

# American Literature and Culture 1900–1960

Gail McDonald





American Literature and Culture  
1900–1960

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# Timeline

## *Historical events*

- 1900** McKinley elected to second term as President  
Hurricane kills 6,000–7,000 in Galveston, Texas
- 1901** President McKinley assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president  
J. P. Morgan founds US Steel Corporation  
First wireless communication between US and England  
Socialist Party of America formed
- 1902** United Mine Workers' strike
- 1903** Henry Ford founds Ford Motor Company  
Wright brothers fly motorized plane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

## *Cultural events (discussed in the text)*

- Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*  
Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Age*  
American Arts and Crafts movement continues from 1890s  
Frank Lloyd Wright establishes architecture studio in Oak Park, Illinois  
Washington, *Up From Slavery*
- James, *The Wings of the Dove*  
*Camera Work* begins publication (Stieglitz)  
Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*  
James, *The Ambassadors*

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
New York City opens subway	11-minute narrative film, <i>The Great Train Robbery</i> , shown in theaters
US Departments of Commerce and Labor created	
<b>1904</b> Work begins on Panama Canal (completed 1914)	James, <i>The Golden Bowl</i> Tarbell, <i>The History of the Standard Oil Company</i> (published 1902 in McClure's magazine) Weber, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>
<b>1905</b> Industrial Workers of the World organized in Chicago, Illinois	Hall, <i>Adolescence</i> Wharton, <i>The House of Mirth</i>
Stieglitz opens 291 Gallery, New York City	
<b>1906</b> Catastrophic earthquake and fire in San Francisco, California	Gilman, <i>Women and Economics</i> Sinclair, <i>The Jungle</i>
Pure Food and Drug Act passed	
Roosevelt first uses term "muckraker" to describe work of investigative journalists	
<b>1907</b> Oklahoma admitted to Union	Adams, <i>The Education of Henry Adams</i> (privately printed)
J. P. Morgan averts financial panic with his own \$100 million in gold	James, <i>The American Scene</i> New York Edition of Henry James (1907–9) First staging of the Ziegfeld Follies in New York City
<b>1908</b> Taft succeeds Roosevelt	Zangwill, <i>The Melting Pot</i> Ash Can school of painters exhibit Singer Building in New York City first US "skyscraper"

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p><b>1909</b> Founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)</p> <p>First White House Conference on Children</p>	<p>W.C. Handy writes down the "Memphis Blues"</p> <p>Wright's "Robie" house</p>
<p><b>1910</b> Boy Scouts of America founded</p> <p>Mann Act prohibits transportation of women across state lines "for immoral purposes"</p> <p>First Ford Model T produced</p>	<p>Addams, <i>Twenty Years at Hull-House</i></p>
<p><b>1911</b> Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire</p>	<p><i>The Masses</i> begins publication (until 1917)</p> <p>Taylor, <i>The Principles of Scientific Management</i> (efficiency in the workplace)</p>
<p><b>1912</b> <i>Titanic</i> sinks</p> <p>Progressive Party established</p> <p>New Mexico and Arizona admitted to Union</p> <p>Wilson elected President</p> <p>Department of Labor and Federal Reserve Bank established</p>	<p><i>Poetry</i> magazine founded in Chicago, Illinois</p> <p>Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i></p> <p>Pound, <i>Patria Mia</i></p>
<p><b>1913</b> Thomas Edison demonstrates the Kinetophone (for talking motion pictures)</p> <p>Ford begins assembly-line manufacturing</p> <p>16th (income tax) and 17th (popular election of US Senators) Constitutional Amendments</p>	<p>Bourne, <i>Youth and Life</i></p> <p>Pound, "A Few Don'ts by An Imagiste"</p> <p>New York Armory Show introduces American public to modern art</p>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p><b>1914</b> First transcontinental telephone conversation (New York to San Francisco)</p> <p>World War I begins in Europe</p>	<p><i>Vanity Fair</i>, <i>The Little Review</i>, and <i>The New Republic</i> begin publication</p> <p>Brooks, <i>America's Coming-of-Age</i></p> <p>Frost, <i>A Boy's Will</i></p> <p>Sandburg, <i>Chicago</i></p> <p>Painting: Hartley, <i>Portrait of a German Officer</i></p>
<p><b>1915</b> Taxi-cab business begins</p> <p>Iron and steel workers strike</p>	<p>Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"</p> <p>Frost, <i>North of Boston</i></p> <p>Masters, <i>Spoon River Anthology</i></p> <p>Provincetown Players founded</p>
<p><b>1916</b> Wilson re-elected</p> <p>Beginning of Great Migration of African Americans from South to North</p> <p>National Park Service established</p> <p>Margaret Sanger opens birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, New York</p> <p>Eight-hour workday for railroad employees</p>	<p><i>The Seven Arts</i> and <i>The Dial</i> begin publication</p> <p>Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past" and "Young America"</p> <p>Frost, "Out, Out –"</p> <p>H.D., <i>Sea Garden</i></p> <p>Painting: Weber, <i>Chinese Restaurant</i></p>
<p><b>1917</b> US enters World War I</p> <p>Immigration act excludes Asian workers (except Japanese)</p> <p>Pulitzer Prize established</p>	<p><i>Cambridge History of American Literature</i> (4 vols., 1917–21)</p> <p>Millay, <i>Renascence</i></p>
<p><b>1918</b> Global influenza epidemic, kills between 20 and 40 million</p> <p>Armistice signed, ending World War I</p>	<p>Cather, <i>My Ántonia</i></p> <p>Williams, <i>Kora in Hell</i></p>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<b>1919</b> Major race riots in Chicago and Washington, DC	Anderson, <i>Winesburg, Ohio</i>
18th Constitutional Amendment makes sale of alcohol illegal (Prohibition)	Frank, <i>Our America</i>
Treaty of Versailles; formation of League of Nations (rejected by American lawmakers)	
Chicago "White Sox" baseball team accused of gambling in the World Series	
Steel and mine workers strike; Boston police strike	
<b>1920</b> Urban population exceeds rural population	<i>Contact</i> magazine begins publication
Transcontinental airmail available	Eliot, <i>Poems</i> and <i>The Sacred Wood</i>
Prohibition in effect	Fitzgerald, <i>Flappers and Philosophers</i>
19th Constitutional Amendment grants women the right to vote	Lewis, <i>Main Street</i>
"Red Scare" and Palmer raids	Millay, <i>A Few Figs from Thistles</i>
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) founded	Pound, <i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i>
Arrest of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti	Santayana, <i>Character and Opinion in the United States</i>
Harding elected President	Turner, <i>The Frontier in American History</i>
<b>1921</b> First regular radio broadcasts in US	Wharton, <i>The Age of Innocence</i>
Emergency Quota Act strictly limits immigration	Yeziarska, <i>Hungry Hearts</i>
	Painting: Sheeler, <i>Church St. El</i>
	Dos Passos <i>Three Soldiers</i>
	Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> imported to US; all 500 copies burned by US Post Office

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
American Birth Control League organized	Moore, <i>Poems</i> Robinson, <i>Collected Poems</i>
<b>1922</b>	Music: Louis Armstrong with the Creole Jazz Band in Chicago; Blake and Sissle, <i>Shuffle Along</i> (first all-black musical) <i>The Fugitive</i> and <i>The Soil</i> begin publication cummings, <i>The Enormous Room</i> Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i> Fitzgerald, <i>Tales of the Jazz Age</i> Hughes, "Mother to Son" Johnson, <i>The Book of American Negro Poetry</i> Lewis, <i>Babbitt</i> Stearns, <i>Civilization in the United States</i>
<b>1923</b> US Steel institutes eight-hour workday "Teapot Dome" scandal in President Harding's administration. Leasing of Wyoming Naval oil reserves to private companies Harding dies; Coolidge becomes President Members of Osage tribe in Oklahoma targets of violence	<i>Time</i> magazine begins publication Frost, <i>New Hampshire</i> Lawrence, <i>Studies in Classic American Literature</i> Stevens, <i>Harmonium</i> Toomer, <i>Cane</i> Williams, <i>Spring and All</i> , "The Red Wheelbarrow" Music: Bessie Smith's "Downhearted Blues" sells 780,000 copies
<b>1924</b> Daily airmail service between East and West coasts of US Second strict curb on immigration	<i>The American Mercury</i> founded (Mencken and Nathan) Ferber, <i>So Big</i> Hemingway, <i>in our time</i> (published in Paris)

*Historical events*

First women governors  
elected in Wyoming and  
Texas

Coolidge elected President

**1925** “Scopes” trial. Tennessee  
teacher found “guilty” of  
teaching theory of  
evolution

Ku Klux Klan’s march  
on Washington

Land boom in Florida

Standard Oil adopts eight-  
hour workday

**1926** Ford introduces  
eight-hour, five-day  
working week

Transatlantic wireless  
telephone

*Cultural events (discussed in the text)*

Moore, *Observations*

Ransom, “Bells for John  
Whiteside’s Daughter”

Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*

Music: Gershwin, “Rhapsody in  
Blue”

“Little Orphan Annie” comic  
strip debuts

*The New Yorker* magazine founded

Anderson, *Dark Laughter*

Cather, *The Professor’s House*

Cullen, “Incident”

Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*

Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*

Eliot, *Poems 1909–1925*

Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Glasgow, *Barren Ground*

H.D., *Collected Poems*

Hemingway, *In Our Time* (revised  
and enlarged)

Locke, *The New Negro*

Pound, *A Draft of XVI Cantos*

Stein, *The Making of Americans*

Williams, *In the American Grain*

Yeziarska, *The Bread Givers*

Music: Copland, *Music for Theater*;  
Charleston dance craze

Book-of-the-Month Club initiated

*New Masses* magazine begins  
publication

Faulkner, *Soldier’s Pay*

*Historical events*

- 1927** Sacco and Vanzetti executed in Massachusetts
- Charles Lindbergh completes first non-stop, transatlantic flight
- First television transmission, New York to Washington
- Amelia Earhart first woman to complete non-stop transatlantic flight

*Cultural events (discussed in the text)*

- Ferber, *Show Boat*
- Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
- Hughes, *The Weary Blues*
- Ransom, "Janet Waking"
- Music: Copland, *Piano Concerto*;  
Josephine Baker stars in *Le Revue Nègre*
- transition* magazine begins publication
- Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (4 vols., 1927–42)
- Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*
- Cullen, *Caroling Dusk* and *Copper Sun*
- Mourning Dove, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*
- Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"
- Hughes, "Mulatto"
- Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*
- Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*
- Williams, "The Dead Baby"
- Film: Al Jolson sings in *The Jazz Singer*, the first successful "talkie"; Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences founded (first Academy Awards, 1929)
- Music: Antheil, *Ballet mécanique*; musical *Showboat*
- Painting: Hopper *Automat* and *Light at Two Lights*; Sheeler photographs of the Ford Motor Company plant

*Historical events*

- 1928** Hoover elected President  
 Kellogg–Briand treaty  
 outlaws war (US  
 approves, 1929)  
 St. Francis Dam breaks in  
 California, killing over 500
- 1929** Gangster activity given  
 national visibility by  
 Chicago “St. Valentine’s  
 Day Massacre”  
 Stock market crashes; Great  
 Depression begins

*Cultural events (discussed in the text)*

- Frost, *West-Running Brook*,  
 “Acquainted with the Night”  
 Larsen, *Quicksand*  
 Film: Mickey Mouse debuts in  
*Steamboat Willie*
- Cullen, *Black Christ and Other Poems*  
 Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*  
 Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*  
 Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*  
 Larsen, *Passing*  
 Helen and Robert Lynd, *Middletown*  
 – *A Study in Contemporary American*  
*Culture*  
 Founding of the Museum of  
 Modern Art (MOMA)  
*Fortune* magazine begins publication  
 Crane, *The Bridge*  
 Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (first  
 of *USA* trilogy, completed 1936)  
 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*  
 Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*  
 Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My*  
*Stand*  
 US Customs seizes copies of Joyce’s  
*Ulysses*  
 Sinclair Lewis becomes first  
 American to receive Nobel Prize  
 for literature  
 “Golden Age” of radio begins  
 Painting: Sheeler, *American*  
*Landscape*

**1930**

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p><b>1931</b> First Scottsboro trial (nine young African Americans accused of raping two white women)</p> <p>Empire State Building completed in New York City</p>	<p>Buck, <i>The Good Earth</i></p> <p>Rourke, <i>American Humor</i></p> <p>Whitney Museum of American Art opens</p>
<p><b>1932</b> “Bonus Army” (war veterans) march on Washington</p>	<p>Farrell, <i>Studs Lonigan</i> (trilogy completed 1935)</p> <p>Hughes, “Mother to Son”</p>
<p><b>1933</b> Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) elected President</p> <p>New Deal begins promotion of economic recovery</p> <p>21st Constitutional Amendment repeals Prohibition</p>	<p><i>Partisan Review</i> begins publication</p> <p>Cowley, <i>Exile’s Return</i></p> <p>Fitzgerald, <i>Tender Is the Night</i></p> <p>West, <i>The Day of the Locust</i></p> <p>Film: <i>42nd Street; Gold Diggers of 1933</i></p> <p>“L’il Abner” comic strip debuts</p>
<p><b>1934</b> “Dust Bowl”</p> <p>Creation of National Labor Relations Board</p> <p>Major strike by millworkers in the South</p>	<p>Painting: Douglas, <i>Aspects of Negro Life</i> mural; “Machine Art” exhibit at MOMA</p>
<p><b>1935</b> Second phase of New Deal; WPA established</p>	<p>Lewis, <i>It Can’t Happen Here</i></p> <p>Odets, <i>Waiting for Lefty</i></p> <p>Rukeyser, “The Trial”</p> <p><i>Cavalcade of America</i> radio program</p>
<p><b>1936</b> FDR re-elected</p> <p>Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in Berlin Olympics</p> <p>Spanish Civil War begins</p>	<p><i>Life</i> magazine begins publication</p> <p>Faulkner, <i>Absalom! Absalom!</i></p> <p>Frost, <i>A Further Range</i>, “Desert Places,” “Design”</p> <p>Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”</p> <p>Mitchell, <i>Gone With the Wind</i></p>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
	Taggard, "Mill Town"
	Wright completes "Fallingwater"
<b>1937</b> Golden Gate bridge opened	Barnes, <i>Nightwood</i>
<i>Hindenberg</i> explodes	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opens
<b>1938</b>	Brooks and Warren, <i>Understanding Poetry</i>
	Luce, "The American Century"
	Millay, "Say That We Saw Spain Die"
	Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>
	Music: Copland, <i>Billy the Kid</i>
	Radio: Broadcast of <i>War of the Worlds</i> causes national panic; series, <i>Americans All</i>
<b>1939</b> New York World's Fair	Steinbeck, <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
World War II begins	Film: <i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>
<b>1940</b> FDR re-elected	Hemingway, <i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i>
	MacLeish, "The Irresponsibles"
	O'Neill, <i>Long Day's Journey Into Night</i>
	Wright, <i>Native Son</i>
	Film: <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> ; <i>His Girl Friday</i>
	Painting: Lawrence, <i>The Migration of the Negro</i> series (completed 1941); Hopper, <i>Gas and Office at Night</i> ; MOMA adds photography department
<b>1941</b> FDR's "Four Freedoms" speech	Evans and Agee, <i>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</i>
Bombing of Pearl Harbor; US enters World War II	Fitzgerald, <i>The Last Tycoon</i>
	Kazin, <i>On Native Grounds</i>
	Matthiessen, <i>American Renaissance</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
	Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"
	Film: <i>Citizen Kane</i>
<b>1942</b>	Faulkner, <i>Go Down, Moses</i>
	Rourke, <i>The Roots of American Culture</i>
	Film: <i>Sullivan's Travels</i> ; <i>Casablanca</i>
	Music: Copland, <i>Rodeo</i>
	Painting: Hopper, <i>Nighthawks</i>
<b>1944</b> FDR re-elected	Moore, "In Distrust of Merits"
D-Day	Music: Copland, <i>Appalachian Spring</i>
G.I. Bill of Rights passed	
<b>1945</b> Germany surrenders	Brooks, "kitchenette building"
Atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki	Williams, <i>The Glass Menagerie</i>
Japan surrenders	Film: <i>Mildred Pierce</i>
World War II ends	
FDR dies; Truman becomes President	
<b>1946</b> 1946–64 sees "baby boom"	<i>Literary History of the United States</i> completed
	Lowell, <i>Lord Weary's Castle</i>
	McCuller, <i>The Member of the Wedding</i>
	Petry, <i>The Street</i>
	Spock, <i>Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care</i>
	Williams, <i>Paterson</i> (completed 1958)
	Film: <i>The Best Years of Our Lives</i> ; <i>The Big Sleep</i> ; <i>It's A Wonderful Life</i>
<b>1947</b> Freedom Train begins travels across US	Hughes, "Genius Child"
	Williams, <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>

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TIMELINE

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<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<b>1948</b>	Mailer, <i>The Naked and the Dead</i> Pound, <i>The Pisan Cantos</i>
<b>1949</b>	Miller, <i>Death of a Salesman</i>
<b>1950</b> Korean war (ends 1953) "McCarthyism" begins	Riesman, <i>The Lonely Crowd</i> Gwendolyn Brooks first African American woman to receive Pulitzer Prize Abstract Expressionism dominates art scene throughout decade
<b>1951</b>	Jones, <i>From Here to Eternity</i> Lowell, <i>The Mills of the Kavanaughs</i> Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>
<b>1952</b> Eisenhower elected President	Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i>
<b>1953</b> Department of Health, Education, and Welfare established Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency formed	Miller, <i>The Crucible</i> Film: <i>Shane; The Wild One</i>
<b>1954</b> First restaurant in the McDonald's chain Supreme Court rules racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional McCarthy censored by Congress	Cheever, "The Country Husband" Williams, <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i> Film: <i>On the Waterfront</i> Television: <i>Father Knows Best</i>
<b>1955</b> Salk polio vaccine	Auden, "The Shield of Achilles" Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California" and "Howl" Film: <i>Blackboard Jungle; Rebel Without a Cause</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p><b>1956</b> Bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama</p> <p>Khrushchev's remark: "We will bury you!"</p> <p>"In God We Trust" adopted as official motto of US</p>	<p>Whyte, <i>The Organization Man</i></p> <p>Film: <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i>; <i>The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit</i></p> <p>Television: Elvis Presley performs on the Ed Sullivan show</p>
<p><b>1957</b> Launching of Sputnik: space race between US and USSR</p> <p>President Eisenhower authorizes federal troops to impose order during school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas</p> <p>Establishment of the Civil Rights Commission</p>	<p>Chase, <i>The American Novel and its Tradition</i></p> <p>Kerouac, <i>On the Road</i></p> <p>Musicals: Bernstein, <i>West Side Story</i>; Willson, <i>The Music Man</i></p>
<p><b>1958</b> Alaska admitted to Union</p>	<p>Barth, <i>The End of the Road</i></p> <p>Television: <i>77 Sunset Strip</i></p>
<p><b>1959</b> "Kitchen Debate" between Nixon and Khrushchev</p> <p>Hawaii admitted to Union</p>	<p>Lowell, <i>Life Studies</i></p> <p>O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died"</p> <p>Television: <i>Dobie Gillis</i></p>
<p><b>1960</b> Kennedy elected President</p>	<p>Brooks, "We Real Cool"</p> <p>Fiedler, <i>Love and Death in the American Novel</i></p> <p>Lee, <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i></p>
<p><b>1961</b> First manned US space flight</p>	<p>Heller, <i>Catch-22</i></p>
<p><b>1962</b></p>	<p>Salinger, <i>Franny and Zooey</i></p> <p>Harrington, <i>The Other America</i></p> <p>Kesey, <i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i></p> <p>Film: <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i></p>
<p><b>1963</b> Assassination of Kennedy</p>	<p>Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i></p> <p>Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"</p>

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# Introduction

Almost without exception companions and introductions to literature begin with questions of nomenclature. In the present instance, the difficulty of defining terms is inherent to the subject. What is “America”? What is “literature”? And what in the world do we mean by “culture”? Given the contested meaning of every term it undertakes to introduce, the title of this volume must seem an exercise in effrontery. Aware as I am that every example and every sentence in the book say as much about its author’s tastes and predilections as about its titular subject, I make no pretense of comprehensive “coverage.” Rather, the materials discussed and examples employed are ones that have proven useful to my students in understanding what are generally agreed to be some important aspects of twentieth-century American writing and its contexts. Because my objective is to be both clear and suggestive, I focus on a few big ideas about America and, by the marshaling of examples and counter-examples, show that these ideas are, and should be, subject to interpretation, revision, supplementation, and debate.

On the cover of this volume is a painting by Jasper Johns entitled *Target with Four Faces*. So large a “target” as the USA’s literature and culture in the first six decades of the twentieth century cannot be fully explored via four of its “faces” but, then, four hundred faces would not exhaust the topic either. One must begin somewhere. The chapters are based on four significant perceptions of America: that it is big, rich, new, and free. Clearly, all these terms are relative and require further definition, and that is the main business of the book. It is intended for students and general readers who, knowing something about America, its literature, and its culture, are inclined to learn more.

“America,” as it is used in these pages, refers to the United States of America and, as will quickly become clear, also to a set of ideas. I’ve

chosen “America” because of its rich connotations and because crucial ideas in circulation in the first decades of the twentieth century employ that term: for example, the American Way, the American Dream, and the American Century. Whether for its brevity or for its euphony, “America” seems to have been the preferred term among the historians, critics, and cultural commentators writing between 1900 and 1960. I have followed their lead.

“Literature,” also a vexed and loaded term, is here used to refer to poetry, drama, novels, short fiction, and, occasionally, autobiography. Given the voluminous written materials from which to select examples, I have chosen to be literal about “literature” – that is, as defined by “the letter” – referring to written and published materials. Therefore, I do not consider oral traditions. The emphasis is primarily on the category of writing designated as imaginative or creative, what once was called *belles lettres*. Because this book is intended as an introduction to American literature, examples are largely confined to those that may be easily located in standard classroom anthologies and on college and university reading lists. Some readers and teachers will want more – a broader representation of ethnicities, for example. Because of the expansion of the canon over the last sixty years, a persuasive case can be made for this point of view. Limits of space have, in part, determined my concentration on frequently studied texts, but there is another reason, too. The explosion in writing that led to canon expansion is largely a phenomenon of the period just beyond the decades covered here. An introduction to post-1960 American writing would thus have a very different configuration from one focused on the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

Raymond Williams, in his seminal book *Keywords*, declares that “‘Culture’ is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” In fact, Williams is one of the thinkers responsible for complicating the definition still further, influential as he was in defining culture as something “ordinary,” as “a whole way of life.” In its earliest uses, “culture” was a noun primarily associated with what is sometimes called “high,” as opposed to “popular,” culture – things like poetry, art museums, opera. One became “cultured” or “cultivated” by exposure to these categories of art, as a plant might be cultivated by exposure to light. Certainly, this book does not ignore so-called “high” culture, but neither does it limit examples to that category. To do so would be a serious distortion of American culture as a whole. In fact, many of its most influential modes of expression – movies and rock-and-roll, for example – are popular arts. In a sense, being in the