



A HISTORY OF  
AMERICAN LITERATURE  
1900-1950

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CHRISTOPHER MACGOWAN

WILEY Blackwell



# A History of American Literature 1900–1950

# WILEY-BLACKWELL HISTORIES OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The *Wiley-Blackwell Histories of American Literature* are culturally grounded, comprehensive, and succinct, recognizing that to write literary history involves more than placing texts in chronological sequence. Thus the emphasis within each volume falls both on plotting the significant literary developments of a given period, and on the wider cultural contexts within which they occurred. Authors address such issues as politics, society, the arts, ideologies, varieties of literary production and consumption, and dominant genres and modes, and the emphasis is on contexts, including a retrospective element on the inheritance of past literature, on texts and authors, and the lasting effects of the literary period under discussion, and incorporating such topics as critical reception and modern reputations. As befits a culturally grounded series, these volumes are first and finally concerned with the plural nature of American culture and how that feeds into American writing. The effect of each volume will be to give the reader a sense of possessing a crucial sector of literary terrain, of understanding the forces that give a period its distinctive cast, and of seeing how writing of a given period impacts on, and is shaped by, its cultural circumstances. Each volume recommends itself as providing an authoritative and up-to-date entrée to texts and issues, and their historical implications, and will therefore interest students, teachers, and the general reader alike.

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Christopher MacGowan

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# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	vii
<b>1 American Literature in 1900</b>	<b>1</b>
Prose and Fiction: Taking on the New Century	3
Regional Fictions: Austin, Glasgow, Cather, and Roberts	23
Black Writing: The Washington and Du Bois Debate	33
American Theater in the First Decades	39
Native American Literature in the Early 1900s	43
Poetry Before the Modernists	47
The Chicago Renaissance: Masters, Lindsay, and Sandburg	49
The Poetry of Feeling: Teasdale, Millay, Wiley, and Bogan	57
The Poetry of Place: Jeffers, Robinson, and Frost	64
<b>2 The Twenties: Becoming International</b>	<b>72</b>
Innovation and American Theater in the 1920s	73
Prose in the American Grain: Lewis, Anderson, Faulkner	82
The Expatriates: “Being Geniuses Together”	96
“Making It New” Modernist Poetry and the 1920s	115
The South: Fugitives and Agrarians	139
The Harlem Renaissance	142

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<b>3 The Thirties: Depression and a Prelude to War</b>	<b>163</b>
Poetry: Some Legacies of Modernism	168
Drama in the 1930s: After O'Neill	178
Fiction in the 1930s: A National and International Canvas	197
Black Writing in the 1930s	226
Immigrant Writing in the First Decades	234
Proletarian Literature	246
American Writers and the Spanish Civil War	263
<b>4 WAR: "Thus dawn the 1940s..."</b>	<b>270</b>
The Media: Books, Hollywood, and Television	270
Literature and the War: Fiction and Nonfiction	276
Literature and the War: Poetry	290
Literature and the War: Theater	302
<b>5 Into Mid-Century</b>	<b>304</b>
Native American Literature 1920–1950	304
Postwar Theater: The Early Careers of Inge, Williams, and Miller	317
Poetry into Mid-Century: Evaluating the Modernist Legacy	333
Black Writing into Mid-Century	356
Fiction in the 1940s	377
J. D. Salinger and Vladimir Nabokov	377
Southern Writing	382
Jewish American Fiction	394
Urban Fiction: Tales of Three Cities	402
Los Angeles	402
New York	408
Chicago	412
And Other Places: Past, Present, and Future	415
Past	415
Present	417
Future	424
<i>References</i>	434
<i>Index</i>	463

# Preface

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Literature is, of course, more than a roll call of numbers and dates, but history can provide a useful reminder of the context out of which imaginative expression comes. In 1900, the year that saw Stephen Crane's death, the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes in an American film, the publication of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and the first of L. Frank Baum's fourteen *Wizard of Oz* books, the population of the United States was 76,212,168, a 21% increase over the 1890 census. New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois were the most populous of the 45 states, and New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were by far the most populous cities. By 1950, when Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American writer to receive a Pulitzer Prize, Jack Kerouac published his first novel, and blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter Dalton Trumbo began an eleven-month prison sentence for refusing to name names to the House Un-American Activities Committee, the population had almost doubled to 150,697,361. California, number 21 in 1900, was now the second most populous state of 48, and although the three largest cities remained the same, the population of Los Angeles, now fourth, and in 1900 thirty-sixth, had risen from 102,479 to 1,970,358. In addition to this westward movement, the first fifty years of the twentieth century would see the United States rise to global military and economic dominance following two World Wars, wars in which its industrial power made a significant difference, as it would in the years following with the Marshall Plan, the United Nations, and the formation of the International Monetary Fund.

The half-century would see a significant migration of the South's black population to northern industrial cities, a migration which would have an important impact on black literature and its subject matter. Average life expectancy for whites in 1900 was 47, but 33 for blacks, an inequality somewhat reduced in 1950 when the figures were 68 and 60. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the ratio of college students to 18–24-year-olds was two in a hundred in 1900, and had risen to seven in a hundred by fall 1949. In 1949, 30% of the enrollees were women, yet that figure had been 36% in 1900. The 1949 figure indicates the large numbers of men returning from the war receiving financial assistance for tuition, as well as a conservative view of gender roles that would accompany the 1950s move to the suburbs, the baby boom, and the flood of new labor-saving devices for the home.

There was an economic boom in the 1920s, which helped finance expenses for the literary expatriates in Paris and provided cheap publishing opportunities for uncommercial modernist writers. The Standard and Poor's 500 composite index had been 6.2 in 1900, and would be 18.4 in 1950, but had been 26 at the height of the 1929 bubble. The Depression of the next decade that brought most of those expatriates home would affect finances, politics, and the intended audience for much 1930s writing.

In 1886, when Charles Francis Richardson published his two-volume *American Literature, 1607–1885* (reporting that Bret Hart was the most popular American author on the book racks of English train stations, and that Victor Hugo although praising Poe had never heard of Emerson), it was still possible for him to try to define what was particularly “American” about American literature. That question became ever more difficult to answer through the century that followed. Henry James, visiting the United States in 1905 for the first time in twenty-one years, was both disturbed and fascinated by the changes he saw, recording his impressions in *The American Scene* (1907), and predicting that “the accent of the very ultimate future, in the States” may become very “beautiful . . . but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English” (James, *Scene* 139). The pace of change and the growing diversity he witnessed increased in the decades to come. In one measure of that change, the Superintendent of the 1890 census declared that the rapid western settlement of the previous twenty-five years, now mostly urbanized, meant in effect “there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” Frederick

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Jackson Turner began with this quotation in his famous “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893). Huckleberry Finn’s line of escape from the civilizing of Aunt Sally in Twain’s 1884 novel, “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest” was fast closing down (Twain 328). Nostalgia for the Old West soon became a marketable subject. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), the best of the novels that responded to it, set many of the genre’s character and narrative tropes for decades to come.

The world of travel and communications changed dramatically in the first half of the century, as it would again in the second half. In 1900, there were 8000 automobiles registered in the United States, 40% of them steam-powered. By 1950, the number was over 40 million. The federal government started funding roadways in 1916, although work on the interstate system did not begin until 1956. In 1909, the futurists had characterized progress and modernity in terms of the machine and speed, a sentiment echoed in far less enthusiastic fashion by Henry Adams in his *The Education of Henry Adams*. By 1920, Emerson’s famous “transparent eyeball” from his essay “Nature” (1836) could become William Carlos Williams’ “spinning on the// four wheels of my car/along the wet road” in his 1923 *Spring and All* (Williams *CPI* 206).

The first transcontinental passenger flights began in 1933, taking 20 hours; such a flight and its staging posts provide a memorable setting for the first chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s unfinished *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941). The first commercial transatlantic flights began in 1939, and by 1950 ten major international airlines were offering transatlantic travel. The era of five-day ocean crossings was beginning to close, while the competition from the two German zeppelins offering transatlantic travel ended with the 1937 Hindenburg disaster at Lakehurst, New Jersey. Suitably, the history of flight makes up an important part of Hart Crane’s celebration of the age in *The Bridge*.

Developments in telecommunications allowed many a new national and international narrative arc. The telephone had been patented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876, and its unreliability in that decade is used in the machinations of Mr. Beaufort in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920). The service was more reliable a dozen years later for Hank Morgan in Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). The first transatlantic radio transmissions began in 1901, with transatlantic telephone service starting in 1927. The first trans-Pacific cables were laid in the first years of the century, and the

Panama Canal, connecting the two American coasts, opened in 1914. At the same time that these changes connected the United States more fully with the world, Congress enacted a number of measures designed to restrict immigration. The first immigration act was passed in 1882 with further important changes in 1917 and 1924. These acts had race, ethnic or regional origin as their basis, and arguably had consequences for the delay of the rich multicultural voices that so characterized American literature in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Within the boundaries of the United States itself, the makeup of American literature became more complex in the first half of the century, with more of its peoples and regions finding expression. The decades covered by this volume record the successful insistence of black writers on being heard, even though at various times they had to deal with attempted control by white patrons, as well as the ever-present racial and economic discrimination. The period of this volume is bookended by two of the most important Supreme Court decisions affecting African Americans. In the 1896 *Plessey vs. Ferguson* case, the court held that racial segregation was constitutional, and in 1954 with *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the Court reversed itself. In between these years, in 1909, W. E. B. Du Bois led the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Its important magazine, *The Crisis*, would be followed by many others providing vehicles for black writing. The flowering of multiple arts known as the Harlem Renaissance provided plenty of material for their pages in the 1920s. By 1950, Langston Hughes was sustaining himself by his writing income alone, Richard Wright had two of his books featured by the influential Book of the Month Club, both bestsellers, and James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were on their way to literary prominence.

The story for Native American writers is one of slower progress. The fuller flowering did not come until the second half of the century. Native Americans had been losing their land and rights throughout the 1800s. The Society of American Indians (1911–1923) was the first lobbying group managed exclusively by Native Americans, working for reforms on the reservations. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 gave citizenship status to Native Americans, and the Meriam Report of 1928, commissioned by the Department of the Interior, laid out a list of reforms to address the poverty, health, and economic problems on the reservations. Importantly, it called for the end of the government's

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attempts to assimilate Native Americans through the forced education of boarding schools. In 1944, the National Congress of American Indians was formed as the first national organization to monitor federal policies as they affect Native Americans. This increase in attention over the half-century to the plight of America's indigenous peoples, and the work of the organizations that came out of it, could not completely halt the gradual loss of tribal traditions and heritage. Much of the Native American writing from the period covered by this volume focused on acts of recovery, recording those traditions before some of them were completely lost.

Greater economic and social independence allowed the range and marketing of writing by women to make its increasing contribution. The first Married Women's Property Act had been passed by New York State in 1848, but it took until 1900 for every state to pass its version of a law that gave women economic independence (although married women could not open bank accounts without their husbands' permission until the 1960s). The Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote, although Native American women had to wait until receiving citizenship in 1924. The first woman elected to the House of Representatives, Jeannette Rankin, had been elected in 1916 in Montana, which had allowed women's suffrage earlier. The first woman elected to the Senate was Hattie Wyatt Caraway in 1932, from Arkansas, and the first woman governor elected was Nellie Taylor Ross in 1925 in Wyoming. Such political and economic advances were foreshadowed in the literary history covered in this volume by such figures as Willa Cather. Hired as managing editor of the popular *McClure's*, she was successful in the then almost exclusively male world of magazine publishing. Two of the most important pioneer little magazines that published modernist writing were founded and edited by women, *Poetry* and *The Little Review*. Thanks to the former, U.S. subscribers could read the poetry of the imagist poets writing in London, and thanks to the latter the first publication anywhere of Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole," as well as the chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses* as they were sent over from Paris. In Paris itself, American writers and artists could find companionship and ideas at the salon run by Gertrude Stein at 27 rue de Fleures, or at Sylvia Beach's bookstore Shakespeare and Company at 12 rue de l'Odéon. *The Little Review* was itself peripatetic, being based in Chicago, New York, and, finally, joining the expatriates in Paris.

Thanks to these and other upstart little magazines, American writers interested in new work no longer suffered the geographical

disadvantage of separation on a vast continent. In a European country, the literary avant-garde, publishers and interested readers would largely be centered in one major metropolis. Ezra Pound, for example, knew that if he went to London, he could meet Yeats and Ford Madox Ford. T. S. Eliot knew where to find Pound and H. D. Now in the United States, thanks to cheaper costs of paper and printing in the new century, magazines publishing contemporary writing such as *Poetry* and *The Little Review* could include material sent from London, Paris, or Berlin to subscribers anywhere in the United States. No longer was the aspiring American writer's knowledge of literary history confined to the English tradition taught in schools and colleges (although a few colleges and universities had started offering courses in American literature by the 1880s). The efficacy of the "little magazines" would be demonstrated again in the 1920s when expatriate journals provided publishing opportunities for United States and European-based American writers alike, and again in the 1930s, when literary magazines with more political agendas came to the fore.

So by 1920, a hundred years after Washington Irving became the first American writer to gain an international reputation with his *The Sketch Book*, American literature had achieved global recognition. American writers (if one allows St. Louis-born T. S. Eliot into the category) won five Nobel Prizes for literature between 1930 and 1949. The asterisk necessary for Eliot highlights another development, the increasingly difficult distinction to make in some cases between American literature and literature in English. The famous decade of the American expatriates in the 1920s produced fiction and poetry that had Americans and Europeans mixing together in ways more complex than the naïve or vulnerable wealthy Americans wandering the continent in the early novels of Henry James. Eliot became a British citizen in 1927, while W. H. Auden, the foremost English poet of the 1930s, became a U.S. citizen in 1946. Hilda Doolittle lived most of her life in Europe, and her one-time fiancé Ezra Pound was only returned to the United States under guard. Three of the half-century's most important black writers, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes, elected to continue their careers in exile, and earlier in the century, Jamaican-born Claude McKay, U.S. citizen in 1940, did the same. Russian-born Vladimir Nabokov, U.S. citizen in 1945, moved back to Europe following the enormous success of his novel *Lolita*. These examples of the international context of American literature continued and increased by the end of the century with the rise of Hispanic, Caribbean, and Asian American voices in American writing.

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As a counter to the internationalist pull of the century's first decades were the arguments made for an independent American literature. Such arguments had been made ever since political independence, of course, perhaps most famously by Ralph Waldo Emerson in "The American Scholar" (1837). But the years after the First World War seemed to offer genuine promise of such a birth, a need made all the more urgent it appeared by the number of writers and artists preferring to be based in Europe. Van Wyck Brooks' *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), called for American writers to overcome what he saw as the hindrances of the Puritan tradition; Waldo Frank's more mystical perspective in *Our America* (1919) called for the unity of vision and purpose that he saw presaged in the poetry of Whitman; in *Port of New York* (1924), Paul Rosenfeld identified "the works of fourteen men and women [who] at different times, gave me the happy sense of a new spirit dawning in American life" (2). His list included Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams. Randolph Bourne, another of Rosenfeld's fourteen, in his prescient 1916 essay "Trans-national America" saw America's different ethnic traditions as a strength upon which its politics and culture could grow; and the English D. H. Lawrence sought in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), the defining features of American literature among its nineteenth-century writers. Twenty years later, Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942) took as its starting point for a discussion of modern American literature William Dean Howells' move from Boston to New York City in 1891, and the characteristic condition of the modern American prose writer as isolated and alienated from self, place, and other.

In the new century, Americans in general were great readers of magazines, journals, and newspapers as they had been in the previous one. Alexis De Tocqueville had noticed the high literacy rate in the United States among the free population when he visited in 1831. A successful writer could make a reasonable living writing short stories in between publishing novels or even without publishing novels (although not with the rates paid by such modernist journals as *The Little Review*). William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry, never published a novel but lived well in New York City in the century's first decade when his stories were in demand from *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's*, *McClure's*, *Munsey's*, and the *New York World*. By the end of the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald was being paid up to \$4000 for his stories by the *Saturday Evening Post*, with circulation of over three million; Edith Wharton received \$3000 from *Liberty Magazine* in 1934 for "Roman

Fever” at the height of the Depression. The rise of television in the 1950s, as well as signalling the end of the Hollywood studio system, led to declining numbers of large-circulation, well-paying magazines. On the other hand, when Simon and Schuster introduced paperback Pocket Books in 1939, the success, soon followed by many other publishers, greatly increased the number of readers an author might expect to reach.

The example of *The Little Review* also illustrates the issue of censorship through the first half of the century. The magazine had run into censorship problems with Wyndham Lewis’s story “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” in October 1917 before publishing twenty-three episodes from *Ulysses* between March 1918 and December 1920. In the February 1921 trial for obscenity, the magazine was ordered to halt the serialization of Joyce’s novel, and its two editors were each fined fifty dollars. The legal issues halted a planned publication of the novel in the United States. Published in Paris in 1922, copies of this and an English edition that were sent to the United States were seized by U.S. customs. The publication ban was finally lifted on December 6, 1933, the same week that Prohibition was repealed. In another example, Theodore Dreiser’s *The Genius* (1915) was threatened with suppression and more than 500 writers signed an Author’s League petition in support of the novel, including Robert Frost, Willa Cather, and Sinclair Lewis. Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* published in France in 1934 would not appear in the United States until 1961. A measure of the change in climate was the relatively little trouble publisher Putnam had in putting out Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* in 1955. Meanwhile, Hollywood censorship, from the days of the 1930 Hays Code, had been largely self-imposed to avoid federal regulation, but it too began to be challenged in the 1950s.

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This book is a contribution to the Wiley-Blackwell *History of American Literature* series initiated by Emma Bennett. Focused on the first half of the twentieth century, it precedes the volume covering “1950 to the Present” by Linda Wagner-Martin published in 2013. Like Professor Wagner-Martin’s volume, it adopts the concept of an “elastic” chronology, a concept that, while recognizing the important role of shifting social and economic circumstances in shaping writers’ interests, activities, and reception, also allows for the notice of such recurring thematic issues—and literary careers—as call for a broader discussion of context.

# American Literature in 1900

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Many of the prevailing ideas about literature in the late nineteenth century spilled over into the early twentieth century. Some major literary figures continued to write and publish: William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Henry James among them. All three expressed misgivings about what the new century would bring and were joined in their unease by Henry Adams in the early years of the 1900s. All four writers were members of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters by 1905. Yet its prevailing conservatism can be seen in the rather unadventurous election in 1908 of the Academy's first woman member, Julia Ward Howe, in her eighties, author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Edith Wharton was nominated at the same time but had to wait until 1930 to be elected, while election of the first black member, W. E. B. Du Bois, did not happen until 1944.

But things were changing. In prose fiction, realism and naturalism were the two prominent literary movements at the turn of the century, reflecting a shift away from the more sentimental and moralist writing of previous decades. Although Huckleberry Finn was enamored of Emmeline Grangerford's verse in Mark Twain's famous 1885 novel, Huck's creator saw it as fit only for satire. Realism resulted from a determination to write about the lives and conditions of ordinary people, not only those of the upper class around whom a novel of manners might be shaped, and also to write about the settings in which those

lives were lived—in the cities to which so many Americans were moving. The anonymity and vulnerability of those lives, especially for women, were captured by Stephen Crane in his *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Naturalism often kept the urban setting in describing the inexorable forces, the scientific determinism, that made for a predictable end, unless a character has the kind of ruthless instinct for self-preservation of Caroline Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) or the luck of Sam Lewiston in Frank Norris' "A Deal in Wheat" (1902). Naturalism reflected the ideas of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in the philosophical foundation of its narratives, whether they took place in nature, as in some of Jack London's most famous stories, or the city, as with Dreiser's controversial novel. Another important development in the end-of-the-century novel, psychological realism, concerned itself more with the thoughts, reflections, and rationalizations of its central characters, and often, but not always, ran counter to the determinist ideas that minimized free will. Here some of the assumptions behind character in the early and mid-nineteenth century, assumptions that allowed broad generalizations about human behavior received more careful analysis, especially in relation to social convention. One of the greatest American exponents, Henry James, was still writing at the turn of the century, while another, Edith Wharton, was just beginning her literary career. The inner psychological explorations of Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner were not far away.

Most American poetry at the turn of the century was still mired in the verse of late Romantic regret. The industrial world, such poets lamented, was no place for poetry, and lyric after lyric would sing of the loss or dream of an escape. However, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost were writing poems that utilized psychological and narrative complexity learned from the novelists. Their work questioned romantic optimism while exploring the power, and danger, of its continuing appeal. A few years hence the major revolution in American poetry would begin with some Americans in London. That revolution would help shift America's literary center away from Boston to New York, Chicago, and other cities to the South and West.

Black writing in 1900 was still constrained by white publishers' sense of what white readers wanted to read from black authors, although some independent black publication venues began to appear. Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar were the most prominent black writers at the turn of the century. But the Harlem Renaissance was still

two decades away, and a Native American renaissance even further in the future. American drama was hobbled from early on by Puritan distrust of the theater. The commercialism that Van Wyck Brooks in his *Wine of the Puritans* (1908) identified as a major barrier to the appreciation of the arts in America was particularly true of American theater, where theater chain monopolies ensured a diet of formulaic melodramas and European imports well into the new century.

### Prose and Fiction: Taking on the New Century

The end of the century suggested images of a “corpse” and a “crypt” to English writer Thomas Hardy in his poem “The Darkling Thrush.” The anxiety in Hardy’s poem about the alienation of humankind from nature and the disappearance of religious faith is captured by Henry Adams’ reflections on the new century in suitably American terms of technology and faith.

Adams (1838–1918) came from a patrician Boston family that included two Presidents of the United States, a President of Harvard, and a prominent diplomat. Before the turn of the century, he had been a firsthand observer of the central figures in both English and American politics, had worked as a freelance journalist, written an important multi-volume work on the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, published two novels, served as a professor of medieval history at Harvard, and edited the influential *North American Review*. But his major achievements came in the twentieth century with his *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (privately printed in 1904, published in 1913) and his autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams* (privately printed in 1907 and published in 1918). In the preface to the latter, written by Adams but published under the name of his friend Henry Cabot Lodge, he refers to the earlier book as “A Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity” and the later as “A Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity.” Adams presents himself in the *Education* as a man with an eighteenth-century sensibility and a nineteenth-century Harvard education, both of which, along with his work as a historian, have failed to prepare him for the twentieth century, an inadequacy brought home to him by his visits to the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and the World’s Fair held in Paris in 1900. Man, for Adams in his *Education*, “had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to

his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale” (Adams 1068). Comparing the forces of faith that produced monuments such as Chartres Cathedral with the energy produced by the dynamos in the Paris Exposition’s Gallery of Machines, Adams observes that not only have the new century’s scientific advances completely broken with earlier continuities, and with the assumed sequences of cause and effect that govern historical narratives, but also that there are consequences for twentieth-century art: instead of the power that produced the great cathedrals, the artists “felt a railway train as power; yet they, and all other artists, constantly complained that the power embodied in a railway train could never be embodied in art. All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres” (Adams 1074). Yet within a few years of Adams’ regret, William Carlos Williams wrote his celebratory poem “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,” and Robert J. Coady published photographs of steam trains as American art in his little magazine *The Soil* (1916–1917).

Mark Twain (1835–1910), the first important American writer born West of the Mississippi, was by 1900 in great demand as a lecturer and an after-dinner speaker. He was probably the best-known American author in the world at the turn of the century. Twain’s America is always multi-layered, balancing humor with a vision sometimes uncompromisingly bleak. For example, the view of slavery and its aftermath is a complex one in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1893), while the bloodbath that ends *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) foretells mutual self-destruction as the inevitable outcome of bigger and better machines for warfare. And his view of humankind and human history became even darker in the last years of his life, as illustrated in his unfinished, posthumously published *44, The Mysterious Stranger* (1916, 1969). Set in a medieval Austrian village in 1490 at the dawn of printing and just before Columbus’ voyage to America, the Huckleberry Finn-like apprentice printer August Feldner is shown glimpses of the future by the mysterious, miracle-performing intruder named 44. The novel’s final vision is of the individual’s unredeemed isolation: “there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell . . . Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought*—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!” (*Stranger* 187). Within the novel’s inventive, unpredictable series of adventures lie Twain’s late conclusions on the power of the subconscious and the role

of the imagination as well as his radical questioning of whether the human condition had benefited from five centuries of print and everything that had followed from Columbus' celebrated voyage. The list of writers who went on to learn from Twain's legacy of trenchant humor and self-revealing loquacious narrators is a distinguished one, among them Sherwood Anderson in some of his best stories, Will Rogers, Ring Lardner, Dorothy Parker, and James Thurber.

A truism of literary criticism is that Twain and Henry James (1843–1916) had little regard for each other's work, and certainly there is a major difference in their approach to writing. Twain's work on *Huckleberry Finn* stopped for three years after the chapter following Huck and Jim's raft being capsized by the steamboat, apparently for the author to consider where the narrative was to go next. Henry James, on the other hand, as his *Notebooks* reveal, generally had the narratives of his stories and novels carefully planned out, their central ideas carefully articulated, before beginning composition. James' literary roots lay in the novel of manners, while Twain's were closer to the Frontier tall-tale. The working classes are usually ciphers in James' fiction, while the social elite are invariably satirized in Twain. And yet both were interested, in their different ways, in the contrasts between European and American culture, and Twain's title *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) could equally apply to a number of Henry James' New World characters encountering European sophistication and its dangers, especially in his earlier novels.

James, the younger brother of distinguished philosopher William James, had by 1900 been publishing novels, stories, and travel writing for thirty years. He had tried, and failed, to establish a successful career as a dramatist, and since 1876 had lived in England becoming a citizen in 1915, with Prime Minister Herbert Asquith as one of his sponsors. In the first years of the century, James published three major late novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), in which his subtle, nuanced prose took on even greater complexity as he continued to explore the tension between convention and feeling, between what a character said or expressed physically and what that character actually thought. In these novels, he takes analysis of psychological and social nuances to new levels.

In some ways, the schemes of Kate Croy and Merton Densher to use the dying American Milly Theale's fortune for their own ends in *The Wings of the Dove* parallel the schemes of *Portrait of a Lady's* Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond in their manipulation of Isabel Archer. But

the complexities of class, money, morality, and sexual desire are much greater in the later novel, more fully explored by the omniscient Jamesian narrator moving in and out of the consciousness of the central characters. Isabel Archer finally understands and accepts the consequences of the trap forced on her, with some degree of choice, but Kate Croy's attempt to stage-manage events only results in everybody suffering and nobody getting what they wanted. The bitter Lord Mark is the direct source of her plans unravelling, but the unpredictability of human passion and the limited power of material wealth are the forces that really govern events.

Just as Kate Croy discovers a world more unpredictable than her plans accounted for, Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* finds that his apparently straightforward mission to bring Chad Newsome back from Paris to the safety of Woollett becomes increasingly complex as he slowly learns more about the motives, desires, and secrets behind the relationships he uncovers. In this novel about many potential marriages, nobody actually gets married. Strether's gradual recognitions unravel through an objective narration strictly anchored in his point of view, a formal device that James had experimented with in his novel *What Masie Knew* published six years earlier and which arguably points the way to the stream-of-consciousness narratives in modernist writing. James was always interested in the ways in which reality is transformed by art (his well-known story "The Real Thing" [1892] explores the theme explicitly). But in a key moment of Strether's growing understanding, he experiences reality transforming art. As he enjoys an afternoon in the country, imagining himself in a painting by rural scene painter Émile Lambinet, Chad and Madame de Vionnet row into his vision, an encounter that reveals the true nature of their relationship and leaves Strether "supposing innumerable and wonderful things" (*Library of America, Novels 1903–1911*, 389).

In the last of James' trio of late masterpieces, *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie Verver is the character who must learn of deeper human mysteries than she had realized, but she succeeds with this knowledge where Kate Croy did not, sending the rival to her marriage back to the United States through a series of quiet, careful maneuvers. Thus, she finds "the golden fruit" of a new emotional intimacy with her husband, replacing the cracked golden bowl that had revealed the threatening earlier secrets: "she stood in the cool twilight and took in all about her where it lurked her reason for what she had done. She knew at last really why—and how she had been inspired and guided, how she

had been persistently able, how to her soul all the while it had been for the sake of this end" (*Library of America* 981).

James completed one more novel, the relatively slight *The Outcry*, revolves around wealthy Americans buying up English art treasures, but the main occupation of his last years was preparing, rewriting, and introducing the twenty-four-volume New York Edition of his works. In the Prefaces he describes his initial conception of the narratives and is quite ready to condemn what he concludes are mistakes—he argues, for example, that the impecunious French aristocrats from *The American* (1877) would have accepted, not rejected, suitor Christopher Newman's money despite its manufacturing origins.

James' death in 1916 came at a time when two younger expatriate Americans in London were changing the course of poetry in English. Both Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot thought James was in danger of neglect and saw James' achievement, together with the seriousness with which he took his craft, as important to their modernist cause and its refusal to make concessions to popular taste. Eliot, writing in *The Egoist* in January 1918, asserted, "there will always be a few intelligent people to understand James, and to be understood by a few intelligent people is all the influence a man requires." James was the touchstone by which Eliot wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925 praising *The Great Gatsby* as "the first step American fiction has taken since Henry James" (*Eliot Letters* 813). Pound, who wrote forty of the sixty-four pages in *The Little Review's* August 1918 issue dedicated to James, terms the novelist "the greatest writer of our time and of our own particular language" (*Literary Essays* 331). Pound and James met a few times casually, a memory that makes its way into Pound's *Canto VII* in 1921.

Although by 1900 William Dean Howells (1837–1920) had already published his major novels: *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), he continued to hold an important position as a critic in his columns for *Harper's Monthly* and the *North American Review*. Across his career and for a large readership, Howells published essays on such writers as Twain, Zola, Tolstoy, Hawthorne, Ibsen, Longfellow, Hardy, and James as well as on the minority writers Charles W. Chesnutt and Abraham Cahan. He introduced readers to some of the major European authors and was the first major critic to recognize the importance of Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Frost. A measure of his stature is that he served as the first President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, being elected in 1908.

Howells had published both Twain and James in his role as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and in his earlier essays like them he made the case for realism to replace the conventions of Romance, insisting: “The novel I take to be the sincere and conscientious endeavor to picture life just as it is, to deal with character as we witness it in living people, and to record the incidents that grow out of character” (Howells, *Selected Literary Criticism* 218). But in his later critical essays, as Ronald Gottesman points out, Howells had an “ambivalent response to the developments in realism, which opened up not only fresh subjects and styles, but fundamentally new ethical and social conceptions that would be reflected in both the darkening views of human existence and the indeterminateness of form that are at the root of modernism” (Gottesman xix). Even though his essays continued to recognize important new voices, Howells’ ambivalence about the new subject matter in fiction made him a convenient figure to mock for writers who saw themselves moving beyond such restrictions. “Respectable as a church and proper as a deacon” is how Frank Norris (1870–1902) described Howells’ novels in his “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901), which argues the superficiality of realism (*Lib of America* 1166). Even thirty years later, for Sinclair Lewis in his 1930 Nobel Prize Speech, Howells was still the epitome of genteel literature against whom to rebel:

Mr. Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men, but he had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage. He abhorred not only profanity and obscenity but all of what H. G. Wells has called “the jolly coarsenesses of life.” In his fantastic vision of life, which he innocently conceived to be realistic, farmers and seamen and factory hands might exist, but the farmer must never be covered with muck, the seaman must never roll out bawdy chanteys, the factory hand must be thankful to his good kind employer, and all of them must long for the opportunity to visit Florence and smile gently at the quaintness of the beggars (Frenz 287).

Lewis returns in his speech for another complaint about Howells in discussing Hamlin Garland (1860–1940). For Lewis, Garland “under Howells’ influence was changed from a harsh and magnificent realist into a genial and insignificant lecturer . . . he is [now] alarmed by all of the younger writers who are so lacking in taste as to suggest that men and women do not always love in accordance with the prayer-book,

and that common people sometimes use language which would be inappropriate at a women's literary club on Main Street. Yet this same Hamlin Garland, as a young man, before he had gone to Boston and become cultured and Howellsised, wrote two most valiant and revelatory works of realism, *Main-Traveled Roads* and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolie*" (Frenz 287).

In a broad review of Garland's work in 1912, Howells does express preference for the later books. These emphasize Romantic individualism rather than the oppressive conditions of Western farm life that are the subject of the earlier *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) for which, along with the autobiographical *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), Garland is most remembered today. In his early fiction, Garland was interested in the economic and land reforms demanded by Western farmers, and in the most famous of the six stories making up the 1891 volume, "Under the Lion's Paw," a poor farmer with exhausting labor improves the farm on which he is a tenant, only to have the price of the farm that he improved, and hoped to buy, raised by the landlord because of the improvements. Between 1896 and 1916, Garland moved away from such controversial subjects and began a series of romantic adventure stories set in the far West, before undertaking the autobiographies of his later years.

*A Son of the Middle Border* covers Garland's life from 1865 to 1893, from his family's hard pioneering life in the mid-West to his becoming an established literary figure: "Going east had proved more profitable than going West!" (quoted in McCullough 111). His accounts of farm life, as Joseph McCullough has shown, reflect the strains of realism and romantic sentiment that his writing often struggles to integrate. On the one hand, Garland writes "most authors in writing of the 'merry, merry farmer' . . . omit the mud and the dust and the grime, they forget the armyworm, the flies, the heat, as well as the smells and drudgery of the barns." And yet shortly after this observation, he extolls the beauties of summer: "The flash and ripple and glimmer of the tall sunflowers, the myriad voices of gleeful bobolinks, the chirp and gurgle of red-winged blackbirds swaying on the willows, the meadowlarks piping from grassy bogs . . ." (quoted in McCullough 110). Howells, reviewing the autobiography, began "I should rank it with the very greatest of that kind in literature" (Garland, *Reception* 64), while H. L. Mencken, foreshadowing Lewis in regretting that Garland "fell under the spell of the Boston *aluminados* of 1885," finds it "a thoroughly third-rate piece of writing—amateurish, flat, banal, repellent" (Garland, *Reception* 74).

Of some interest are Garland's stories of Native American life. Traveling through the West in 1897, Garland lived on several Native American reservations, and in consequence, his stories in *The Book of the American Indian* (1923) move beyond many of the stereotypes of the time to show sympathy for a culture trying to adapt to an alien modern world. The stories, which had first appeared in periodicals twenty years earlier, show little sympathy for insensitive attempts to integrate Native Americans, attempts that showed little awareness of their way of life. However, unlike the preservationist focus of most Native American writers of the time or the more sensitive approach of 1920s writers like Mary Austin and Oliver La Farge, he was convinced of their eventual need to adapt.

Writing in 1900, Howells had only praise for the short stories of Charles Chesnutt (1858–1932), who went on to become the first important black American novelist (although seven-eighths white, Chesnutt identified as African American). His well-regarded short fiction began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the late 1880s—where Howells' review also appeared—and they were successfully collected as *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, both in 1899. But whereas Garland's Western romances had taken his fiction away from his earlier radical interests, Chesnutt's next three novels took the opposite direction, exploring controversial topics central to the black experience.

*The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) was the first African American novel published by a major American press when put out by Houghton, Mifflin. In a sometimes rather contrived narrative, but one that complicated genre stereotypes, mixed-race siblings Rena and John Walden pass successfully in the white world of the Carolinas until Rena's aristocratic fiancé rejects her when he discovers her black heritage—to his later regret. The novel is original in its approval of the siblings' act of passing and of their reasons for doing so and condemns racial barriers for the pain that they cause both blacks and whites. Chesnutt's purposeful foregrounding of passing and treatment of miscegenation inevitably caused controversy and hurt the book's financial success.

*The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) is based directly on a historical event, the 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina, riots in which a 2000 strong white supremacist mob overthrew an elected Populist and Republican government, in the process destroying the property and businesses of black citizens and killing an estimated twenty African

Americans. One of Chesnutt's intentions was to refute the sensationalized and celebratory versions of the incident that had appeared in the white press.

He tells the story of the coup through a series of interwoven subplots, summarized in an essay he published in the *Cleveland World*, the year of the novel's publication, "There is a crime, followed by a threatened lynching. There is an episode of injury and revenge, another of wrong and forgiveness . . . . There is a love story with a happy ending." Soon after the event, prominent black citizens were forcibly exiled, and North Carolina began passing a series of Jim Crow laws that for decades to come restricted black voting and black participation in local government, but Chesnutt remained an optimist. Although the novel, he wrote in the same essay, "involves . . . the course and the underlying motives of the recent and temporarily successful movement for the disfranchisement of the colored race in the South . . . . it is the writer's belief that the forces of progress will in the end prevail" (*Library of America*, Chesnutt 873). Nevertheless, in his next novel, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), the efforts of Colonel Henry French to reform the racist and corrupt southern town of Clarendon, North Carolina, meet with no success.

Following the poor sales of *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt published no further novels in his lifetime (two posthumously published novels appeared in 1999: *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.*, completed in 1921, and *The Quarry*, completed in 1928; the former set in early nineteenth-century New Orleans, and the latter in the Harlem Renaissance). Chesnutt relied for a livelihood on his successful stenography business in Cleveland, while publishing the occasional short story, and continuing his activism on racial issues. He was still a presence in the Harlem Renaissance, where Carl Van Vechten in the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) praised his work, although calling him "an author strangely unfamiliar to most of the new generation" (176) and the NAACP awarded Chesnutt its Spingarn Medal in 1928 "for his pioneer work as a literary artist, depicting the life and struggle of Americans of Negro descent."

Frank Norris (1870–1902), who published seven novels in his short career, most importantly *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903), argued against the kind of realism advocated by Howells. In his famous essay "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901) after insisting that "Romance" is not "cloaks and daggers, or moonlight and golden hair," (*Lib of America* 1165), but that "Romance . . . is

sitting among the rags and wretchedness, the dirt and despair of the tenements of New York (1168), Norris goes on to characterize realism as “minute, it is the drama of a broken teacup . . . the adventure of an invitation to dinner” (1166). Not surprisingly, Howells, while generally praising *McTeague*, criticized its view of reality: “His true picture of life is not true because it leaves beauty out. Life is squalid and cruel and vile and hateful, but it is noble and tender and pure and lovely, too. By and by he will put these traits in, and then his powerful scene will be a reflection of reality.” Howells warns “Polite readers of the sort who do not like to meet in fiction people of the sort they never meet in society will not have a good time in *McTeague*,” adding: “there is really not a society person in the book” (*Selected Literary Criticism* 12–13).

Howell’s comments could equally apply to all three of Norris’ late novels. The narratives either depict the impact that heredity, environment, and large industrial and economic forces have on individual lives, lives that can see those forces only as oppressive, anonymous powers impossible to control, or they describe the brutal, selfish, actions of those at the top who try to manipulate those forces. *McTeague* leaves its once successful hero handcuffed to a dead body in Death Valley, *The Octopus* depicts a predatory railroad trust battling the ranchers who farm its land, while at the center of *The Pit* is Curtis Jadwin’s attempt to corner the whole American wheat market and his wife Laura’s eventually chastened Romantic idealism.

Norris’ method in these narratives is Naturalism, a literary technique associated with the French novelist Émile Zola, the subject of Norris’ 1896 essay “Zola as a Romantic Writer.” As Donald Pizer has pointed out, Norris’ interest is not so much in “the philosophical orientation . . . of Zola’s discussions of naturalism,” which emphasize material determinism and lack of free will, as in “some fundamental truth of life within a detailed presentation of the sensational and low” (Pizer 410). Norris wants to expand the subject matter of James’ and Howells’ realism, taking it beyond the minutiae of manners, of people who know the rights and wrongs of how to hold a teacup. His naturalism blends the accumulated detail of realism with the broad sweep of romance, exposing the powerful forces in nature and human nature rarely if ever foregrounded in the novel of manners.

Norris, generally considered the first major American naturalist writer, had a hand in starting the literary career of his successor, Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), when as a reader at Doubleday, Page

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and Company, he recommended publication of *Sister Carrie* (1900). Dreiser (1871–1945) began as a newspaper reporter in Chicago, later working in Pittsburgh and New York City. Dreiser used his experience as a journalist in telling the story of Carrie Meeber's rise to Broadway stardom as her lover George Hurstwood falls from his social position and drifts into his eventual suicide. Dreiser had earlier written of strikes, urban homelessness, and the theater, and all find their way into the novel. Like the heroine of Dreiser's later *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), Carrie goes unpunished while the sexual relationships that bring her increasing material success challenged the period's conventions of morality. Senior member of the publishing house, Frank N. Doubleday, was one of the offended, and despite Norris' enthusiasm, after trying to get out of the contract made sure that a minimum number of copies were printed and that publicity was minimal. As a result, only 456 copies were sold. Dreiser purchased the plates himself and arranged for a successful reissue in 1907.

Within this narrative of seduction, theft, adultery, and bigamy, the narrator offers an unusual degree of commentary on the forces at play in Hurstwood and Carrie's different trajectories. This almost continuous commentary, which has drawn mixed reactions from readers and critics, reflects Dreiser's general interest in Social Darwinism and particularly the ideas of Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer. An oft-cited example occurs when Carrie leaves her sister and husband to move in with her first lover, Drouet, a point at which Carrie "was as yet more drawn than she drew." The narrator opens the chapter with: "Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct . . . [but] not yet wholly guided by reason . . . . He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve with the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other." For Dreiser, man will eventually reach "a perfect understanding," and "we have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail" (*Library of America* 70). This detached narrative voice, together with such chapter titles as "The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces" and "The Lure of the Material" suggest the language of scientific process, even though chance is also an important factor as events unfold.

The narrator's many philosophical comments might have doomed the novel to becoming a record of the psychological musings from a

bygone age, but the very human drama of Carrie and Hurstwood's contrasting fates, their richly drawn characters, together with such authentic urban detail supplied by Dreiser's journalism experience in the accounts of Hurstwood's saloon, the shoe factory, and the new department stores, keep the narrative firmly at the center of the novel. Hurstwood is doomed by a combination of economic and social forces and by his despair, but Carrie, despite her success, does not achieve her "ideal," represented in the novel by the values of the inventor Robert Ames. She is herself doomed, as the narrator directly tells her, to be caught between opposing forces, "for you is neither surfeit nor content . . . in your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (455).

Dreiser's next novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) also ran into trouble with his publishers, this time Harper & Brothers, who agreed to publish only after censoring the criticism of organized religion and wealthy social elites, and toning down much of the book's discussion of sexuality. (The 1992 Pennsylvania Dreiser Edition of the novel prints the version that Dreiser originally submitted to Harper's.) As published in 1911, the novel centers on the story of Lester Kane, a wealthy Cleveland businessman, who is forced by the provisions of his father's will to give up his out-of-wedlock relationship with Jennie and her child from an earlier relationship with the late Senator Brander. His subsequent marriage to a woman of his own class brings him no happiness. Jennie is by his bedside at his death, but she must watch his funeral from "a seat in an inconspicuous corner . . . so much a part of this solemn ritual, and yet infinitely removed from it all" (818–819).

A career-long interest in the dynamics of power is behind Dreiser's trilogy based on the life of Chicago financier and transportation baron Charles T. Yerkes, named Frank Cowperwood in the novels: *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and the posthumously published *The Stoic* (1947). Despite financial defeats in Chicago and London, and most of his wealth disappearing after his death, Cowperwood, unlike most Dreiser characters, uses his power to maintain control of his environment. In his pursuit of young women and his interest in art, Cowperwood, like Yerkes himself, distains Victorian values, and for all his monopolistic motives, his philanthropy and transportation schemes benefit the cities in which he operates.

The third volume of the Cowperwood trilogy was initially delayed by Dreiser's interest in publishing the semi-autobiographical *The Genius* (1915), the controversial reception of which, because of its