

## ENG 3320: American Literature, 1890-Present Dr. Hope Jennings

The history of American literature  
is the literature of American history.

Sources:

<http://swift.enumclaw.wednet.edu/ehs/ophelps/documents/download/Overview+of+American+Literature+.ppt?id=305181>

<https://www.oregonsd.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=284&dataid=1302&FileName=americanmodernism.ppt>



# American Literary Periods

- Native American Period (pre-1620)
- Colonial Period (1620-1750)
- Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)
- Romanticism (1800-1865)
- Realism (1850-1900)
- Naturalism (1880-1940)
- **Modernism (1900-1950)**
- **Postwar/Postmodernism (1950-Present)**

# Modernism (1900-1950)

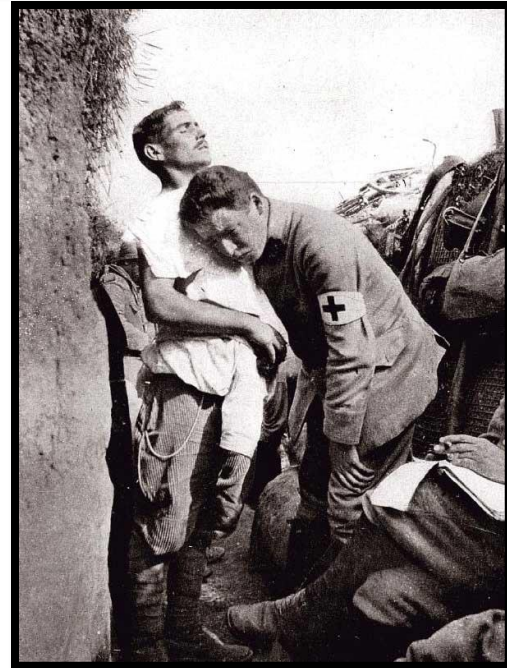
- ◉ **Modern Period** writers were affected by
  - ◉ World War I, World War II, fear of communism, and the beginning of the Cold War
  - ◉ Roaring 20s, the Great Depression, commercialism
  - ◉ Racial tensions after slavery and Reconstruction
  - ◉ Immigration and increased population
  - ◉ Technological changes and growth of modern science
  - ◉ Rise of the youth culture and fear over eroding traditions

# Between World Wars

- Many historians have described the period between the two World Wars as a “traumatic coming of age.”
- In a post-Industrial Revolution era, America had moved from an agrarian nation to an urban nation.
- The lives of these Americans were radically different from those of their parents.



# WWI





# URBANIZATION



Looking North along Mulberry St., c 1900



# INDUSTRIALIZATION



**Replacing bobbins on machinery**

*Kids At Work, Russell Freedman, Scholastic, 1994. Photo by Lewis Hine*



**Winding Large Rotating and Stationary Armatures**

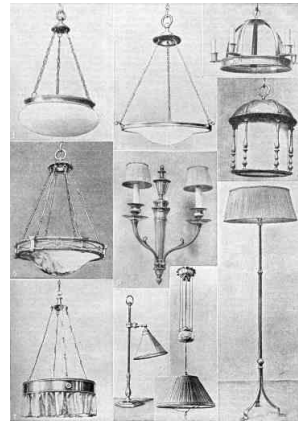
# IMMIGRATION

Oscar Handlin states,  
“Once I thought to  
write a history of the  
immigrants in America.  
Then I discovered that  
the immigrants were  
American history.”



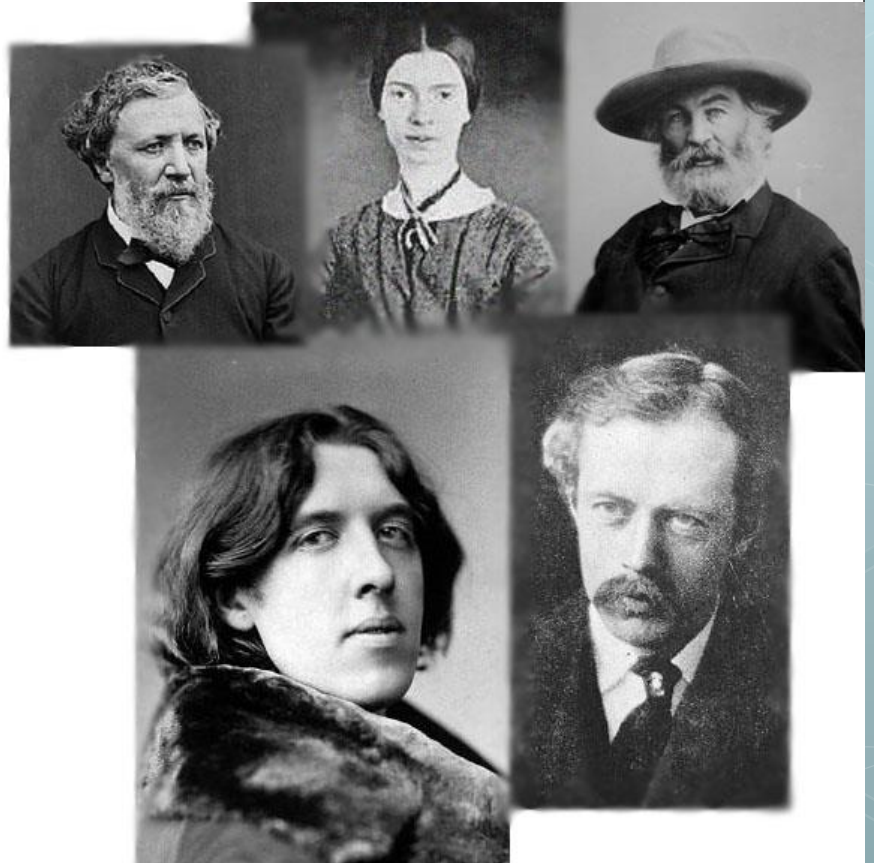


# TECHNOLOGY



# Literary Roots of Modernism

- Influenced by Walt Whitman's free verse
- Prose poetry of British writer Oscar Wilde
- British writer Robert Browning's subversion of the poetic self
- Emily Dickinson's compression
- English Symbolist writers, especially Arthur Symonds



# Modernist Style

- **Modern writers** are known for
  - themes of alienation and disconnectedness
  - challenging tradition and moving beyond realism
  - frequent use of irony and understatement
  - nontraditional syntax and forms
  - experimentation with new literary techniques:
    - stream of consciousness
    - interior dialogue
    - fragments
  - conscious attempts to create a unique style
  - increasing presence of ethnic and women writers

# The Lost Generation

- A group of American writers who chose to live in Paris after WWI.
- Their writing explored themes of alienation and change and confronted people's fears, despair, and disillusionment.
  - T. S. Eliot (poetry)
  - F. Scott Fitzgerald (fiction)
  - Ernest Hemingway (fiction)



# Imagism

- A subgroup of the Lost Generation that created a new kind of poetry.
  - Ezra Pound, H.D. [Hilda Doolittle], Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens
- Imagist poetry highly resembles Japanese haiku and concentrates on creating a word picture, a snapshot of a moment in time:
  - Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
  - To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
  - As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.



# Harlem Renaissance

- A flourishing of African-American authors in a cultural movement that also included music and art; these writers had two goals:
  - to write about the African-American experience
  - to create a body of literature by African-American authors that could rival anything written by anyone else
- **Harlem Renaissance** writers include, among others:
  - Langston Hughes (poetry)
  - Zora Neale Hurston (fiction)
  - Claude McKay (poetry)
  - Countee Cullen (poetry)
  - Arna Bontemps (poetry)

# Modernist Themes

- Alienation of the individual
- Breakdown of social norms and cultural sureties
- Valorization of the despairing individual in the face of an unmanageable future
- Product of the metropolis, of cities and urban landscapes/spaces



# THE SPIRIT OF MODERNIST POETRY

- Conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies. **Therefore, art had to be renovated.**
- Modernist writing is marked by a strong and conscious break with tradition. It rejects traditional values and assumptions.
- “Modern” implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record.
- Writers exhibited a skeptical, apprehensive attitude toward pop culture; writers criticized and deplored its manipulative commercialism.
- Literature, especially poetry, becomes the place where the one meaningful activity, the search for meaning, is carried out; and therefore literature is, or should be, vitally important to society.
- Imaginative vision is thought to give access to an ideal world, apart and above reality, or to contain alternative, higher values than those reigning in the statehouse and the marketplace, which could enrich life. Furthermore, modernists believed that **we create the world in the act of perceiving it.**



# Postwar/Postmodernism (1950-present)

- The **Postwar/Postmodern Period** includes
  - Unprecedented prosperity
  - Global conflict--Korean War, Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, the rise of terrorism, Gulf War, 9/11, Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
  - Social protest—the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the gay rights movement
  - Mass culture and consumerism; media saturation
  - Rise of technology and space exploration
  - The digital revolution

# Postmodern Style/Themes

- The best adjective for this literary period is eclectic—a collection of a little bit of everything.
- Postmodernists create traditional works without traditional structure or narrative.
- Authors increasingly addressed social issues related to gender, race, sexuality, and youthful rebellion.
- Questioning of “traditional values”—insistence that values are not permanent but only “local” or “historical”; media culture interprets values.
- Writing is often critical and ironic, concentrating on surface realities and the absurdity of daily life.
- There are no heroes; anti-heroes are common.
- Tone is often detached, unemotional.
- Individuals often seem isolated.

# Major Themes Explored in this Class (and American Literature generally)

- ◉ **American Individualism & The American Dream**

- ◉ Celebration of **the self-made man** through ambition and achievement; rooted in original colonists looking for religious freedom and opportunities not available in class-based European societies.
- ◉ The idea that anyone can become whatever he or she wants to become through hard work, determination, and perseverance

- ◉ **Cultural Diversity and Tolerance**

- ◉ Ideals rooted in the American Dream yet often in conflict with American reality and history