. Considered Loesser's masterwork, the musical again shows the range possible on Broadway. In contrast to these successes is the Lillian Hellman adaptation of Voltaire's *Candide*, with poetry by Richard Wilbur and music by Leonard Bernstein.

The year 1957 saw the brilliant *West Side Story*, Arthur Laurents's updating of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and choreography by Jerome Robbins. The play is set in the New York tenements, with the family war waged between Puerto Rican gangs and white: because of its comparatively raucous music and the violence some viewers objected to for a musical, the Tony for Best Musical, as well as the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, went instead to Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*, a nostalgic look at small-town middle America. It was *West Side Story*, however, that changed the Broadway stage irreparably.

There were comedies on stage in 1958 – William Gibson's *Two for the Seesaw* and Samuel Taylor and Cornelia Otis Skinner's *The Pleasure of His Company* – but no musicals. Then in 1959 Jerome Weidman and George Abbott's *Fiorello!*, the musical biography of Fiorello La Guardia, won two Tony awards, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Arthur Laurents's *Gypsy* – lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and music by Jule Styne – provided Ethel Merman her last and perhaps most famous role as stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. In contrast to the realism of *Gypsy*, *The Sound of Music* told the story of the Von Trapp family in the last collaboration between Rodgers and Hammerstein. As a major popular success, the play became a film – and a cult classic – in 1965.

## American Fiction During the 1950s

### A. Fiction and the War

Postwar households bought books once more. The increased availability of spendable income meant that Americans were able to buy



not only cars and refrigerators but also designer clothes and Book-of-the-Month Club selections. In what might have seemed to be indiscriminate purchasing, the flood of merchandise filled shelves and sent interviewers on more culturally oriented radio stations to writers as subjects. It was not that intelligent people had forgotten either the 1930s depression or the panic of the war-involved 1940s; it was rather that culture was aiding in a kind of erasure. And while the decade of the 1950s was studded with writing that reified these historical experiences (the fear of unemployment and, hence, hunger; the trauma of being on welfare; the dangers of being a participant in warfare; the strain of observing that warfare; the suspicion of avoiding the taint of un-American behaviors or beliefs), for the most part people in the United States were alive, and they were somewhat prosperous. Some of them were even self-satisfied. When Morris Dickstein comments about the 1960s, that culture experienced a “deep-seated shift of sensibility that altered the whole moral terrain” (Dickstein x), he was predicating that shift on what he saw as the 1950s’ stability.

It was never so simple as Chester Eisinger made it sound. In terms of class, this critic saw novelists as consistently waging war: “The rebellion against mindless, arbitrary authority, which had been directed against the police in the thirties, was directed, in the war novels, against the officer class” (Eisinger 231). The reader might replace “officer class” with any kind of agreed-upon authority figure. The realistic United States war novels – Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Irwin Shaw’s *The Young Lions*, James Gould Cozzens’s *Guard of Honor*, all published in 1948, along with Herman Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny* and Thomas Heggen’s *Mr. Roberts* in 1951 and William Styron’s 1952 *The Long March* – used the plotline of single soldier versus officer culture.

In 1952 James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity* more successfully broadened that narrative. From the story of conflict, pitting one lone man against the system, Jones used a bildungsroman scheme to humanize the unsophisticated Robert E. Lee Prewitt. Knowing the military’s rules, Prewitt yet avenges the death of his friend, and eventually – mistaken for an AWOL soldier – is shot by friendly fire. John Hersey similarly – in both *The Wall*, 1950, and *The War Lover*, 1959 – creates characters that behave riskily and ambivalently.

Content to give readers action, even without real conclusions, novelists into the 1960s were still developing what the thrust of the war experience would do to characters’ psyches. In 1960, John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* and Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* treat protagonists who deny what the war had done to their minds. Critic Paul Fussell works



with the complicating power of traumatic memory when he shapes a congeries of wars in the twentieth century into a blur: the images of war “remain in the memory with a special vividness. The very enormity of the proceedings, their absurd remove from the usages of the normal world, will guarantee that a structure of irony sufficient for ready narrative recall will attach to them” (Fussell 326). In *Rabbit, Run* Updike’s description melds with this insight: Angstrom runs from his wife and his lover, from friendship, and from his daughter’s funeral: there is no alleviation for his pain. Nor is there any escape for Walker Percy’s Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, even in his controlled and controlling existence. As his bereaved, suicidal cousin Kate reminds him early in the book, Binx is much more damaged than she. Both Kate and Janice Angstrom show unexpected resilience, and ameliorate to some extent what seems to be a pattern of white male dominance in these novels.

To some extent these women characters reminded readers of Kit Moresby in Paul Bowles’s 1949 novel, *The Sheltering Sky*. Traumatized as she is after the death of her husband, Port, Kit displays a Poe-like reliance on horror as separate from their lives in North Africa: both characters generalize about the effects of war, its tendency to homogenize all cultures, to create a sameness unrelieved by a country’s ostensible foreignness. Never detailed, the Moresbys’s postwar despair creates a shroud of unreality for both Port and Kit. As Erin Mercer points out, even though the war is present in *The Sheltering Sky*, the novel never mentions “the loss of human life, large-scale destruction, concentration camps, or the atomic bomb as aspects of war worthy of condemnation” (Mercer 152).

These narratives of the wounding of war are for the most part implicit rather than explicit. Because one effect of these – and other – novels is the deadening of the effects of loss, readers at mid-century often cited existential grief, alongside postwar trauma, as causative. As deep a strand as ever in 1950s fiction is the ironic – often the parodic – expression of what postwar life had become. What had happened was that the novels of war were expanding to become the novels we think of as postmodern. To achieve that newer status – creating a fiction that would soon be described as postmodern – eventually meant great changes in American fiction. Instead of outright criticism of the acquisitive, even mendacious, culture, fiction writers chose to re-inscribe successful novels from past literary history. When John Barth slyly published *The Floating Opera* in 1956, his first novel was much less accessible than the outright critiques of Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in*

*the Gray Flannel Suit* or Cameron Hawley's *Cash McCall*, both books published in 1955. Barth's complex satire of the French defense of suicide, a humorous look at Camus' belief in existential choice sired by Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, was followed in 1958 by his *The End of the Road*. In this more compelling narrative about the influence of Sartre, Barth's work found its way to the highbrow literary readers who were already scoffing at Book-of-the-Month Club selections (Radway 20). Two years later, when Barth published *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), American fiction had become even more influential internationally than it had been during the earlier modern period: the stream of important novels during the late 1950s seemed unending. With his third novel, Barth was able to bring new recognition to Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges (*The Sot-Weed Factor* rewrote in part Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote"). For United States writers, Borges's meditations on the uses of silences were more compelling than had been Barth's earlier thematic parodies of existentialism. Modernism may have been in its waning days, but American writers were still in the business of putting words on paper effectively.

Aside from Barth's novels, one of the most difficult books of the 1950s was William Gaddis's 1955 *The Recognitions*. Following the privileging of the erudite in this age of Sputnik (an emphasis that also awoke readers to the powerful currency of Ellison's *Invisible Man*), Gaddis drew from music, art, and language in several manifestations to map out the existence of Wyatt Gwyon; frequently taught with the African American masterwork, *The Recognitions* reminded readers that one of the aims of the novel was to create new imaginative worlds. For a time, difficulty became the road to literary success. Barth, Ellison, and Gaddis all benefited from the tendency to equate factual knowledge in books dense with information – no matter how parodic the delivery of that information was – with power.

Erudition, and an insistence on the unfamiliar – in this case, economic and political theory – were both appeals of Ayn Rand's 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. Over a thousand pages long, the book intrigued readers: it had been written by a Russian émigré, Alice Rosenbaum from St Petersburg. The novel – like Rand's *The Fountainhead* before it in 1943 – became one of the foundations for libertarianism or, in Rand's terms, objectivism, as well as right-wing monetarism. In these years of veneration for the classics of Western culture, with University of Chicago's "Great Books" and discussion groups engaging readers' attention, philosophical novels by a woman – amid a sea of books

written by men – deserved investigating. Rand’s conservatism and her hostility to big government, as well as her sympathy with society’s “real producers,” may have been a quasi-personal response to life in Russia, but nevertheless references to the author and her politics surfaced repeatedly during the United States’ 2007–2008 financial crisis. Much of the *Wall Street Journal* coverage then reminded readers that Alan Greenspan, former head of the United States federal banking system, had early on been a Rand enthusiast. So had much of the intelligentsia of the East Coast, witness Rand’s invitation to lecture at Harvard in 1962. In 1999 the United States postal system issued a commemorative stamp for Rand.

### ***B. Class and Sexuality in the Novel***

The issue of a book’s difficulty was quickly eclipsed by a renewed emphasis on the variety of United States writing. As British critic Bernard Bergonzi claimed in his comments on Salinger’s novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* is “a novel of even greater intricacy than *Invisible Man* . . . . The difficulty is, of course, that American reality is constantly transcending itself, moving to new heights of absurdity or horror that leave the most extravagantly inventive novels behind” (Bergonzi 85–86). Salinger wrote one kind of response to the times – that of withdrawal combined, not too seriously, with quest – but many other novelists tried to find accurate expression through indirection. Much of the vaunted indirection was stylistic, and the incipient postmodern metafictional texts encircling key areas of silence were inapproachable. As one critic commented, the very intricacy that attracted some readers drove others away (Karl 158). Vladimir Nabokov, a United States citizen after 1940 when he left his prominent family to escape Russian culture, fascinated many United States readers in the 1950s, first with translations of his Russian novels and then – in 1955 and 1958 – with *Lolita*, in 1957 with *Invitation to a Beheading*, and in 1962 with *Pale Fire*. In the latter work he challenged all narrative conventions of character; in all his fiction, Nabokov drew from a deep understanding of the reader’s role in interpretation. When he could change tradition, when he could surprise the reader, Nabokov did so in a less visibly transgressive style.

It was his novel *Lolita* that provided the real challenge to American readers. The narrative of a middle-aged professor, so fascinated with the adolescent daughter of his lover that he travels throughout the

States with the kidnapped child, inscribing a myriad of cheap motels with the residue of their unpleasant sex – unpleasant, certainly, to Dolores/Lolita – seemed an unlikely adventure tale. Nabokov, himself a happily married Cornell University professor, had found a storyline that was unquestionably repulsive. Years before sex crimes and sexual harassment as a legal term were common to general readers, the fate of Humbert Humbert’s *Lolita* epitomized the deepest level of depraved lust. And yet, the adolescent’s name became synonymous with a depravity that worked in opposite ways: Lolita was a vamp, and she remained a highly sexual child in the reader’s imagination as well as in Humbert Humbert’s. Supposedly, it was *her* rapacious sexual appetite that had seduced the professor. Lolita became not only everyman’s dream girl, especially at her virginal age of 14, but also everyman’s sexual fantasy.

Comic as the novel was said to be by critics and other writers, described consistently as a book that was beautifully and effectively written, touted as a paradigm of ironic style, *Lolita* was assigned as a text in many creative writing classes. Nabokov’s other works struck readers as linguistic fantasies rather than sexual ones – and probably saved him from the condemnation that had befallen Henry Miller, a United States novelist banned from publication here because of his sexually explicit novels (i.e., *The Tropic of Cancer*, *The Tropic of Capricorn*). Readers could find Miller’s work under the aegis of French publishers.

In the 1950s, when for the first time women outnumbered men and more and more women students enrolled in universities, novels that narrated unlimited male power were still dominant (Gilbert 215). Heterosexual relationships were the staple of American fiction, both high-brow and popular, during the 1950s. No matter how offensive *Lolita*’s content, critics raved about Nabokov’s style (his “reverberating wit and witticism, the brilliant combinations of language and languages . . . the seamlessness itself of the various levels of narrative” (Karl 158)). The novel, however, remained a shockingly sexual work, and Humbert Humbert could easily be read as a manipulative, criminal pedophile.

If there is a Nabokovian school of writers to be identified, it would include John Hawkes with his highly experimental fiction (*The Cannibal*, 1949; *The Beetle Leg*, 1951; *The Lime Twig*, 1961; *Second Skin*, 1964, and others), his work reifying the French novels of Celine and Lautremont (Friedman 79–80), as well as Thomas Pynchon,

whose *V* in 1963 and *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1966 exemplified the intrigue of misread clues, deft if politically offensive narrative lines, and bewildered women characters. As an undergraduate student at Cornell, Pynchon sat in on Nabokov's classes and has often praised the older writer's uses of both narrative conventions and strategies for changing the reader's role in relation to text.

As the career of particularly Pynchon was to show, the literary world was becoming self-conscious about an inherent bifurcation between what a novel "means" and what its convolutions of language and form might suggest to readers. Certain kinds of books were predictable – and, therefore of possibly less critical interest: Ernest Hemingway's 1952 *The Old Man and the Sea*, beloved for its parable-like insistence on endurance and pride, showed nothing technically new to aspiring writers. John Cheever's stories, like his Wapshot novels, were expert but traditional descriptions of manners, especially of marriages and divorces. As critic Andreas Huyssen speculated, the thirst for the new that modernism occasioned had leveled off and by the late 1950s, "artists and critics alike shared a sense of a fundamentally new situation. The assumed postmodern rupture with the past was felt as a loss: art and literature's claims to truth and human value seemed exhausted, the belief in the constitutive power of the modern imagination just another delusion" (Huyssen 184, 189).

In an exaggeration of this view, little from the past has value. Little has aesthetic credibility. Insisting somewhat contradictorily that education and learning had maintained their worth, novelists drew both language and themes from other fields – of science, of biology, of technology, of physics – bringing into letters the idea of "the global village of McLuhanacy, the new Eden of polymorphous perversity, Paradise now" (Huyssen 189). Set as it was in the midst of the media-typed postwar complacency this turn away from the known to what was often the avant-grade, the European, the scandalous, or the simply impenetrable was an attempt to break through the apparent uniformity that supermarkets, prefabricated homes, and suburbia suggested. Beneath the crust of the conventional, however, a number of different sites of eruptions were visible.

As Michael Kammen defined "mass culture," these elements of housing, shopping, and perhaps also of reading were "mass" approved (Kammen 18). Whether or not these qualities were "high-brow" and not "low-brow" was the sticky issue: the climb out of being average into having excellent taste was another journey America's book buyers

found themselves trying to chart. Only a certain kind of rationalization allowed readers to champion *Lolita*; for most readers, the difficult novels like *The Recognitions* and even *Invisible Man* were not mentioned in everyday conversation. For many of the book buyers in the United States fifties culture, *realism* was still a valuable classification – they read Nelson Algren, Harriette Arnow, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, and others – and much of the new writing available in the decade could be so described. Reading realistic fiction, however, was not a way to increase the perception of one’s class standing. As William Dow has recently asked, “What is the place of working-class culture – including its resistant, oppositional, and emancipatory accents – in the development of American nationhood?” (8). Dow continues to inquire about which readers are interested in fiction that harbors class elements, and why those readers are comparatively scarce.

It was easy to offend readers in the 1950s. Even Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* was banned in many schools (for its language and its commentary on both homosexuality and depression). But because United States culture was trying to convince world observers that “winning the war” and being prosperous meant achieving across-the-board happiness, fiction about the poor, and about the pastimes of the poor, was to be avoided. Harriette Arnow’s Kentucky trilogy, which culminated in 1954 with *The Dollmaker*, showed how grim the reality of working-class life was, without steady employment, property, or any sense of community. Just as so many 1930s novels had described the despairing, relentless lives of the poor, so Arnow’s novels created a gallery of unfulfilled existences. Even with a strong woman protagonist, reliant on religious beliefs and the unexpectedly helpful friendships among Detroit auto workers, readers avoided Arnow’s writing. For the author, a journalist who grew up in the South but then settled with her journalist husband in Ann Arbor and knew the Detroit and Ypsilanti auto plant cultures well, the accuracy of her portrayal of Gertie Nevels’s life did not lessen readers’ disapproval. Would-be readers pointed out that her vivid descriptions of the lower class did not constitute a literature of uplift.

Despairing as *The Dollmaker* might have been, Arnow was preferable to Nelson Algren. In his 1956 *A Walk on the Wild Side*, a rewriting in part of his 1935 novel *Somebody in Boots*, Algren again narrated the lives of characters rooted in urban poverty, this time that of Chicago. This novel followed Algren’s 1949 *The Man with the Golden Arm*

(which had won the first National Book Award for Fiction). *A Walk on the Wild Side* remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 15 weeks, but never brought Algren what he saw as commensurate critical acclaim. In Algren's words, he had written at his best, and he had drawn America accurately. He called the novel "an American fantasy, a poem written to an American beat as true as *Huckleberry Finn*" (in Horvath 113).

To compare Algren's gritty realism in both *Walk* and *The Man With the Golden Arm* to William Burroughs's more surreal effects in *Junkie* (1957) or *Naked Lunch* (1959) is to create somewhat false distinctions. Algren was intent on realism; Burroughs was writing comedy intended to shock. Algren observed the effects of drugs; Burroughs wrote while he as author was under their influence. A few conventional mainstream readers read Algren, especially after he had won the National Book Award; Burroughs's novels found a coterie, but nothing like the groups of readers who tried Algren. What was most offensive to readers of both Algren and Burroughs was the idiomatic, colloquial language that their realistic works demanded: for a readership trying to be educated, trying to rise above the norm, the language of characters who remained at the edge of respectability was itself offensive. To compare the books by Algren and Burroughs with John Steinbeck's late novel, *East of Eden* in 1952, for instance, shows the kinds of differences the focus on lower class characters can make. In Steinbeck's generational saga, there is a great deal of sex but it is heterosexuality. The language Steinbeck's characters use is reliably middle class. Like Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* a few years later, replete with sex scenes and infidelities, readers found little that offended them.

The distasteful details of poverty, the crude language of drug addicts, and the unrelieved attention to heterosexual sex combined to warn readers away from writing in the 1950s that would not be suitable for book club conversation. But the real site of offense for 1950s readers was a narrative that relied on lesbian, gay, and homosexual pairing. As George Will recently commented, it was 1959 before United States publisher Grove Press won permission to publish D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And it was the 1940s before Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel, *An American Tragedy*, could be sold in the state of Massachusetts (Will). What readers saw as *obscene* varied by generation and place: even though these works portrayed heterosexual liaisons, their sin was that the sex was extramarital.



In the late 1940s, however, the concept of lesbian and/or homosexual sex won the competition for public distastefulness. In 1948 two novels appeared that tested that credential. Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* were attractive, even mesmerizing. But because the direction of the young men's lives differs from those of mainstream characters, their authors create a kind of dream-like pattern. Capote's *Other Voices* is not what it at first seems: the story of 13-year-old Joel Harrison Knox, eager to go to Skully's Landing and make a home with his father. The novel does not, however, explain the life of Joel's paralyzed father but instead limns the house of horror that his cross-dressing uncle Randolph has created. The real horror by the end of the narrative is that Joel has been corrupted by his uncle and his uncle's life, and chooses to stay with the transvestite bisexual characters of Skully's Landing.

In the Capote novel, the author leaves Joel's specific sexual experiences undescribed; he instead weaves a fabric of desire that is convincing. In contrast, Vidal tells a fairly predictable tale of homosexual attraction, an attraction that began with the protagonists as boys and ends with one murdering the other after their return from war.

By the time James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* appeared in 1956, his poignant story of two light-skinned lovers was better accepted. Geographically separated from United States mainstream readers, Baldwin's novel emphasizes the exotic setting – Italy. It provides a bittersweet story of the sophisticated American, David, who finds himself in love with the Italian, Giovanni. When David's fiancée Helle returns to him from Spain, David breaks off his sexual passion with Giovanni. Out of work in Paris where they have been lovers, Giovanni is forced to have sex with the bar owner he despises – and whom he eventually kills. Characteristic of fiction in the 1950s, Baldwin never describes Giovanni and David's lovemaking. The metaphor for David's reluctance to admit his homosexuality is that of the title. In the room where the Italian lives and stores his few possessions, the smells of his body surround the tidy David, who lives abroad on checks his father sends. Crowded, hot, stained with the residue of a brutal life, Giovanni's room is what David thinks he must escape. In fact what he attempts to escape is his realization of his homosexuality.

The novel makes clear Baldwin's anti-American attitudes. As he shows how naturally passion comes to Giovanni, he draws the ultra clean and upwardly mobile David in frequent unflattering scenes. It is David's inability to recognize Giovanni's pain that leads to the

precipitous ending. As David describes his reaction, “Something had broken in me to make me so cold and so perfectly still and far away” (Baldwin 120).

By 1963, John Rechy’s *City of Night* was published, becoming an international bestseller. Rechy, the son of Mexican parents, was slow to be identified as an ethnic writer, but this first novel about male prostitution in a homosexual world brought him fame. In structure the book is a kind of quest story, though episodes are more chaotic than straightforward; the work was often criticized for its explicit sex scenes. Its acceptance signals a clear change from the criticism that had, in effect, censured such descriptions in the Capote, Vidal, and Baldwin novels.

### ***C. The Novel, Jewish and Southern***

To return to the observers of the literary scene is to continue the commentary on what was swiftly becoming the most visible – and, many would say, the most significant – of genres in the United States. If the reader accepts Melvin Friedman’s ethnic-based classification of United States novels as clustered into either Jewish fiction or Southern (leaving aside what he then considered the less well populated African American fiction group), the reading public’s interest fell squarely on the writers of the so-called Jewish segment (Friedman 82). Such a categorization was not only Friedman’s belief: Ahab Hassan uses a similar organization, as do both Tony Tanner and John W. Aldridge. Perhaps it was the visibility of the writers who had taken over East Coast publishing – many of whom were either Jewish or wrote about subjects that could be construed as being Jewish, including Canadian Saul Bellow – or perhaps it was the need to avoid discussing fiction writers from the United States South, mired as that region was in difficulties about black–white relations. (There was also the problem that many of the Southern writers that critics wanted to discuss were female, and many of those comic; in general assessments of mid-century United States writing, attention to women was scarce.) Hassan notes, for example, that whereas the Southern novel may be waning – after his listing of Welty, McCullers, and O’Connor – that is not the case with the Jewish grouping, in which he places Mailer, Bellow, Salinger, Roth, Paley, Malamud, and Singer (Hassan 71).

It might be because Norman Mailer was so early a star in the American novel that he became central to this group. He was never so significant, judging from the critical commentary, however, as was Saul Bellow. Mannerly, well-constructed, always within the bounds of a reader's propriety, Bellow's fiction – even at its most comic, as in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) – does not unsettle his readers. With *Henderson*, for instance, he places his white protagonist in cultures that challenge him – Africa, for one location – but Henderson's failures are the same as those of Joseph in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *Augie March*, and Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* (as well as *Herzog*). Far from being just a picaresque adventure, *Henderson* is built around dialogues that advertise Bellow's philosophical concerns – it is the way Bellow fits into the more sober moralistic (i.e., teaching) novel that endears him to his United States readers. In a readership defensive about the innovations that the twentieth century had come to privilege, Bellow's somewhat old-fashioned handling of both character and language won him countless readers.

Following the career of Norman Mailer through its many structural frames, and many configurations of “story,” gives a sense of what American fiction was like between 1948, with his *The Naked and the Dead*, and his very late novels, such as *The Castle in the Forest*, 2007, and including his 1995 biographies, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (and the equally innovative *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography*). Mailer's constant reputation – buttressed by a book nearly every year after 1948 – was that of American commentator. Once he had discovered that readers in some respects preferred his idiomatic coverage of history, especially the history in which he was involved – not so much in his role as a Jew but in that of a New Yorker, well-connected with people making news, such as the Kennedys and the city politicians – he began working in all genres, including poetry, the detective novel, short story, and of course journalism. Mailer never claimed that he was an historian, but he was an aggressive – and sometimes astute – observer.

Literary critics were sensitive to the fact that he could write effectively in countless ways. Once so-called New Journalism was in vogue, Mailer made outstanding contributions there: some of his best writing occurred in both *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968* and, more highly praised, *The Armies of the Night*, *History as a Novel*, *the Novel as History*, both 1968. For Mailer to usurp the term *history* in that subtitle, well

before Hayden White's definitions of the real elements that constituted history, was to call sophisticated attention to the novelist's sometimes rash, sometimes effective experimentation. Because one of the stylistic fascinations with literature during the 1950s and the 1960s was the blurring of lines between "fiction" and a kind of newly subjective prose that made no pretense at fiction (Joan Didion's essays, for instance, and the "novel" by Truman Capote which appeared in 1966, *In Cold Blood*, a book sometimes credited with beginning postmodernism), critics were well aware of Mailer's experiments. They understood his giving his prescient essay "The White Negro" to Lawrence Ferlinghetti so that it could appear from City Lights Books in 1957. They were intrigued with the way digressive sections (and separate essays) were the real heart of *Advertisements for Myself* in 1959. Better received than Mailer's 1955 Hollywood novel, *The Deer Park*, was his 1965 macabre *An American Dream*, a narrative in which the white protagonist kills his wife and harms his lover: this book was the beginning of the feminists' long-term antipathy toward Mailer and his work. Wherever that antipathy surfaced, however, the writers of the twentieth century came to his defense. Although Mailer never won the Nobel Prize for Literature (as did both Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer), no American writer was more important to the world reputation of innovation in the United States.

Philip Roth has grown into the shoes that Mailer seemed to care little about wearing. Immensely productive, letting his protagonists age as their author does (Roth is now in his seventy-eighth year), concerned with the physical debilitation of that age – especially the sexual ramifications – Roth turns out novel after novel, some better received than others. Perhaps one of his strongest has been *American Pastoral*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1997. His treatment of Meredith Levov, the daughter of a conventional Jewish family, as she becomes a student involved with the SDS, who bombs a building and eventually kills four people, is structured so that the reader's understanding of this incredible character – or, rather, of her interaction with her culture – mirrors that of her disbelieving family. The randomness, the reasonlessness of it all, becomes the fabric for her act. Different from Mailer's use of violence, here Roth stays well within the parameters of the novel's conventional form.

Roth's fiction had not always been considered conventional, however. In 1979, *The Ghost Writer* began his intriguing Nathan Zuckerman series. Here a writer befriended a more famous Jewish novelist

and studied that writer's alleged affair with a young woman (Zuckerman identified her as Anne Frank); in 1981, *Zuckerman Unbound* focused on the notoriety of Roth's 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*. In 1983 Zuckerman appeared again in Roth's *The Anatomy Lesson* and in 1985, all three of these novels, with an epilogue, were published as *Zuckerman Bound*. Roth would produce other sequence fictions, but none so captivated his readers.

Whereas Roth had won the National Book Award for his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959, this novella and stories did not endear him to Jewish readers. Set at Ohio State University, the narrative suggests that Jewish characters must assimilate – Roth uses a number of different cities as his backdrop before settling in with his home territory of New York. The comedy of the middle-class aura makes the novella similar to the effect of Salinger's fiction, and somehow that levity did not sit well with Jewish readers. Four years later, *Letting Go*, Roth's Chicago novel – a self-consciously told tale of university faculty members, ill-suited love relationships, and abortionists – was praised for its accurate depiction of the urban lives of Jewish characters. As Friedman noted at that time, "Roth is perhaps more sensitive to the verbal rhythms and pulse beat of the second and third-generation American Jew than any of his contemporaries" (85). To list his recent fiction awards shows this versatility: besides the Pulitzer in 1997, he has been awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Patrimony*, 1991; the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Operation Shylock*, 1993; the National Book Award for *Sabbath's Theater*, 1995; his second PEN/Faulkner Award for *The Human Stain* (2000); and in 2001, the Gold Medal in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Such accolades suggest that whatever interest accrued in Roth when he was considered one of the newest Jewish writers in the United States, has been quickly outgrown: his status has kept him at the center of contemporary fiction, regardless of what might be emphasized as his ethnicity.

Consideration of Philip Roth places him at the opposite edge of ethnic studies, and in direct contrast to Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose introduction to United States readers came in translations from the Yiddish. Most of his early novels are set in Poland, either twentieth century or earlier, and many of his most honored stories are also recreations from a national, Yiddish literature. *The Family Moskat*, *The Magician of Lublin*, *The Slave*, and several collections of short stories constitute the basis for his excellent reputation. In his later fiction he

often moves between a more contemporary Jewish life and an older, traditional set of values. In some of these narratives, the Holocaust becomes a character, with either memories or actual lived experience marking people's lives. In his 1972 *Enemies, A Love Story* the setting is Brighton Beach-Coney Island; his Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded in 1978.

Several literary critics have praised Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961) for his incorporation of the Holocaust with contemporary life and culture in the urban United States; that he died young does not keep this novel from being lauded. Perhaps a worthy successor to the kind of Jewish voice that Singer's work represented is the writing of Bernard Malamud, who began his publishing career with *The Natural* in 1952 and then wrote what some critics consider his best novel, *The Assistant*, 1957.

It has been conjectured that critical interest in Jewish writers at mid-century was a kind of metaphor for allowing familiarity with the writer-as-outsider to remain respectable. In breaking away from the white, male canon (though most of these Jewish writers were, admittedly, also white and male), literary observers were trying to keep open minds about what comprised new, good literature. Because so much United States narrative was set in urban middle-class existences, readers were beginning to think of current fiction as formulaic. And, perhaps unknowingly, they also were avoiding work that represented the radically new – the Beat consciousness with its detailed but unfamiliar experiences, the drug culture fiction with both thematic and stylistic innovation, the so-called postmodern experimental writing that used single letters of the alphabet rather than all 26 letters, as in the case of Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*.

That literary critics were prone to pair Jewish writing with Southern writing is in some ways an outgrowth of the United States' cultural discomfort with the South. Particularly in the 1950s, when most of the country's race problems seemed to be located in that region, concepts of literature that were more recent than the modernism of William Faulkner were forestalled: given the amazingly deft short stories of Eudora Welty, Elizabeth Spencer, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers, critics seemed at a loss to explain where that finesse – not to mention that sheer talent – came from. (That there were male Southern writers such as Walker Percy, Truman Capote, Reynolds Price, and Erskine Caldwell seemed to broaden the categorization too much for most critical assessments.) Critics liked their self-constructed image

of the deferential, sequestered Southern woman writer, whose work appeared regularly in *The New Yorker* but whose face was seldom seen.

Had they really known their Faulkner, they would have realized that the South was not the horrific corner of a hedonistic America: the customs, religious beliefs, and family structures of the South were both identifiable and permeable. Despite its apparent racial problems, the South was not exotic, nor was it expressly backward. It was, however, even linking all those disparate states, a community. But to consider Elizabeth Spencer, who spent much of her adult life in first Italy and then Canada, and Carson McCullers, who never settled anywhere emotionally and usually not geographically, and even Eudora Welty, with her ties to New York and her other profession, that of photographer, all the same kind of “Southern writer” is making a misstep that pages of history, as well as theory about Southern writing, is not going to reify.

What does endure about the South is that notion of community, and as the century has progressed, often a matriarchal community. At what point in their individual biographies can each of these women become less *Southern* and more *modern*? When does the notion of *place* and *context* fuse with a more general sense of *time*, of *zeitgeist*? In the fiction of all these important writers, place – the recognition of locale and a person’s development in, and through, it – becomes a primary means of growing, of coming to understanding, both as individual and as community member. One important question in many of the works of Southern women writers – both modern and contemporary – is whether or not the central character has any right to that place. The marginality of the poor, the child, the wife, the slave is a pervasive theme, perhaps the main theme in fictions as different as Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*, Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*, Elizabeth Spencer’s *The Voice at the Back Door* as well as *Light in the Piazza*, Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the stories of all these, along with those by Eudora Welty. For the purposes of the actual art of the writing of literature, the telling of story, the creation of narrative, community becomes essential. Women’s writing is intended for both reading and listening. It assumes a live response.



Elizabeth Spencer opens her story “A Southern Landscape” in her vaunted colloquial voice,

If you’re like me and sometimes turn through the paper reading anything and everything because you’re too lazy to get up and do what you ought to be doing, then you already know about my home town. There’s a church there that has a gilded hand on the steeple, with the finger pointing to Heaven. The hand looks normal size, but it’s really as big as a Ford car. At least that’s what they used to say in those little cartoon squares in the newspaper. . . . that old Presbyterian hand the size of a Ford car. It made me feel right in touch with the universe to see it in the paper – something it never did accomplish all by itself. . . . The name of the town, in case you’re trying your best to remember and can’t, is Port Claiborne, Mississippi. Not that I’m *from* there; I’m from *near* there.

As readers, we know this voice, this small town culture, and we can envision the writer’s images of Mississippi. Similarly when we open Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path,” we are faced with a different class, a different (and non-white) character, and a voice that belongs not to the persona so much as to the author as narrator:

It was December – a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. . . .

Both of these excerpts share the meticulous detail of accurately described surroundings, the re-creation of language carefully rendered, the authenticity of people in a place that these authors have made real to their readers. As we have seen with the consideration of Isaac Singer’s fiction, the authenticity of his Poland may have won for him the Nobel Prize in Literature: whether Welty’s gender or her specialization in the short fiction form or her association with the American South kept her from winning the only prize she was not to have before her death, there is no question that her writing was consistently excellent.

What Welty did win was the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1973 (for her novel, *The Optimist’s Daughter*), along with O’Henry prizes, Guggenheim fellowships, and the American Book Award, the National

Endowment for the Arts' National Medal of Arts, the National Book Foundation Medal, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal, the President's Medal of Freedom, the William Dean Howells Medal for the most distinguished work of fiction between 1950 and 1955, and the Commonwealth Award of the Modern Language Association. She has also been awarded France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres, a prize which confers knighthood.

Considering the oeuvre of not only Welty but Spencer, O'Connor, McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and other Southern writers such as Caroline Gordon, Shirley Ann Grau, Doris Betts, Harriette Arnow, and more contemporary writers (Barbara Kingsolver, Lee Smith, Kaye Gibbons, Josephine Humphreys, Jill McCorkle), one must return to C. Hugh Holman's persuasive commentary, when he noted that a writer who purports to be a Southern writer must be concerned with not only history and time but "the omnipresent conundrum of geographic space" (Holman 98). The classification of Southern woman writer may have originally been artificial, but the last 60 years of writing have codified the boundaries.

